

Biography



Georg von Békésy was born in Budapest, Hungary, on June 3, 1899, the son of Alexander von Békésy, a diplomat, and his wife, Paula. He received his early education in Munich, Constantinople, Budapest, and in a private school in Zurich. Having passed the Swiss «Maturitätsprüfung» he studied chemistry at the University of Berne. After a short military service he received his Ph.D. in Physics in 1923 from the University of Budapest. Later on he entered the services of the Hungarian Post Office in Budapest where he stayed until 1946. He worked one year at the Central Laboratory of Siemens and Halske A.G. in Berlin, at that time one of the centers in the development of telecommunication. During vacations he spent his free time in different workshops learning how to use a file for many hours without hurting the hands.

His work in the research laboratory of the Hungarian Post Office was concerned mainly with problems of long-distance telephone transmission. The friendly and efficient atmosphere of this laboratory made it possible for him to spend considerable time in the study of the ear as a main component of the transmission system. Soon he became a nuisance to the autopsy rooms of the hospitals and the mechanical workshops of the Post Office. There they did not like to find their drill press full of human-bone dust in the morning. But the wonderful laboratory spirit helped to overcome all difficulties, except those produced by the destructions of World War II.

During the years 1939-1946 he was also Professor of Experimental Physics at the University of Budapest. He left Hungary in 1946 for Sweden, where he was a guest of the [Karolinska Institute](#) and did research at the Technical Institute in Stockholm. It was during this period that he developed a new type of audiometer which is operated by the patient and has applications outside the field of hearing. For instance, it has permitted the determination of the change in sensitivity of the eye of pigeons during dark adaptation.

In 1947 he went to the United States and has worked since then at Harvard University in the Psycho-Acoustic Laboratory. Lately he has been interested in developing a mechanical model of the inner ear with nerve supply, the nerve supply being represented by the skin of the arm. This model shows such close similarity to phenomena in hearing that it has become a useful tool in the investigation of some specific problems that have been pursued for many years.

His honours include the Denker Prize in Otology (1931), the Guyot Prize for Speech and Otology of Groningen University (1939) and the Shambaugh Prize in Otology (1950). He was the recipient of the Leibnitz Medal of the Berlin Academy of Sciences (1937), the Academy Award of the Budapest Academy of Science (1946), the Howard Crosby Warren Medal of the Society of Experimental Psychologists (1955), and the Gold Medals of the American Otological Society (1957) and the Acoustical Society of America

(1961). Honorary doctorates (M.D.) were conferred on him by the Universities of Munster (1955) and Berne (1959).

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