

Roche: a pharmaceutical company from the beginning

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Unlike Ciba, Geigy and Sandoz, which began as dye makers, Roche was a pharmaceutical company from its foundation. Fritz Hoffmann, born in 1868 into the Hoffmann family of ribbon merchants that Part B mentioned in connection with the engine loom, trained as a merchant and worked in the drug trade in London and Hamburg. After becoming a partner in a small Basel drug firm in 1894, he founded his own company in 1896, F. Hoffmann-La Roche & Co, adding to his name that of his wife, Adèle La Roche, a member of a Basel banking family, as was the custom in Basel.¹

Hoffmann's idea was to produce standardised medicines in industrial quantities and to sell them under brand names through intensive marketing to physicians and pharmacists in many countries. At the end of the nineteenth century, most medicines were prepared by pharmacists according to individual prescriptions, and their composition and quality varied. Hoffmann saw that industrially produced, standardised preparations, sold under a trademark with guaranteed composition, would offer physicians reliability and the manufacturer a lasting market. His first successful products were Sirolin, a cough syrup, and Thiocol, a preparation of guaiacol, followed by Digalen, a standardised digitalis preparation.²

From the beginning, Roche was an international company. Fritz Hoffmann built a factory at Grenzach, on the German side of the border near Basel, in 1896, to supply the German market without paying German tariffs. Within the first two decades he also founded subsidiaries in Italy, France, the United States, Britain, Russia and other countries. The company's international expansion was financed partly by the Hoffmann family and partly by the family's bankers. It was an early example of a Swiss company that treated the world as its market from the outset, because the Swiss market was too small to support a pharmaceutical company of significant size.

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The First World War and the Russian Revolution brought Roche to the edge of ruin. The company had large assets in Russia, which were lost after 1917, while its business suffered from the disruption of the war. In 1919, Roche was converted into a joint-stock company with the help of the Basler Handelsbank and other investors. Fritz Hoffmann withdrew from the management shortly before his death in 1920.³ Under the leadership of Emil Christoph Barell, who directed the company for several decades, Roche recovered and became one of the leading pharmaceutical companies of the world.

In the 1930s, Roche entered the field of vitamins. The synthesis of vitamin C, achieved by the chemist Tadeus Reichstein at the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich in 1933, was licensed to Roche, which developed an industrial process and began large-scale production. Roche became the world's largest producer of vitamins, a position it held for decades.⁴ Reichstein, who later moved to the University of Basel, received the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1950 for his research on the hormones of the adrenal cortex. The vitamin business made Roche a mass producer of a product whose demand grew with the rising standards of nutrition in the twentieth century.

1 Notes

1. On Fritz Hoffmann-La Roche (1868–1920) and the foundation of F. Hoffmann-La Roche & Co in Basel on 1 October 1896, see HLS, article "Hoffmann-La Roche, Fritz"; the history of Roche. Dates to be verified. ↩
2. On the early Roche products (Thiocol, Sirolin, Digalen) and Fritz Hoffmann's strategy of branded, standardised medicines with international marketing, see the history of Roche. To be verified. ↩
3. On the financial crisis of Roche after the First World War and the Russian Revolution, its conversion into a joint-stock company in 1919 and the death of Fritz Hoffmann-La Roche in 1920, see the history of Roche. To be verified. ↩

4. On Tadeus Reichstein's synthesis of ascorbic acid (vitamin C) in 1933, its licensing to Roche and Roche's position as the leading producer of vitamins, see HLS, article "Reichstein, Tadeus"; the history of Roche. To be verified. ↩

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