Splitting Atoms in a Beer Cellar

The Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Physics in Berlin opened its doors a century ago. One of its future directors was Werner Heisenberg, the father of quantum mechanics. In February 1945, he and his colleagues gathered in Haigerloch in the Württemberg region of Germany. There, in a secret cellar in a cave, the researchers embarked on a daring experiment.

He himself planned to travel for an indefinite period. When he returned to Berlin the following year as a Nobel laureate, he passed the scepter to Laue for good. Officially, however, Einstein remained on the books as director until 1932.

Max von Laue set out to reorganize the Institute from the ground up and secure its future competitiveness, and it was set to finally get a dedicated building. The money was provided by the American Rockefeller Foundation. Then the Nazis came to power in early 1933 and brought things to a sudden standstill. Leading scientists, including Albert Einstein, emigrated. Under these circumstances, Laue presumably lost the desire to run the Institute. In the end, the director’s post was transferred to Dutchman Peter Debye, who had previously been working in Leipzig.

The official inauguration of the new Institute building in Berlin-Dahlem took place on May 30, 1938. Above the entrance stood the words “Max Planck Institute.” The scientists in Berlin chose this name to commemorate the outgoing president of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society. The authorities were not pleased; Planck, after all, was a Nazi opponent. Nevertheless, the name remained. What would the Rockefeller Foundation have thought if the name had been changed? The KWI for Physics was thus the very first Max Planck Institute, pre-dating the foundation of the Max Planck Society by a decade.

The Second World War broke out on September 1, 1939 and the Institute was placed under the command of the German Army Ordnance Department the following year. A project that was unofficially known as the “Uranium Club” was launched to explore the possibilities of nuclear fission, which Otto Hahn and Fritz Strassmann had discovered at the KWI for Chemistry in December 1938. Barred from leading a war project as a foreigner, Director Debye was asked to take on German citizenship. He refused and was banned from the Institute, making Werner Heisenberg the lead scientist of the Uranium Club.

Heisenberg, who was born in 1901, had a brilliant career behind him. Based on his outstanding performance in secondary
in Haigerloch is now home to a replica of the legendary B8 experiment.

Where it all took place: The beer cellar of the former Schwanenwirt pub in Haigerloch