

## Masterpiece of a master

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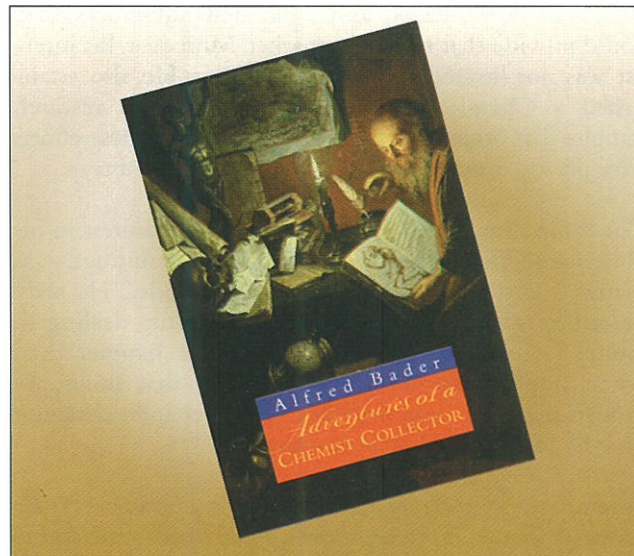
**Adventures of a Chemist Collector** by Alfred Bader. Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd, 1995, 288 pages. \$25.00 hardcover (ISBN 0-297-83461-4).

It was said of Goethe that his life was his greatest masterpiece. That applies as well to Alfred Bader. His is an intriguing and inspiring story of hard work and worthy obsessions. Now famed for his philanthropy, his art collecting and his remarkable career as a chemical entrepreneur, Bader vividly portrays the several intertwined worlds he has explored with zest and élan over seven decades.

Born in Vienna in 1924, he faced many daunting vicissitudes. His father, “described as a charming, shiftless gambler,” was murdered two weeks after Alfred’s birth. His mother, a devout Catholic rejected by her family because she had married a Jew, was nearly penniless. Extraordinary inflation had set in, and his mother, in return for financial help, gave up Alfred for adoption by his father’s sister, a childless widow. The early years of his boyhood were happy; he recalls fondly his enjoyment of soccer, stamp collecting, adventures with schoolmates, Jewish rituals and summer visits to Moravian villages. At the age of 10 he began buying drawings with money he’d been given for gifts or ice cream cones; this resulted in an examination by a child psychologist, with a reassuring verdict. But soon his youthful idyll was overwhelmed by the financial collapse of the Depression and by mounting anti-Semitism.

Luckily, Bader was among 10 000 Jewish children allowed to emigrate to Britain after Hitler took over Austria in 1938 and blatantly attacked synagogues. Bader left Vienna, at age 14, carrying one American dollar and a small suitcase with his stamp collection; he was not to see his aunt or his mother again. After the fall of France, in 1940, when Britain feared an imminent invasion, Bader was deported to Canada and interned with other “enemy aliens” along with captured German soldiers in a prisoner-of-war camp. After more than a year, he was released and his diligent pursuit of education was rewarded by admission to Queen’s University in Ontario. As well as earning BS and MS degrees in engineering chemistry with distinction, Bader won prizes for debating and helped to raise funds to buy a house for the Hillel Foundation. During summers and for a year after graduation, he worked for the Murphy Paint Company and took a BA in history “extramurally.”

Deciding to go for a PhD “at the best school that would admit me,” Bader accepted a fellowship to Harvard and undertook research with Louis Fieser. In his first year, he failed all eight cumulative exams. Undaunted, he passed



the next six exams and completed his PhD in well under three years.

Since he felt morally obligated to Murphy Paint, for helping him pursue graduate study, Bader took a job with the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company, which had purchased Murphy. That brought him to Milwaukee in 1950, where the paint research division was located. Soon, in partnership with a friend, he launched as a sideline the Aldrich Chemical Company, incorporated with the minimum required capital of \$500 and run from a garage. The impetus came from his experience as a graduate student, when he found that Eastman Kodak, then the only substantial supplier of organic research chemicals, was capricious and cavalier. After one year, with no salaries paid, Aldrich posted a profit of just \$20; but after three years, Bader dared to commit himself full-time and bought out his partner. By dint of rapid, reliable, enterprising service to customers and astute judgement, over the next 20 years he built Aldrich into a thriving business. In 1975, Aldrich merged with Sigma, a biochemical supplier; the combined company now has annual sales of a billion dollars.

The intricacies of Bader’s business adventures are well told and instructive, including the bizarre episode of his dismissal from the board of Sigma–Aldrich in 1991. Most striking, however, is Bader’s earnest humanity, exemplified in what he terms the ABC of his life: “art, bible, and chemistry.” It is exemplified also in his focus on the host of friends and family who have shared in his odyssey; the index lists about 600 names. Characteristic is the story of his first Saturday in Milwaukee. He

inquired at the Jewish Reform Temple whether there was need for a Sunday School teacher, and thereby undertook a commitment to teaching 5th and 6th graders which he continued for 32 years.

In developing Aldrich, Bader was likewise evangelical. He personally sought out chemists all over the world, to find out what they needed and what new substances they could provide that he might market. Moreover, his interest was not limited to marketable items. He also established a Chemical Library, to preserve rare research samples that otherwise might have been lost. These efforts have greatly fostered research in synthetic chemistry.

The same sustained, personal devotion is manifest in his "buying, selling, trading, and giving away paintings. . . as many as 200 a year during the past decade." He slyly describes this as "a natural extension of my dealing in stamps," but confesses that "I am never happier than when hunting for dirty old paintings that might be hidden treasures," and provides a lively chapter detailing how he found many such treasures.

Foremost among Bader's treasures is his wife Isabel. Their romance is the most uncanny of his many remarkable

tales: it involves a shipboard courtship, over 400 ardent letters, prophetic dreams, a separation of 25 years and other elements apt for an opera or fairy tale! Among many benefactions, Alfred and Isabel have indeed recently made a fairy-tale gift to Queen's University. This provided funds for the purchase and renovation of Herstmonceux Castle in Sussex, to serve as Queen's European campus.

This is a fine book about a wonderful life, written with verve and Pepys-like frankness. As remarked to me by Professor Michael Henschman, it is particularly to be recommended to young people, "to emphasize the importance, not of talent and social advantage, but of enterprise and resolve." It also emphasizes gratitude, joy and faith. In his final remarks, Bader says: "Whenever I have contemplated any achievement in my life, I have marvelled how many and how diverse are the people who have made it possible. . . With Isabel's vision, and if the Lord gives us time, we will find other great things to do."

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