

Nowhere at Home

Albert Einstein, the 'Gypsy' Who Became a Citizen of the World

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IN LATE JULY 1933, SIX MONTHS AFTER THE NAZI REGIME came to power in Germany and forced many distinguished German Jews to leave their native land, Albert Einstein paid his one and only visit to the House of Commons in Britain. Having anticipated the Jewish exodus from Germany and gone into voluntary exile in Belgium with his wife in late March, he now found himself in London, looking down from the Distinguished Visitors' Gallery of the House and listening to a dramatic speech in support of Jewish refugees under the ten-minutes rule of the British Parliament. It proposed the motion: "That leave be given to bring in a bill to promote and extend opportunities of citizenship for Jews resident outside the British Empire."

The speaker was a dashing, upper-class, Conservative Member of Parliament, Commander Oliver Locker-Lampson, who was personally—if not closely—known to Einstein. A few days before the speech, Locker-Lampson had arranged a private meeting between Einstein and Winston Churchill at Churchill's country house, where the scientist and the politician had agreed on the seriousness of the new Nazi threat to world peace. And shortly after this meeting, Locker-Lampson had introduced Einstein to a former British prime minister, David Lloyd George. In Lloyd George's house, the MP witnessed Einstein sign the visitors' book, after pausing for a moment at the 'Address' column and then writing "*Ohne*"—German for "Without".

At the beginning of his speech, Locker-Lampson noted that he himself was neither Jewish nor anti-German. Indeed, after the end of the world war in 1918—in which the commander had fought on the Russian front in support of the Tsarists and against the Communists,

with the backing of Churchill—he noted that he had pleaded in the House of Commons for fair play for Germany, on the grounds that the German people had been misled by their leaders in 1914. Now, however, the current German leaders seemed to be repeating the earlier misdirection of their countrymen, by driving out their Jewish fellow-citizens. Then Locker-Lampson made reference to the House’s current distinguished visitor, as follows:

[Germany] has even turned upon her most glorious citizen—Einstein. It is impertinent for me to praise a man of that eminence. The most eminent men in the world admit that he is the most eminent. But there was something beyond mere eminence in the case of Professor Einstein. He was beyond any achievements in the realm of science. He stood out as the supreme example of the selfless intellectual. And today Einstein is without a home. He had to write his name in a visitors’ book in England, and when he came to write his address, he put ‘Without any’. The Huns have stolen his savings. The road-hog and racketeer of Europe have plundered his place. They have even taken away his violin. A man who more than any other approximated to a citizen of the world without a house! How proud we must be that we have afforded him a shelter temporarily at Oxford to work, and long may the tides of tyranny beat in vain against these shores.¹

1 ‘House of Commons Debates’, 26 July 1933, *Hansard*, 280, 2604–2606.

The House of Commons voted to support Locker-Lampson’s bill on its first reading. Afterwards, as Einstein stood with Locker-Lampson in the lobby of the House, “Members eagerly came forward to be introduced to the greatest scientist of the age”, wrote the *Jewish Chronicle*. “As the professor walked out of the lobby, it was clear that his appearance in the House had intensified the Members’ appreciation of the grim reality of the plight of the Jews of Germany.”² Certainly the Nazi newspaper, *Völkischer Beobachter*, took note in its report headlined “Einsteinish Jewish Theatre in British Parliament”, which accused Locker-Lampson of having staged the performance for the purposes of self-publicity in the foreign press.³ The combative references in his speech to the predatory “Hun” naturally provoked a bitter Nazi denunciation of the British MP. (Later in the 1930s, the Nazi leader Adolf Hitler personally called Locker-Lampson “a Jew and a Communist.”)⁴

2 *Jewish Chronicle*, 28 July 1933.

3 *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 31 July 1933.

