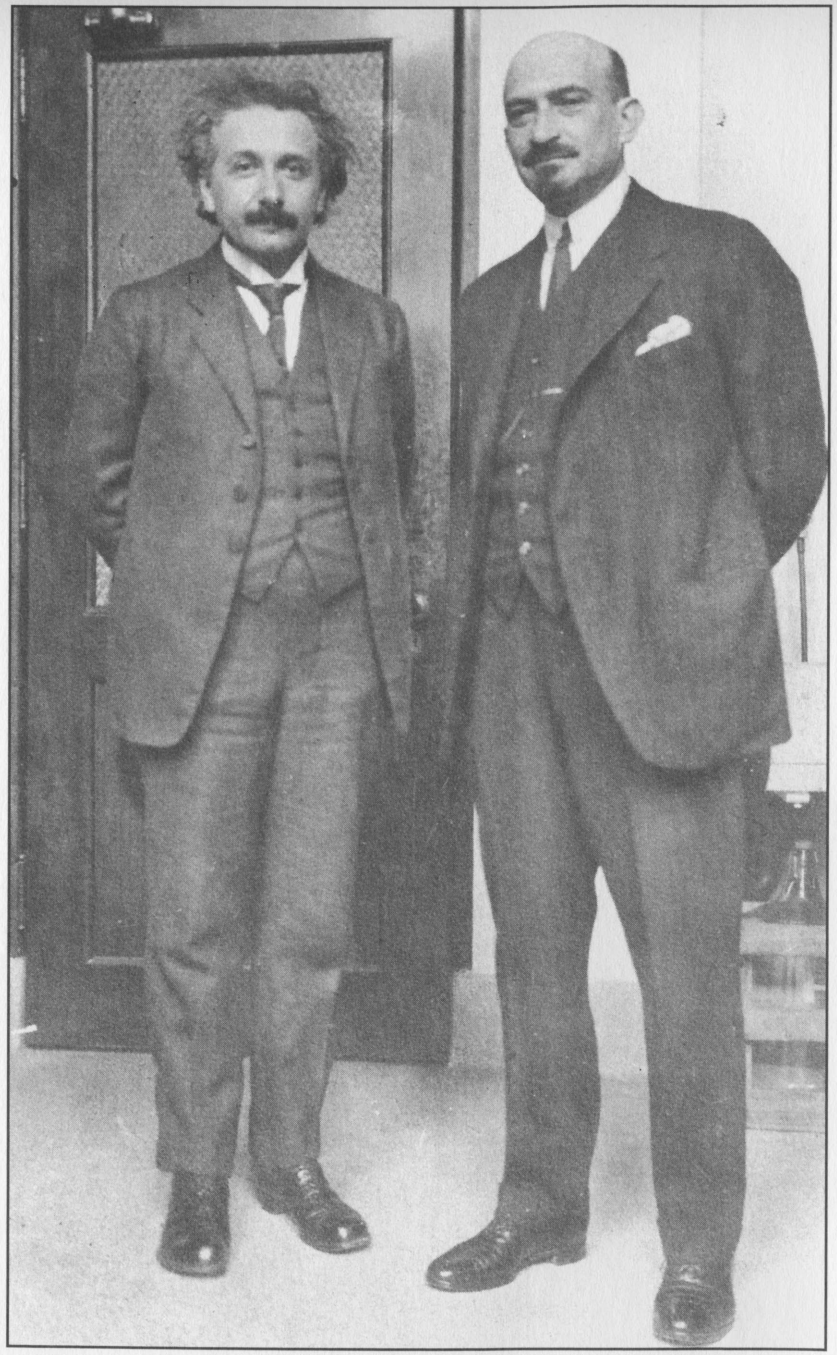
Albert Meets America

How Journalists Treated Genius during Einstein's 1921 Travels

Edited by

JÓZSEF ILLY



Einstein and Weizmann in New York.
Courtesy Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

