



# The Life of Ernst Chain: Penicillin and Beyond

By Ronald Clark



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A Jew who left Germany when Hitler came to power, Sir Ernst Chain was a winner, with Sir Alexander Fleming and Lord Florey, of the Nobel Prize for Physiology and Medicine in 1945. Later he was a significant figure in the use of the semi-synthetic penicillins which, from the mid-1950s onwards, revolutionized the use of the antibiotic in more than one field of medicine.

Born in Berlin in 1906, of a Russian emigre father and a German mother, Chain left Germany for England on 30 January 1933. Working first with Sir Frederick Gowland Hopkins in Cambridge, then with Professor Howard Florey in Oxford, Chain studied the biochemical processes by which bacteriolytic agents operate. Writing up his results, he studied Fleming's neglected original report of the bacteria-inhibiting properties of penicillin, and with Florey's support embarked on a major investigation of how penicillin could be made and purified.

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### Editorial Review

#### From Publishers Weekly

Though his name is not well known to the general public, Chain was of central importance in the development of antibiotics, and was co-recipient of a 1945 Nobel Prize for his work on penicillin. Clark, author of *The Survival of Charles Darwin*, etc., effectively recreates Chain's life and career, from his Berlin youth as a scientifically and musically gifted Russian-German Jew until his move to England in 1933. There he joined Howard Florey's biochemistry laboratory to research the therapeutic application of penicillin; by 1944, the drug was being mass-produced for war use. The author draws a candid portrait of the ebullient, temperamental Chain and of his stormy professional relations. In Rome, where he headed the first international center for research on antibiotics, and later again in England, he developed semi-synthetic penicillin, which was of utmost value in the battle against bacteria. Chain also fostered academic collaboration with industry and government support of medical research. Photos.

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#### From Library Journal

Numerous books have been written on penicillin and those who contributed to its discovery (e.g., Gladys Hobby's *Penicillin*, LJ 11/1/85, and Trevor Williams's *Howard Florey*, LJ 1/85). This new work is significant in large part because of its author, known for his biographies of Einstein, J.B.S. Haldane, Charles Darwin, and Sigmund Freud, among others. Indeed, Clark is on familiar ground here since it was Haldane who helped Chain to begin his scientific career in England when he immigrated from Berlin in 1932. Clark stresses the importance of Judaism in Chain's life and the complex issues related to this heritage that figured in his illustrious career. Although his subject is a scientist, Clark emphasizes psychological and historical rather than scientific aspects. A superbly written biography, recommended for public and academic libraries.

Frances Groen, McGill Univ. Medical Lib., Montreal

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#### About the Author

Ronald Clark (1916-1987) born in London and educated at King's College School. In 1933 he chose journalism as a career. During the Second World War, after being turned down for military duty on medical grounds, he served as a war correspondent. During this time Clark landed on Juno Beach with the Canadians on D-Day and followed the war until its end, then remained in Germany to report on the major War Crimes trials. Clark returned to Britain in 1948 and wrote extensively on subjects ranging from mountain climbing to the atomic bomb, Balmoral Castle to world explorers. He also wrote a number of biographies on a myriad of figures, such as: Charles Darwin, Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, Benjamin Franklin, Sigmund Freud, and Bertrand Russell.

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