4 Obituary of Oliver Locker-Lampson in *New York Times*, 9 October 1954.

Two months after the speech, Locker-Lampson took the leading role in organizing a public meeting so that Einstein might speak and raise charitable donations for academic refugees from Germany. The audience, more than ten thousand strong, filled the Albert Hall in London in early October 1933. Einstein, as the star attraction among the many distinguished British speakers chaired by the physicist Ernest Rutherford, spoke on “Science and civilisation” in his hesitant, peculiar and touching English, to massive applause. Afterwards, on the steps of the hall, he told a British newspaper reporter:

I could not believe that it was possible that such spontaneous affection could be extended to one who is a wanderer on the face of the earth. The kindness of your people has touched my heart so deeply that I cannot find words to express in English what I feel. I shall leave England for America at the end of the week, but no matter how long I live I shall never forget the kindness which I have received from the people of England.⁵

5 *Eastern Daily Press*, [Norwich], 4 October 1933.

“A wanderer on the face of the earth.” In 1950, after living in the United States since 1933, Einstein went even further than this self-description. In a letter from his American home in Princeton to a friend in Switzerland whom he had known as a student in Zurich half a century before, Suzanne Markwalder, he wrote that he had now lived in America for 17 years—without having adopted anything of the country’s mentality. “One has to guard against becoming superficial in thought and feeling; it lies in the air here. You have never changed your human surroundings and can hardly realise what it is to be an old gypsy. It is not so bad.”⁶ Even when he formally became an American citizen in 1940, Einstein retained his Swiss citizenship. As was recently noted in the *New York Review of Books* by the influential English-born physicist, Freeman Dyson, who knew Einstein at Princeton in 1948 and later settled in the United States: “He had gone through the ritual of naturalization, but he remained an alien spirit in America.”⁷

6 23 December 1950, in Carl Seelig, *Albert Einstein: A Documentary Biography*, (London, Staples Press, 1956), 40.

7 Freeman Dyson, ‘Einstein as a Jew and a philosopher’, *New York Review of Books*, 7 May 2015, 14.

By 1950, Einstein the gypsy had wandered far indeed from his country of birth and truly become a citizen of the world. Born in southern Germany in 1879, he abandoned it in 1894. After a period living with his parents in Italy, he received the remainder of his education in Switzerland, where he married a Serbian fellow-student of physics and settled (before creating his special theory of relativity and his revolutionary quantum theory in 1905). Having relinquished his German citizenship in 1896, he was stateless until 1901, when he became a Swiss citizen. In 1911, he and his young family moved from Switzerland to Prague, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but returned to Zurich in 1912. Then, in 1914, some months before the outbreak of war, he settled in Berlin and again acquired German citizenship, while keeping his Swiss citizenship. As he humorously remarked in an article in the *London Times*, published in 1919 during the bitter aftermath of war, “Today in Germany I am called a German man of science, and in England I am represented as a ‘Swiss Jew.’ If I come to be regarded as a *bête noire*, the descriptions will be reversed, and I shall become a Swiss Jew for the Germans and a German man of science for the English!”⁸ Nevertheless, he remained based in Germany—while travelling extensively in the 1920s and early 1930s to the United States, Britain, various European countries, the Far East (notably Japan), Palestine and South America—until 1933. Then, with the arrival of the Nazi regime, he moved to Belgium and after that Britain, before eventually settling in the United States, in Princeton.

8 *The Times*, 28 November 1919.

He never returned to Europe, such was his unrelenting distrust of the Germans—or to Palestine, despite his committed sympathy for Jewish causes. (He willed his massive archives to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.) In fact, Einstein never left the shores of the United States between 1933 and his death in 1955.