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Foreword

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When chided for agreeing to make his first trip to the United States as part of a Zionist delegation, rather than as a representative of German science, Einstein replied to his colleague Fritz Haber, the Nobel Prize winner in chemistry:

> Despite my expressed internationalist orientation, I nevertheless always consider it my duty to intervene on behalf of my persecuted and morally oppressed tribal colleagues, as much as is in my power. I therefore gladly agreed [to the request to travel to the United States with a Zionist delegation], without debating for more than five minutes, although I had just turned down all the American universities. This therefore is rather an act of loyalty than one of disloyalty. The prospect of erecting a Jewish university in particular fills me with special joy, since I have recently seen numerous examples of the perfidious and loveless manner in which one treats splendid young Jews and seeks to sever their educational possibilities. I could also list other events of the past year that would have to drive a self-respecting Jew to take Jewish solidarity more seriously than seemed proper and natural in earlier days.

A few days later Einstein reiterated in a letter to his close friend Heinrich Zangger: "On Sunday it's off to America. Not only to speak at universities, which will happen as well, but for the founding of the Jewish university in Jerusalem. I feel the keen need to do something for this cause."

Thus, Albert Einstein, who had received numerous invitations to lecture in America over the preceding few years, traveled from Berlin via the Netherlands in the spring of 1921 with a full agenda and schedule: he would spend most of his time accompanying Chaim Weizmann on a tour of East Coast cities, making numerous, brief appearances at large gatherings intended to arouse enthusiasm for the Jewish colony in Palestine and its planned cultural and educational institutions. In addition, Einstein was to deliver a series of lectures at Princeton University on his contributions to modern physics.

Einstein had been propelled to international fame in the fall of 1919, at age forty, with the confirmation of his general theory of relativity by two

teams of British astronomers who had observed the 1919 solar eclipse and produced evidence confirming Einstein's prediction of light bending in the vicinity of massive objects. He had been celebrated as the greatest physicist of the twentieth century on the front pages of all major American and European newspapers.

As one of only a handful of German scientists who had publicly criticized Germany's war aims, Einstein could have expected to travel to former Allied countries without fearing overt anti-German sentiment. Since the end of World War I, however, he had not been officially invited except by formerly neutral or Central power European countries, such as Holland, Switzerland, and Austria. Although the British Royal Astronomical Society had considered awarding him their Gold Medal in 1920, the nomination had ultimately failed to gain the majority needed, and Einstein's planned trip to England to receive this honor had been canceled.

During 1920, Einstein received several invitations to teach or lecture in America. He toyed with the possibility of an extended lecture tour and exchanged letters with representatives of Columbia University, the University of Wisconsin, Harvard University, Princeton University, and the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C. By the end of the year, Einstein was even studying English pronunciation and was expecting to travel soon to the United States. But by early 1921, it had become clear that, in the climate of postwar economic hardships, not even American institutions of higher learning could come up with the ambitious sum of fifteen thousand dollars that Einstein was hoping to be paid for his U.S. lectures.

Distinguished European scientists had begun traveling to America in the previous two decades, received enthusiastically by an academic community eager to adopt the practice of research-oriented scientific education that had taken hold, primarily at German universities, since the late nineteenth century. Physics, and theoretical physics in particular, had experienced extraordinary growth in Germany since Hermann von Helmholtz, Felix Klein, Max Planck, and other distinguished physicists had started the intellectual revolution leading eventually to quantum physics and relativity, fields in which Einstein had made his most remarkable and lasting contributions between 1905 and 1915. It had been customary for American students to travel to the great chemical and physical laboratories of Berlin or Leipzig for postgraduate work and then to return and recast American science departments at MIT or Caltech on the model of German higher

education, emphasizing independent research as an integral component of scientific education.

