Polonium was discovered in 1898 by Marie Curie and named for her native country of Poland. The discovery was made by extraction of the remaining radioactive components of pitchblende following the removal of uranium. There is only about $10^{-6}$ g per ton of ore! Current production for research purposes involves the synthesis of the element in the lab rather than its recovery from minerals. This is accomplished by producing Bi-210 from the abundant Bi-209. The new isotope of bismuth is then allowed to decay naturally into Po-210. The sample pictured above is actually a thin film of polonium on stainless steel.

Although radioactive, polonium has a few commercial uses. You can buy your own sample of polonium at a photography store. It is part of the special anti-static brushes for dusting off negatives and prints.

Contributors

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