Towards each and every one of these countries in which he lived or travelled, he felt an ambivalence. With the possible exception of Switzerland, Einstein felt nowhere at home throughout his life. Unlike his almost equally distinguished physicist contemporaries, Max Planck and Niels Bohr—friends of Einstein who felt at home only in Germany and Denmark, respectively—Einstein did not fully identify himself with any country or nation. “If I had to characterise Einstein by one single word I would choose *apartness*,” wrote Einstein’s (and Bohr’s) biographer, Abraham Pais, a physicist who had known Einstein and Bohr personally.⁹

This solitariness was evident from Einstein’s childhood. He was a quiet baby, so quiet that his parents became seriously concerned and consulted a doctor about his not learning to talk. But when a daughter, Maja, was born in November 1881, Albert apparently asked promptly: Where are the wheels of my new toy? It turned out that his ambition was to speak in complete sentences: First he would try out a sentence in his head, while moving his lips, and only then repeat it aloud. The habit lasted until his seventh year or even later. The family maidservant dubbed him “stupid”.

At school, he was good, yet by no means a prodigy. However, Einstein showed hardly any affection for his schooling and in later life excoriated the system of formal education current in Germany. He referred to his teachers as “sergeants” and “lieutenants,” disliked physical training and competitive games—even intellectual games such as chess—and detested anything that smacked of the military discipline typical of the Prussian ethos of northern Germany.¹⁰ “Constraint has always been his personal enemy. His whole youth was a battle against it”, wrote a friend and Einstein biographer, Antonina Vallentin, in 1954. “When he uttered the German word for it, an abrupt word, with a particular sinister sound, *Zwang*, everything tolerant, humorous or resigned in his expression vanished.”¹¹ In 1920, he even told a Berlin interviewer that the school matriculation exam should be abolished. “Let us return to Nature, which upholds the principle of getting the maximum amount of effect from the minimum of effort, whereas the matriculation test does exactly the opposite.”¹² As he astutely remarked in 1930 after he had become world famous: “To punish me for my contempt of authority, Fate has made me an authority myself.”¹³

Part of Einstein’s problem lay in the heavy emphasis in the German Gymnasiums on the humanities; that is, on classical studies and to a lesser extent German history and literature, to the detriment of modern foreign languages, such as French and English. Science and

9 Abraham Pais, *Einstein Lived Here* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994), 39.

10 Alexander Moszkowski, *Conversations with Einstein* (London, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1972), 223.

11 Antonina Vallentin, *Einstein: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1954), 20.

12 Moszkowski, *Conversations*, 66.

13 Banesh Hoffmann and Helen Dukas, *Albert Einstein: Creator and Rebel* (New York, Viking, 1972), 24.

mathematics were regarded as the subjects with the lowest status. But the main problem with school was probably that Albert was a confirmed autodidact, who preferred his own company to that of his teachers and fellow students. “Private study” is a phrase frequent in his early letters and adult writings on education. It was clearly his chief means of becoming educated. His sister Maja recalled that even in noisy company her brother could “withdraw to the sofa, take pen and paper in hand, set the inkstand precariously on the armrest, and lose himself so completely in a problem that the conversation of many voices stimulated rather than disturbed him.”¹⁴

14 Albert Einstein, *Collected Papers of Albert Einstein*, volume 1 (English translation supplement), (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987), xxii.

15 Albrecht Fölsing, *Albert Einstein: A Biography* (London, Penguin, 1998), 27.

Things came to a head in 1894. A new class teacher informed Einstein that “he would never get anywhere in life”. When Einstein replied that surely he “had not committed any offence,” he was told: “Your mere presence here undermines the class’s respect for me.”¹⁵ For the rest of his life, Einstein would be known for a mocking (and self-mocking) way with words that was sometimes biting and always at odds with his later gentle image. When as an adult in the 1920s he chanced upon a German psychiatrist’s book, *Physique and Character* by Ernest Kretschmer, he was shaken by it and wrote down the following words in his diary, which he apparently thought applied to himself: “Hypersensitivity transformed into indifference. During adolescence, inwardly inhibited and unworldly. Glass pane between subject and other people. Unmotivated mistrust. Substitute paper world. Ascetic impulses.”¹⁶

16 Albert Einstein, *The Travel Diaries of Albert Einstein: The Far East, Palestine & Spain, 1922–1923*, Ze’ev Rosenkranz ed., (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2018), 89.

