

# Nobel Prize Winner Was Product of Yiddish Ghetto

By JOSEPH POLAKOFF

Nobel Prize winner Julius Axelrod of the National Institute of Mental Health in suburban Bethesda, Maryland, is among the world's foremost authorities in the chemistry of nerve transmission, esoteric as that is, and yet he talks with warmth and simplicity, tinged when suitable with a delightful Yiddish accent in a manner characteristic of unabashed first-generation American Jews of Eastern European origin.

He lost the sight of his left eye when a bottle containing ammonia exploded in his face a quarter of a century ago but he has stuck to the hazards of his lab and the intricacies of research with the tenacity and intensity of those who devoted their lives to studying every syllable of the wisdom of the prophets.

Everybody loves this 58-year-old biochemist—his family, his staff, his colleagues, his boss, his maid—for his humaneness, his work, his intelligence.

A conversation with him took place a few hours after the announcement in Stockholm on October 15 that two Jewish scientists—Dr. Axelrod and Sir Bernhard Katz, professor of biophysics at University College in London—and Sweden's eminent Professor Ulf von Euler—had been named the winners of the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize in Physiology and Medicine for their independent basic research concerning the regulatory mechanisms in the nervous systems. Their discoveries may result in the possibility of effecting the nervous system to correct nervous and mental disorders, including schizophrenia and high blood pressure.

"Mazeltov" said the Jewish Telegraphic Agency's correspondent when Dr. Axelrod came to the phone in his apartment in heavily Jewish suburban Rockville, Maryland, to answer the call. There was a chuckle from the now world famous biochemist. "Thank you," he replied. "It's good to hear."

"All the media," the JTA man said, "will tell the world about your scientific achievement. But would you tell me something about yourself and your family background?"

And so, Dr. Axelrod first spoke about his Orthodox Jewish parents—"Itzic—Izzie (yes, for Isadore) and Molly" Axelrod who now live at 460 Neptune Avenue in Brooklyn. They emigrated from Galicia to New York City when each was 14 years old and they met and married in New York.

"My father made straw baskets for a living," the scientist said. "He was called 'Itzic der Keichel Macher'."

Dr. Axelrod, who is short and slight of build, was born on May 30, 1912 on East Houston Street—"the Yiddish ghetto," he termed it. He went to "P. S. 22" and Seward Park High School—"opposite the knish factory."

"I went to cheder and was Bar Mitzvah," Dr. Axelrod said. "I identify very strongly with Israel but not in a religious way. I feel a strong Jewish identity."

Dr. Axelrod said he knows many Israeli scientists and has many colleagues in Israel which he visited for about two weeks in 1966 after he had been invited to lecture there.

With his family in humble economic circumstances, "the only way I could get a free education was to go to City College" (now the City University of New York) where he was graduated in 1933, in the midst of the Great Depression, with a bachelor of science degree.

"My mother wanted me to be a doctor," Dr. Axelrod recalled. "It was hard in those days for Jews to get into medical schools. I wasn't that good a student but if my name was Bigelow I probably would have gotten in."

So Dr. Axelrod went to work in the Department of Bacteriology at New York University for the next two years

and then switched to the university's laboratory of industrial hygiene where he remained for eleven years. Meanwhile, in 1941, he acquired his master's degree at NYU.

From 1946-49 he was a research associate at the Goldwater Memorial Hospital in New York and late in 1949 he came to the National Heart Institute in Bethesda, on Washington's northwest edge. In 1955—the year that he received his doctorate in physiology at George Washington University here—he accepted the offer of the National Institute of Mental Health to the position he now holds. He is chief of the section of pharmacology working with chemicals in animals in the laboratory of chemical science. Shortly afterwards he began the amazing studies that extended over a dozen years and culminated in the award to him of the world's highest honors in his field.

But to get back to Dr. Axelrod's family life. His wife was Sally Taub before they were married in 1938. Like the scientist, she was born and raised in New York and graduated from Hunter College in 1942. Mrs. Axelrod at present is a second grade teacher in the Kent Mill Public School in Maryland's Montgomery County which borders on the District of Columbia. When JTA asked Dr. Axelrod to speak with her, she responded through him that she did not want to be interviewed.

