

Isidor I. Rabi

Physicist, Nobel Laureate (1898 – 1988)

Born in Austria, Isidor Isaac Rabi came to the U.S. at age one, and grew up in New York City. An indifferent student in high school, He graduated from Cornell in three years and received his Ph.D. from Columbia in 1927. He married Helen Newmark on the day he deposited his dissertation. Rabi joined the Columbia faculty in 1929, “where he quickly became the life of the physics department” (CHAUNCEY G. OLINGER, JR.). In 1937, he invented the method that underlies today’s M.R.I.

Because of his concern about the threat of Nazi Germany, he left Columbia in 1940 to work as Associate Director of the Radiation Laboratory at MIT on the development of radar as well as the atomic bomb. He later remarked that “the world would be better without an Edward Teller,” an advocate of building and weaponizing.

He was awarded the Medal for Merit, the highest civilian award in World War II, the King’s Medal for Service in the Cause of Freedom, and was an Officer of the Legion of Honour. In 1944, he received the Nobel Prize for his discovery of nuclear magnetic resonance.

In 1945, he returned to Columbia to chair the Physics Department for four years, a period during which it was home to two Nobel Laureates (Rabi and Enrico Fermi) and eleven future laureates. When Columbia created the rank of University Professor in 1964, Rabi was the first to receive such a chair.

Rabi is considered to be the father of three major research laboratories. He raised funds after World War II to start Columbia’s Nevis laboratory in Irvington, New York; he led drive to fund the Brookhaven Laboratory in Smithhaven, New York; and in 1950 he introduced the proposal for funding CERN, the European laboratory in Geneva, Switzerland.

He retired from teaching at Columbia in 1967 but held the title of University Professor Emeritus and Special Lecturer. “Rab,” as he was known, joined the Century at the age of 76 and remained a member until his death in 1988.

HARRISON SALISBURY’s supporting letter for Rabi summed up the tone of all of the letters: “I was astounded to learn from Charles Frankel that I. I. Rabi is not a member of the Century. This is a deficiency that must be corrected at once.”

