This Day in History… August 15, 1896

Birth of Gerty Cori

Biochemist Gerty Theresa Radnitz Cori was born on August 15, 1896, in Prague, Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Gerty was the daughter of a Jewish chemist who invented a method for refining sugar. She was tutored at home before going to secondary school, where she decided at age 16 she wanted to be a doctor. Gerty then discovered that in order to enter a scientific program, she needed to study Latin, physics, chemistry, and math. In just one year she studied the equivalent of eight years of Latin, five of science, and five of math.

This stamp has an error in the chemical formula for Cori ester. The phosphate group should connect to the rest of the sugar by the leftmost oxygen rather than the one on the right.

Gerty's hard work paid off, and in 1914 she was admitted to the medical school at Charles-Ferdinand University. While there, she met Carl Cori. During World War I, Carl was drafted into the Austro-Hungarian Army. Also during this time, Gerty suffered from severe malnutrition caused by food shortages, leading her to develop dry eye. Following the war, they both completed their studies in 1920 and married. Though Gerty had converted to Catholicism in order to marry Carl, the rising fascism and anti-semitism was still a threat to her because of her Jewish ancestry. This, coupled with her health problems, led the Coris to seek employment in and immigrate to the United States in 1922.

The Cori's spent decades conducting medical research together.

In America, the Coris worked on medical research at the State Institute for the Study of Malignant Diseases (later Roswell Park Cancer Institute) in Buffalo, New York. They became US citizens in 1928.

The Coris were often told that they shouldn't work together, but they continued to. During their time in Buffalo they published 50 research papers together. Their main focus was studying how glucose was metabolized in the body and the hormones that were involved in the process. In 1929, they discovered the Cori Cycle, which shows how carbohydrates are metabolized in the body.

When the couple decided to leave Buffalo, Carl was offered many university positions, but Gerty, as a female, was not. The Coris moved to St. Louis, Missouri, in 1931 after accepting positions at the Washington University School of Medicine. However, Gerty was hired as a research associate, earning one-tenth of what her husband did. It would take 13 years for her to finally receive the same rank as her husband.

Gerty was driven to study sugar after her father was diagnosed with diabetes and asker her to find him a cure.

While in Missouri, the Coris discovered an intermediate compound in frog muscles that enabled the breakdown of glycogen, which became known as the Cori ester. Gerty also studied glycogen storage disease and was the first to show that defects in enzymes could cause genetic diseases.

In 1947, the Coris won the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine "for their discovery of the course of the catalytic conversion of glycogen." This made Gerty the first American woman (and third woman overall) to receive a Nobel in science. They split the prize with Bernardo Houssay "for his discovery of the part played by the hormone of the anterior pituitary lobe in the metabolism of sugar." The Coris' work led to major advancements in the treatment of diabetes.

In 2004, the American Chemical Society designated The Washington University School of Medicine a National Historic Chemical Landmark for the Cori's work there.

Shortly before winning the Nobel Prize, Gerty was diagnosed with primary myelofibrosis, a bone marrow blood cancer. She continued to work for another 10 years. During that time she was elected a fellow of the American Academy of Sciences and appointed to the National Science Foundation. She also received a number of awards and honorary Doctor of Science degrees. Gerty died on October 26, 1957. The Cori Crater on the Moon was named for her.

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