The Axelrods have two sons. Paul, 25, is studying anthropology at the University of North Carolina's graduate school at Chapel Hill. Fred, 21, is an undergraduate in forestry at the University of Minnesota. He spent the summer parachuting from the skies in Alaska, Wyoming and Washington, to help fight forest fires.

In the Axelrod apartment is an eight-branch candelabra for Hanuka. "We used to light it when the kids were home," Dr. Axelrod said.

Dr. Axelrod first heard he had been awarded the Nobel Prize from his friend Dr. Ben A. Williamowsky, a dentist, whose office is in Silver Spring, another Washington suburb with a large Jewish population.

Dr. Williamowsky, whose father is a rabbi, Dr. Axelrod said, greeted him upon his arrival about 8:30 a.m. with the question: "Julie, what's this I hear about you and the Nobel Peace Prize?" He had heard a broadcast to that effect.

"I see Ben about once a year and today was the day for my appointment," Dr. Axelrod said. "Ben always amuses people and I thought this was his way of making a joke."

About a half-hour later, while his mouth was stuffed with instruments and cotton, an urgent phone message came to him at the dentist's office informing him that he had won the prize.

But for Mrs. Axelrod the news came after an anxious half-hour. She was attending a teachers' meeting in Baltimore when she was informed there was an "emergency" call for her, Dr. Axelrod said. The "emergency call" did not come through for what seemed hours and meanwhile Mrs. Axelrod's anxiety kept mounting. Finally, the good news came.

An indication of Dr. Axelrod's family feeling is that while congratulatory calls and messages were pouring in on him from all over, among his first thoughts were to inform his aged parents and to remember his sisters in New York—Mrs. Pearl Denmark and Mrs. Gertrude Brodsky.

The self-effacing, pleasant Dr. Axelrod was extolled from all sides. Daniel G. Rice, a spokesman for NIMH, said



DR. JULIUS AXELROD

Dr. Axelrod was "non-plussed, without words but very, very pleased and totally and genuinely surprised" when he was informed of the award.

"His colleagues all love him," Mr. Rice, who is not Jewish, said. "He is very well respected at NIMH. He never closes the door of his lab office. Those working with him are always in to see him. He is so open and gracious with his time and energy. He is highly respected by the younger people."

Mr. Rice pointed out that Dr. Axelrod's small staff is highly dedicated to him and emphasized the special dedication of Mrs. Helen Hunt, a Negro assistant who has worked with him for sixteen years.

"Mrs. Hunt," Mr. Rice said, "sometimes comes in at five or six a.m. and works nights and weekends, too, when necessary."

Dr. Axelrod's immediate superior at NIMH is Dr. Irwin J. Kopin, 41-year-old chief of the laboratory of clinical sciences since 1968. Dr. Kopin, who holds a bachelor's and medical doctorate degrees from McGill University, also is a native of New York City. A member of Bethesda's Beth El Congregation, Dr. Kopin said he would not have been at the Institute on the day of the Nobel announcement because it was sukkot but he came to join in congratulating Dr. Axelrod.

In Stockholm on Dec. 10, Dr. Axelrod, Sir Bernard and Professor von Euler will meet for the first time and receive their Nobel Prizes which includes a one-third share each of the \$78,000 award.

Drs. Axelrod and Sir Bernard also have a factor in common besides science and Jewishness. Both look to the welfare of youth.

In his news conference here, Dr. Axelrod said he was worried about cuts in funds for basic research especially because it would reduce the chances of young people to compete and establish themselves. And at the University of California, Berkeley, where he received the announcement, Sir Bernard left his news conference hurriedly to see a young undergraduate student who had been kept, he said, "waiting to see me for 45 minutes." A press report pointed out that it is characteristic of Sir Bernard that he felt the student's time was more important than anything else.

What a great December day it will be in Stockholm for everybody who cares about people!