At the 1904 World's Fair in Saint Louis, a stellar gathering of European scientists had delivered comprehensive lectures on the state of science at the turn of the century, among them Max Weber, Jacques Loeb, and Wilhelm Ostwald. A year later, the eminent Austrian physicist Ludwig Boltzmann returned to the United States and ventured as far as Berkeley and the newly founded Stanford University, where he lectured in English and was frequently entertained by munificent donors, among them Mrs. Hearst and Mrs. Leland Stanford. In an essay published that same year as "Trip of a German Professor to Eldorado," Boltzmann gave a vivid and entertaining account of his summer sojourn in California, of American railroads, restaurants, prohibition, and the ubiquitous presence of a Euclid Avenue in every city. Boltzmann was most impressed by the giant telescope of the Lick Observatory and the entrepreneurial spirit of American scientists and their supporters and less impressed by the students in his class, whom he found only modestly prepared to deal with integrals and differentials.

Over the ensuing years, many other European physicists accepted invitations to lecture at major American universities engaged in the new progressive movement of social, economic, and increasingly vibrant educational reform. With these reforms came growth in federal support of science. In the early 1900s, through the efforts of the newly founded American Physical Society and scientists at Princeton, Columbia, Wisconsin, Harvard, Cornell, and other institutions, physics departments expanded their laboratories, faculty, and student enrollment, and "as though to symbolize the vitality of American physics, in 1907 Albert Michelson won his Nobel Prize in physics."*

By 1914, the new atomic physics discovered in England and on the Continent was being taught at Princeton, at Chicago (where Robert Millikan carried out his famous oil-drop experiments), at Harvard, and elsewhere. Support for scientific research was growing through private funding agencies, such as the Carnegie Institution, and industrial research laboratories at companies such as AT&T, DuPont, Westinghouse, and General Electric

*For a detailed account of the development of American physics in the years before and after Einstein's visit, see especially Daniel J. Kevles, *The Physicists: The History of a Scientific Community in Modern America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 79.

were increasingly attracting talented young physicists. But it was the outbreak of World War I that propelled American science onto its path of ascendancy and into the preeminent position it was to occupy for the rest of the twentieth century.

The war caused a major rupture in international scientific relations, with wide-ranging repercussions for the further development of science. With the recruitment by all belligerent countries of engineers, chemists, and physicists in the service of the most devastating and technologically advanced conflagration in history, the reestablishment of scholarly exchanges among former enemy nations after 1919 was a slow, cautious process, fraught with resentment for many. Marie Curie, the two-time Nobel Prize winner in chemistry and physics (who had introduced x-ray machines on ambulances on the French front), was received triumphantly on May 20, 1921, at the White House, where she was presented with a gift of one gram of radium by President Harding. Einstein, however, was not invited but had to content himself with meeting Harding as part of a delegation of scientists. Even two years after the end of the war, his German origin and residence caused many officials to be cautious. Nevertheless, as the articles so conscientiously collected and humorously annotated by Dr. Illy in the present volume indicate, many representatives of local and state governments and of academic establishments along the East Coast sincerely welcomed Einstein.

During his U.S. travels, Einstein spent considerable time in New York City and also visited New Brunswick, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Princeton, Boston, New Haven, and Cleveland. He lectured at the College of the City of New York, Columbia, Princeton, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the Zionist Society of Engineering and Agriculture. From the more than 160 newspaper reports contained in this comprehensive collection, however, one senses that he tried hardest to explain to reporters and the general public, invariably through an interpreter, the essence of his theory of relativity, its significance, and its usefulness.

This collection highlights the creation of the public image of Einstein, and of relativity, at the hands of the press, the public, and of Einstein himself. His physical and emotional attributes, his pleasant, jocular, and at times exasperated demeanor, his professorial attire and peculiarities, his eating habits and opinions on America were all dissected, reported, and repeated. Einstein's wife, Elsa, is also fully present in many articles. She apparently served as Einstein's interpreter on numerous occasions and also made her own mark with the press and the various dignitaries they encountered. Her English skills were evidently much better than Einstein's, and she relished entertaining, recounting anecdotes, and replying to many questions regarding Einstein's work habits in Berlin, his tastes and preferences, his likes and dislikes. She comes across as an energetic, determined woman, the worldly companion to the maladroit savant.

