

The International Year of Crystallography. Bringing Nations Together.

(Lecture given in Poznan, Poland in April 2014 at the occasion of the unveiling of a plaque commemorating Max von Laue in the building of the school he attended there)

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We gather here to commemorate the achievements of a remarkable scientist. The discovery of X-ray diffraction by Max von Laué in 1912 heralded the beginning of a new phase of crystallography, in which the scientist was able to image atoms, ions and molecules in crystals and therefore obtain insights into physics, chemistry and biology. What a remarkable journey it has been for crystallographers during the last 100 years!

The International Union of Crystallography is pleased to partner with UNESCO in this year long celebration of our subject through the medium of the International Year of Crystallography 2014. This International Year is more than a series of scientific discussions and conferences. It is about spreading the message of science at the grassroots level all over the world and it is no coincidence that we are assembled here in a primary school. At issue is the entire question of the sustainability of the high level scientific enterprise and the ways and means by which science can be used to improve the human condition worldwide. This is a matter that cannot be left to scientists alone, but scientists need to be well aware of the fact that the ramifications of their work can extend into domains very far removed from their areas of expertise.

Science is one of the greatest of unifying factors in the world today. We meet in Poznan, Poland in the year 2014. When Max von Laué went to school here around 1890, it was the town of Posen in imperial Germany. This land of shifting borders is soaked in the blood and tears of many generations. But it is important to note that if people were to meet here again a 100 years from now, it would be the name of Max von Laué that they would remember, not the names of kings, emperors, dictators and commissars who strutted around here. Even technicalities such as the name of the country in which this place is located would not be so important. Such is the importance of critical scientific discoveries and the men and women who make them. Science is then truly a way of bringing nations together and I join the community of crystallographers of Poland and Germany to celebrate the subject of crystallography and to honor the memory of one of our greatest sons.