

Alfred and Isabel Bader

Alfred's grandfather, Moritz Ritter von Bader, was a civil engineer who helped Ferdinand de Lesseps build the Suez Canal. His mother was the daughter of a Hungarian count. In his early teens he was interned in Canada as a prisoner of war, a potential Nazi "fifth columnist," although he was a Jew whose adopted mother died in the Holocaust.

Such is the background that helped to shape the fascinating personality of Alfred Bader, Queen's University's most generous benefactor.

"Everything that has any connection with you, Alf, seems enchanted," Isabel wrote to him in 1949 – prophetically, as it turned out.¹ But Alfred Bader's family background in pre-war Austria had been far from enchanted. When his mother, a Catholic aristocrat, fell in love with his father, a middle-class Jew, her parents tried to have her committed to an asylum. Despite this roadblock, they married in London, settled in Vienna, and had two children there. When his father died just two weeks after Alfred's birth in 1924, his mother was left with no income in a time of runaway inflation. Her sister-in-law adopted Alfred and brought him up a Jew. In 1938, after the infamous Kristallnacht (the Nazi attack on synagogues), Alfred was one of 10,000 Jewish youngsters allowed to enter Britain.

In 1940, however, Churchill, alarmed by the possibility of 'fifth columnists' among the many German speaking refugees, decided to "collar the lot", sending many between the ages of 16 and 65 to internment camps in Canada and Australia. Alfred, just 16, was held in Quebec's Fort Lennox. In the fall of 1941, he was released into the care of a Montreal sponsor, Martin Wolff.

Martin Wolff became like a father to him, pressing him to further his education. While in the camp Alfred had passed his matriculation exams easily, but upon release, was promptly rejected by both McGill and the University of Toronto (presumably because their Jewish 'quotas' were filled). He applied to Queen's, where he was accepted, in mid-term, into the Faculty of Applied Science.

"I was a free man, I had been welcomed into a Canadian family and had been accepted by a prestigious Canadian university," he recalls. "I was determined to do my best."

Combining arts and science, as he has ever since, Alfred earned a number of Queen's degrees very quickly: A BSc in Engineering Chemistry 1945, a BA in History 1946 and an MSc in Chemistry 1947. He went on to complete his PhD in

organic chemistry at Harvard in 1950. That year he went to Milwaukee to work in research for the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company and the next year he started his own tiny chemical supply company literally in a garage.

In 1949, travelling on the SS Franconia from Quebec City to Liverpool, Alfred met Isabel Overton, the daughter of a deeply religious Protestant family in Northern Ontario and a graduate of Victoria University in Toronto.

“How all the fellows at the university could have overlooked a woman of such inner and outer beauty, such goodness and intelligence was beyond my understanding,” he later wrote. After the voyage, Alfred and Isabel spent many hours in London together and were enchanted with each other; after nine days Alfred proposed marriage.

“During those nine days I thought of only two problems, one important, one trivial,” he recalls, tongue-in-cheek. “How to bridge our differences in religion was the major issue. The minor one was whether our greatly different eating speeds would make life difficult, for I eat quickly and Isabel eats very slowly; indeed, she takes at least 20 minutes longer over a meal than I do. An hour a day is 365 hours a year . . . if we lived together for 30 years, I would spend an additional 456 days – well over a year – just eating. I concluded that Isabel was worth it.”

Isabel eventually decided that Alfred should really marry a Jewish girl with whom he would build the family he so much wanted. Her book, *A Canadian in Love*, is based on the 82 letters she wrote to Alfred between their meeting in July 1949 and her sad decision in September 1950 not to write to him again. In 1952 Alfred married Helen Daniels, with whom he had two sons, David and Daniel. In 1981, Helen divorced Alfred so that he could marry Isabel, his first love.

When she was “rediscovered” by Alfred in England in 1975, Isabel had been teaching since 1949 at Bexhill in Sussex (close to the site of Herstmonceux Castle). There, she co-founded a drama school, and later, a costume museum. Isabel loves gardening, music and the theatre. She accompanies Alfred on his European lecture tours and visits with chemists. Like him, she is very interested in the Bible, old master paintings, and “investing” in research and scholarship. Wherever they are, they both attend synagogue faithfully.

With Isabel a close collaborator, Dr. Bader now spends his time dealing in paintings, writing and lecturing, “trying to help chemists”, and giving away money sensibly. He finds the last of these the most difficult.

Although he is well known to international art auction houses, he takes particular pleasure in buying dirty old paintings in antique stores or at auctions and flea markets, hoping that cleaning will reveal great works. His special skill is in distinguishing work by Rembrandt's students from that of the master himself. Slide-illustrated tales of such detective work have held gallery audiences spellbound for years.

His close connection with the Agnes Etherington Art Centre began in 1967 when Frances Smith, then the curator, asked him whether he would consider donating a painting to the fledgling gallery.

"I was pleased to be asked," he recalls, "and felt that Queen's would be a good home for the *Salvator Mundi* that had belonged to my grandfather. An early 16th century Italian painting, it did not really fit into my own collection, and from then on Queen's became the home of choice for beautiful paintings which I could not pass up, but knew were not really for me."

Despite their wealth, the Baders live modestly. Alfred's favourite painting in his house is a large biblical scene titled *Joseph and the Baker*, at one time attributed to Rembrandt. This painting and another Dutch biblical scene, *Angel Appearing to Hagar*, seem to embody the things in life that Alfred holds dear: God, good works and help of the neediest and the ablest.

A self-made millionaire, Alfred Bader is a survivor, an astute businessman, a connoisseur and a scholar. With typical modesty, Alfred Bader wrote in 1995: "Whenever I have contemplated any achievement in my life, I have marveled how many and how diverse are the people who have made it possible."

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all quotes ascribed to Isabel Bader in this article are from her book, *A Canadian in Love* (University of Toronto Press, 2000). Dr. Alfred Bader is quoted from his 1995 book, *Adventures of a Chemist Collector* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson).