George Wittig Biography

George Wittig

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Biography

George Wittig is the German chemist famous for discovering a method for synthesizing alkenes from carbonyl compounds. Born in Berlin, Germany on June 16, 1897, as a youth Wittig was educated at the Wilhelms-Gymnasium. He entered the University of Tübinge in 1916 but left shortly thereafter to serve in World War I. In 1920 he returned to his study of chemistry at Kassel and Marburg Universities. He eventually received his degree from Marburg and joined the chemistry department there.

Wittig lectured at Marburg from 1926 until 1932 when he became head of the department at the Technische Hochschule in Brunswick. He served in this capacity from 1932 to 1937. In 1937, Wittig became Special Professor at the University of Freiburg. From 1944 until 1956 he was Professor and Institute Director at Tübinge. He became professor at Heidelberg in 1956 and remained there until 1967 when he became Emeritus Professor. That same year he won the Otto Hahn Prize for his contributions to Chemistry. In 1979 he was jointly awarded the Nobel Prize for Chemistry with British-born U.S. chemist Herbert Brown.

Wittig's early work was in the field of solution chemistry of radicals and carbanions. In the early 1950s he demonstrated that a carbonyl compound (such as an aldyhede or a ketone) could be reacted with an type of organic phosphorus compound (known as an alkylidenetriphenylphosphorane) to form a hydrocarbon with a double bond (known as an alkene.) Today many important alkenes are made using the Wittig process. These include squalene (which is the precursor of cholesterol), vitamin D_3, and various steroids.

Although Wittig retired in 1967, he continued publishing until the age of 90. He died on August 26, 1987.