

Johannes (Jan) Baptista GILLIS, analytical chemist, professor, rector, historian of sciences

Born, Arlon, August 8th 1893. Died, Oostende, August 25th 1978

Son of Louis Henri, military physician and of Pauline de Keghel. Married at Schaerbeek on May 12th 1920 Paula van de Velde. May 5th 1923 a son Paul was born, he died on June 13th 1962.

Jan Gillis received his chemical training at the University of Ghent under the supervision of F.Swarts (1866-1940), the pioneer of the chemistry of organic fluorine compounds. During the First World War, Gillis was wounded and evacuated to the Netherlands. He started his research in the laboratory of A.Smits (1870-1948) at the State University of Amsterdam. In 1918 he became a Ph D in chemistry by the Central Belgian Jury set up in Le Havre, France. After 1918 Gillis was given an appointment in the laboratory of F.Swarts. Meanwhile he obtained in 1922 a second doctorate in botanical science.

Gillis was after the introduction of the Flemish linguistic regime the first professor appointed in the Chair of Analytical Chemistry in 1923. His duties were extended to cover the Faculty of Science, The Faculty of Applied Science and in the Faculty of Medicine for the training of pharmacists. He was teaching from 1932 the theory of methods for the future professors of the secondary schools.

Gillis devoted himself for the synthesis of new organic reagents designed for the sensitive detection of different ions. In 1940 Gillis was appointed to the International Committee on New analytical Reagents of the IUPAC. He made valuable contributions to physical-instrumental techniques as electrochemical methods; only two years after Heyrovsky (1890-1967) had devised the first polarographe in 1927 Gillis introduced this technique in his laboratory. With his co-workers he studied the quantitative aspects of arc emission spectrography and in 1958 Gillis was involved in the application of radioactive tracers. His outstanding abilities are shown by the more than 180 publications in different areas. In 1947 he was a co-founder of the well-known journal *Analytica Chimica Acta*.

Gillis was the founder of the School of Analytical Chemistry in Ghent, which is still flourishing. Many of his former students have gone on to become Professors in Analytical Chemistry (J.Eeckhout, J.Hoste and A.Claeys), others in Applied Analytical Chemistry (B.J.Cuvelier, J.Pijck and R.Ruyssen).

In addition to his teaching and research Gillis served the University of Ghent with great skill as secretary (1936-37) and dean (1937-38) of the Faculty of Science and in 1951-1953 as secretary of the Academic Board and from 1953 till 1957 as rector and president of the Board.

After his retirement in 1961 Gillis became very active in the field of the history of chemistry, making very detailed studies of George Sarton, Leo Baekeland and especially August Kekulé. Thanks to Gillis, parts of the original laboratory of Kekulé were rescued and are to day exposed in the Museum on the History of Science in Ghent.

Hendrik Deelstra (01.03.2009)