

László Zechmeister

1890-1972

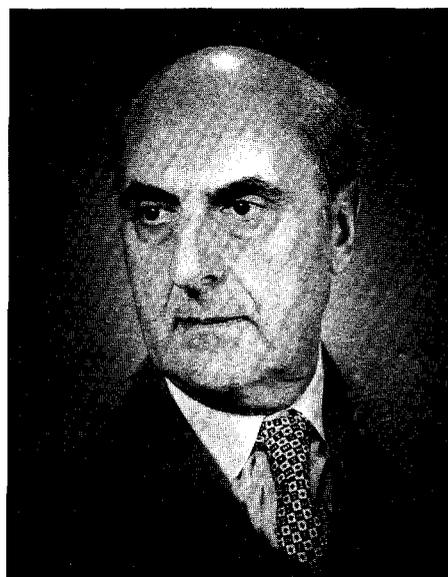
László Zechmeister, professor of organic chemistry emeritus, died in Pasadena on February 28 after an extended illness. He was 82.

A native of Hungary, Dr. Zechmeister received his education at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule in Zurich, Switzerland, where he was awarded his Dr. Ing. degree in 1913. From 1921 to 1923 he was an instructor in the Royal Danish Agriculture and Veterinary Academy, and from 1923 to 1940 was professor of medical chemistry and director of the chemistry laboratory of the medical school of The University of Pécs in Hungary. He joined the Caltech faculty in 1940 and became professor emeritus in 1959.

From 1912 to 1914 Dr. Zechmeister taught at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Chemistry in Berlin. At the outbreak of World War I he was inducted into the army and sent to the front, where he was wounded twice and eventually taken prisoner by the Russians. During his subsequent two years of imprisonment, he taught himself English with the aid of one of the few books available to him—a Russian-English dictionary. Escaping once, he made his way to the Russian border before being recaptured and returned to prison. At the end of the war—with the complete collapse of the Russian army and government—he was able simply to walk away from the prison and home to Hungary.

After a period as a scientific leader in a pharmaceutical factory in Hungary, in 1921 Zechmeister was offered a teaching appointment in Denmark—contingent upon his learning Danish in three months. He succeeded, and spent two years in that country before returning to Hungary.

In 1940, at the invitation of Linus Pauling, then chairman of the division of chemistry and chemical engineering at the Institute, Zechmeister came to Caltech—barely avoiding internment in Hungary for the duration of World War II. The illness of his wife kept her from accom-



panying him, and she died in Hungary in 1941. In 1949 he married Elizabeth Sulzer of Zurich. She survives him, as do two sisters, a stepdaughter, and a nephew, who live in Budapest.

Zechmeister was widely known for his research in many areas of chemistry, among which were methods of chromatography and spectroscopy, and studies of polysaccharides, natural pigments, naturally occurring fluorescent compounds, and stereochemical phenomena. He was the author or co-author of more than 250 papers and of three textbooks. For nine years he was a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of the American Chemical Society*.

For many years he had a wide influence on international science through his founding and editing of the first 27 volumes of *Progress in the Chemistry of Organic Natural Products*, a review

journal published annually in English, German, and French. Contributing authors were among the world's outstanding authorities in the field. He often referred to his wife as his associate in this work, because of her assistance in both editing and translating material.

In 1949 Zechmeister was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in order to lecture in European universities. He was an honorary member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and holder of its Grand Prize; he was also a member of the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences. He received the Pasteur Medal of the French Biochemical Society in 1935 and the Claude Bernard Medal in 1949. In 1962 he received the Labline Award of the American Chemical Society for his work in chromatography and electrophoresis. Dr. Zechmeister's most recent honor arrived in Pasadena in January of this year: an honorary degree of Doctor of Medicine from The University of Pécs in recognition of his important contributions to chemistry and its relations to medicine.

One of Zechmeister's favorite non-academic activities was tennis. Despite all his feelings about maintaining the dignity and comportment expected of a European professor, he regularly played Sunday morning tennis with Julian, the Athenaeum headwaiter. The Athenaeum served breakfast in those days, and also required that all men wear coat and tie. On Sunday mornings Zechmeister met this situation by putting on his white tennis shorts and a coat and tie—and startling the Athenaeum hostess the first time he appeared in this garb. "Good heavens," she moaned to the manager, "Professor Zechmeister has forgotten his pants!"

Though he became professor emeritus in 1959, Zechmeister remained active in reading and research at Caltech, and until he became ill last summer, he swam regularly at the Caltech pool. At his own request, no services were held.