Even in Switzerland, these youthful personal characteristics tended to isolate him. His relationship with his physics professors at the Swiss Polytechnic in Zurich in 1896–1900 was distinctly awkward, because the largely self-taught Einstein regarded them as behind the times, scientifically speaking, and unable to cope with his student challenges to their authority. As he recalled of a student friend, the mathematically gifted Marcel Grossmann (who would later aid Einstein crucially with the mathematics of general relativity), “He was a model student; I untidy and a daydreamer. He on excellent terms with the teachers and grasping everything easily; I aloof and discontented, not very popular.”¹⁷ When, after four years of study at the Polytechnic, Einstein graduated with a diploma entitling him to teach mathematics in Swiss schools, his aim was to become an assistant to a professor at the Polytechnic, write a doctoral thesis and enter the academic world. But he received no support from his professors. In 1902, his desperate economic circumstances compelled him to take a job as a clerk in the Patent Office in Bern, with the help of Grossmann’s father. Luckily for Einstein, this stable, practical employment proved to be an ideal setting for spare-time research on theoretical physics.

17 Hoffmann with Dukas, *Albert Einstein*, 36.

Moreover, many of his friends in Zurich and Bern—including his fiancée, Mileva Marić—were not fully Swiss. Grossmann, though a member of an old Swiss family, was born in Hungary. Michele Besso,

the only helper acknowledged by name in Einstein's first published paper on special relativity, though born in Switzerland, was a Jew from an Italian family. Maurice Solovine, one of the three members of an academic discussion club formed with Einstein (which they jokingly called the Olympia Academy), was born in Romania. Only the third member of the club, Conrad Habicht, a mathematician who also helped Einstein to develop relativity, belonged entirely to Switzerland.

Although Einstein eventually left the Patent Office and became a professor of theoretical physics at the university in Zurich in 1909, this move came about, ironically, thanks to German—not Swiss—support. German physicists, led by Planck, had recognized the importance of special relativity and of other papers published in Germany by Einstein from 1905. And it was they who eventually lured him back to his abandoned country in April 1914 by offering him a plum position at the Prussian Academy of Sciences in Berlin.

There, in 1915-16, working furiously and virtually alone, Einstein created the most important work of his scientific life: general relativity. At the same time, his marriage collapsed, and the First World War divided him from his German colleagues, including Planck.

As a Swiss citizen, he was not required for military service. On the other hand, he was expected to support the patriotic effort. In October 1914, two months after the outbreak of war, 93 leading Germans from the world of the arts, humanities and sciences enthusiastically signed a "Manifesto to the cultured world," which was translated into ten languages, arguing that Germany had not started the war and that its cultural legacy—Goethe, Beethoven, and Kant were mentioned by name—and its current militarism were as one. Einstein, instead, signed a "Manifesto to the Europeans," arguing for European unity, rather than war, which attracted only four signatures and had to be printed in Zurich, not Berlin. When, in 1915, he was asked by the officers of the Berlin Goethe League for a contribution to *The Country of Goethe 1914-1916: A Patriotic Album*, he argued that: "The best minds from all epochs are agreed that war is one of the worst enemies of human development, that everything should be done to prevent it." This comment was permitted. But when he further remarked that: "The state, to which I belong as a citizen, plays not the slightest role in my emotional life; I regard a person's relations with the state as a business matter, rather like one's relations with a life assurance company", the League refused to publish this.¹⁸ Germany's national self-delusion was perfectly encapsulated in a vignette from Einstein reported to a Swiss colleague, the Nobel prize-winning writer Romain Rolland, in 1915. After every meeting of the Berlin University Senate, said Einstein, laughing aloud, all the professors would meet in a restaurant and "invariably" the conversation would begin with the question: "Why are we hated in the world?" Then there would be a discussion in which everyone would supply his own answer while "most carefully steering clear of the truth."¹⁹

