

Preface

Biographies of physicists tend to aggregate around certain figures. There are surely more than a hundred on Einstein. Numerous, too, are the books written about the lives of Galileo and Newton. A few lengthier biographical accounts have recently appeared on Lise Meitner and Werner Heisenberg; but very many other important physicists of the twentieth century are still awaiting more thorough scrutiny than an obituary or a scientific memoir. The list of Nobel laureates among them is long.

In the 1950s the physical chemist Johannes Jaenicke decided to start working on a biography of his close colleague Fritz Haber and asked friends and former coworkers for their recollections. When James Franck visited Germany in 1958, he was also interviewed by Jaenicke about his friend. Franck's remarks on that occasion could just as well apply as recommendations for a work covering his own life:¹ "There are various ways to write this biography," he told Jaenicke.

If you choose not to write about the scientific research itself but present contributions by various people, the result is a kind of collective issue that tends to be dedicated to the living on birthdays. This is not a biography but would merely be another way of honoring Haber's memory. A biography has to be homogeneous. For such a colorful personality, the various tints have to be allowed to blend together.

Franck left no autobiographical notes, nor did he keep a diary. He gave a longer interview late in life and spoke publicly about his experiences on another occasion as well. An abbreviated biography of Franck and his friend Max Born appeared in 1982 in the catalog of an exhibition titled "The Luxury of Conscience" and celebrating the centenary of their births. It was organized by the German

cultural endowment Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz, with the support of the German Physical Society and the Max Planck Society in Berlin.

The preliminary research for the exhibition involved not only a close study of the papers left behind by the two Nobelists, but also a canvassing of as many people as possible with some biographical knowledge about them. A broad-scale search was conducted at the time for more material not only about Max Born, on behalf of his son Professor Gustav von Born as well as his daughter Margarete Farley-Born, but also about James Franck, for his younger daughter, Lisa, and her husband, Professor Hermann Lisco. Many of Born's and Franck's pupils and coworkers contributed further facets in the form of personal reminiscences, some having already written commemorative articles for Franck's seventieth birthday and other key anniversaries. They gratefully acknowledged his achievements as a scientist and a teacher no less than his example as a person. This latter they were better able to appreciate from their own experiences during the period between 1933 and 1945 than when they had been young members of the upcoming generation of physicists. Later in life it was easier for them to grasp what Franck had given up, what he had lost when he felt compelled to leave Germany. Important as these testimonies are, they were related or written in retrospect, after a time when physics was reaching for new horizons, partly inspired by ideas that Born and Franck had conceived, and when political developments were throwing into much sharper relief the responsibility of a scientist. After 1945, actions that had been taken from the late 1920s to the end of World War II were judged under the burden of the terrible events and Nazi crimes.

While on a visit to Germany in 1992, Hermann and Lisa Lisco asked me whether I would be willing to write a biography of James Franck. As a consequence, my collection of materials was substantially extended, and new sources were identified in the years that followed. Many conversations with Professor and Mrs. Lisco and an intense exchange of letters made possible the addition of much detail of a more private nature to this report of Franck's life as a scientist. The Liscos were closely consulted on the overall project and were fortunately able to read the first biographical part of the present work. Mrs. Karen Lieberman née Lisco kindly made further material available to me.

Albert Einstein states in his autobiography: "The world of physics is not granted, but assigned to mankind." This "assignment" characterizes the scientific evolution of James Franck's entire lifework and is a major element of his biography.² The report about Franck's research up to 1933 is, at the same time, essentially a history of atomic physics. In order to let the various tints "blend together," as Franck's prescription for his friend Haber's biography goes, I have quoted generously from Franck's correspondence and publications. To provide for the historical context of events directly affecting his course in life, I have

consulted contemporary reports in papers that it is very likely Franck himself had read. A great many primary documents predating 1920 are unfortunately lost, and so a very limited selection of family letters had to fill this gap; consequently the depth of description is uneven. This applies particularly to Franck's attitude toward American policies between 1947 and 1960. A lack of sources precluded any incorporation of reflections on American politics within their political context.