18 Albrecht Fölsing, *Albert Einstein*, 367-368.

19 Ibid., 366.

After the war, Einstein's attitude to Germany became even more ambivalent. General relativity made him suddenly world famous in late 1919, when his 1915-16 theory was proved by British astronomical observations of a solar eclipse, led by Arthur Eddington. The British connection—combined with Eddington's Quaker support for pacifism—made Einstein increasingly suspect in the eyes of German patriots, who in 1920 launched an anti-relativity movement in Germany, claiming that the theory was scientifically bogus. Einstein's subsequent support for a Jewish national home in Palestine from 1921, and for pacifism, intensified this German opposition, which combined anti-relativity with anti-Semitism and militarism. In mid-1922, right-wing extremists assassinated in Berlin the foreign minister of the Weimar Republic, Walther Rathenau, a Jew who was friendly with Einstein. Soon after, Einstein, fearing for his own life, left Germany for a long lecture tour abroad. While he was in Japan, the trial of the would-be assassins of Rathenau took place in Berlin. One of the witnesses, a German-Jewish journalist, testified in court that: "The great scholar Albert Einstein is now in Japan because he does not feel safe in Germany."²⁰ This comment was picked up from a news agency report by the *Japan Advertiser*, causing embarrassment to the German ambassador to Japan. He requested Einstein by cable to allow him to deny the story publicly. But as Einstein conveyed to the ambassador in a letter, the true situation was somewhat more complicated than it appeared. Before the murder of Rathenau, "A yearning for the Far East led me, in large part, to accept the invitation to Japan". After the murder, "I was certainly very relieved to have an opportunity for a long absence from Germany, taking me away from the temporarily heightened danger without my having to do anything that could have been unpleasant for my German friends and colleagues."²¹

20 Note 170 in Einstein, *Travel Diaries*, 305.

21 20 December 1922, in Einstein, *Travel Diaries*, 253.

Thus, during the first half of the 1920s, Einstein found himself in a disturbing position. He was promoted and hailed as an important cultural ambassador for Weimar Germany when he travelled and lectured in many countries: the United States and Britain in 1921, Japan in 1922, Palestine in 1923 and South America in 1925. Yet he was also fiercely attacked by many Germans, at home and abroad. In Argentina, for example, the German ambassador reported to his masters in Berlin on Einstein's visit: "For the first time, a world-famous German scholar came here, and his naïve, kindly, perhaps somewhat unworldly manner had an extraordinary appeal for the local population. One could not find a better man to counter the hostile propaganda of lies, and to destroy the fable of German barbarism."²² And yet, the ambassador admitted, the local German community in Argentina had boycotted all Einstein-related events because its members objected to his pacifism. "A funny lot, these Germans", wrote Einstein in his Argentina diary. "To them I am a stinking flower, and yet they keep putting me in their buttonhole."²³ At several times in this period,

22 Josef Eisinger, *Einstein on the Road* (New York, Prometheus, 2011), 83.

23 17 Apr. 1925, in Fölsing, *Albert Einstein*, 549.

Einstein seriously contemplated leaving his home in Germany for good. Such personal tribulations gave him advance warning—ahead of most other Germans—of what to expect from the Nazi party a decade later.

When Einstein moved to the United States in 1933, his 1920s predicament in Germany in a sense recurred in his new setting. Relativity might now have been largely accepted by scientists (other than Nazi sympathizers), but right-wing American forces were suspicious of Einstein's public opposition to the Nazis and supposed sympathy for Communism. Even in Princeton, as late as November 1939, after the outbreak of war in Europe, the university's freshmen chose Hitler, for the second year running, as "the greatest living person" in the annual poll of their class conducted by the *Daily Princetonian!* (The German leader received 93 votes in the poll; Einstein 27 votes; and Neville Chamberlain, the British prime minister, 15 votes.)²⁴ In the early 1940s, soon after he became an American citizen, Einstein was nevertheless excluded by the military authorities from access to plans to build an atomic bomb, despite the fact that he had first proposed its construction in a famous letter to President Franklin Roosevelt as early as August 1939 (such was Einstein's fear that German physicists would beat physicists in the United States). During the cold war, post-1945, right-wing American suspicions intensified. After Einstein announced his opposition to the hydrogen bomb in a nationwide television broadcast in 1950, J. Edgar Hoover, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, launched a top-secret FBI investigation with the aim of having Einstein deported from the United States as a Communist agent. It continued until Einstein's death, despite a lack of any convincing evidence.

24 *New York Times*, 28 Nov. 1939.

More effective was Einstein's opposition to Senator Joseph McCarthy and his 1950s Red Scare. Einstein helped to turn the tide against the climate of fear and precipitate the decline of McCarthyism. In this period he made a number of public statements and supported several individuals threatened with dismissal from their jobs for having Communist sympathies. But the one that really stirred public controversy was Einstein's letter to a New York teacher of English, William Frauenglass, in May 1953. Frauenglass had refused to testify before a congressional committee about his political affiliations and now faced dismissal from his school. He asked for advice from Einstein, who wrote to him (no doubt thinking of his experience of German intellectuals in the first world war and under Nazism):

The reactionary politicians have managed to instil suspicion of all intellectual efforts into the public by dangling before their eyes a danger from without. ... What ought the minority of intellectuals to do against this evil? Frankly, I can only see the revolutionary way of non-cooperation in the sense of Gandhi's. Every intellectual who is called before one of the committees ought to refuse to testify, i.e., he must be prepared for jail

and economic ruin, in short, for the sacrifice of his personal welfare in the interest of the cultural welfare of his country. ... If enough people are ready to take this grave step they will be successful. If not, then the intellectuals of this country deserve nothing better than the slavery which is intended for them.²⁵

25 Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions*, Carl Seelig ed., (New York, Three Rivers Press, 1982), 33-34.

After this advice was published in the *New York Times* with Einstein's permission, he feared that, at the age of 74 and in poor health, he might have to go to jail. Immediately, McCarthy told the *New York Times* that "anyone who gives advice like Einstein's to Frauenglass is himself an enemy of America. ... That's the same advice given by every Communist lawyer that has ever appeared before our committee." (A week later, he modified "enemy of America" to "a disloyal American.")²⁶ The *New York Times*, in an editorial, agreed with McCarthy's criticism of Einstein's advice.

26 Pais, *Einstein Lived Here*, 238.

Perhaps, if Einstein had been younger and healthier in the 1950s, he might have emigrated from the United States to Israel. Yet such a move seems unlikely on the evidence. During the 1930s and 1940s, he repeatedly refused to accept a professorship from the Hebrew University, or even to revisit Palestine from Princeton. He certainly supported some Jewish organizations, and assiduously helped numerous individual Jews—in both the humanities and the sciences—to escape doom at the hands of the Nazis, but he evinced no sympathy for Zionist nationalism. When he turned down the presidency of Israel in 1952, Einstein remarked that his relationship with the Jewish people had become his "strongest human bond."²⁷ However, he clearly valued the pleasures of solitary thinking about physics more highly than human bonds, whether in Jerusalem, Berlin, Oxford, Princeton or anywhere else in the world. "Remoteness, a relative absence of intimate personal relationships, is ... a genuine ingredient of certain types of genius," noted the Oxford philosopher Isaiah Berlin long after Einstein's death. "It is certainly true of Einstein, who was himself aware of his absence of contact with human beings; although in his case this certainly did not take the form of a desire for power or glory."²⁸ Home, for Einstein, was always his own mind. A

27 Ze'ev Rosenkranz, *Einstein before Israel: Zionist Icon or Iconoclast?* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011), 273.

28 Letter to Anthony Storr, 29 September 1978, in Isaiah Berlin, *Affirming: Letters 1975-1997*, Henry Hardy and Mark Pottle eds, (London, Chatto & Windus, 2015), 84.