The two months that Einstein spent in the United States cemented his status as the scientific icon of the twentieth century. Einstein later embarked on a few similar long journeys, to Japan and the Far East and to South America. He returned to America a decade later as a visiting scientist at Caltech for three successive winters, starting in January 1931. In early 1933, while Einstein was in Pasadena, Hitler's Nazi regime made Einstein's return to Germany impossible. His fifth and last transatlantic journey brought Einstein to New York in the fall of 1933, when he took up his last academic position as a member of the newly founded Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, where he spent the last two decades of his life.

The United States had become his third home country, a country that he supported wholeheartedly during World War II but whose misdeeds during the McCarthy era he criticized equally vigorously. During the interwar years he had served the cause of international reconciliation and pacifism and had thrown the weight of his scientific reputation behind the cause of oppressed and disenfranchised Eastern European Jews. He joyously welcomed the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 but continued to advocate tirelessly on behalf of peaceful coexistence and cooperation between Jews and Arabs. After 1945 the press and the world saw Einstein as the "father of the atomic bomb," on which he in fact never worked. He continued to feel a weight of responsibility for the devastations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and devoted the last decade of his life to promoting the civilian control of nuclear energy and international nuclear disarmament.

Diana K. Buchwald
General Editor and Director
The Einstein Papers Project

Preface

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Sing of Einstein's
Yiddishe peachtrees, sing of
Sleep among the cherryblossoms.
Sing of wise newspapers
That quote the great mathematician:
A little touch of
Einstein in the night—

—William Carlos Williams,
"St. Francis Einstein of the Daffodils" (First Version), 1921

When Einstein joined Chaim Weizmann's tour of the United States in 1921 to gain support among American Jewry for the Zionist cause, his role was to raise funds for the establishment of Hebrew University. Although news coverage of the trip frequently focused on Weizmann's fierce disputes with the leaders of American Zionism, I concentrate on Einstein for three reasons.

First, in spite of Weizmann's leading role in the organization and aims of the trip, the central figure in the American and English-language Zionist press reports was Einstein, who just two years previously had gained worldwide celebrity because of a successful test of his general theory of relativity. As one journalist put it, "There is reason to believe that Prof. Einstein was induced to accompany the mission in the hope that his presence would act as a 'tail to the kite.' And now, lo and behold, contrary to all calculations (except, perhaps, those based on the theory of relativity), the tail has become the whole kite."

Second, Einstein did not participate in the fierce debate between the Weizmann-led World Zionist Organization and the leaders of the Zionist Organization of America (the "Brandeis-group"), although Einstein

followed the debate and supported the views of Weizmann. The two salient points of the debate were (1) whether to build up the Jewish national home in Palestine with private (Brandeis) or public funds (Weizmann's Keren Hayesod) and (2) whether the Zionist organization should have a federal system with independent member organizations (Brandeis) or the Zionist Congress should be a parliament exerting central control (Weizmann). (You see the parallel with the federalist and unionist viewpoints in American history!) Weizmann won the debate in Cleveland with the help of the majority of American Jews, the "Easterners" (i.e., those with roots in Eastern Europe), against the official leaders of American Jewry, who were mostly "Westerners" (i.e., of ancestry from Germany).

A third reason for concentrating on Einstein is somewhat subjective. Working for the Einstein Papers Project, I have learned that one should be careful with newspaper accounts. As historical scholars, we collect each scrap of newspaper with Einstein's name in it, but when forming scholarly conclusions, we turn to them only as a last resort. As a result, we now have a sizable collection of clippings, with interesting interviews, events, and commentaries. We keep them in big, black steel cabinets that protect them from floods, fires, earthquakes, and the eyes of readers, I fear. As a conservation-minded person, I cannot tolerate this waste of intellectual treasure and interesting reading.

A few words about the news reports presented herein. I had to use microfilm copies of the originals, often on the edge of legibility; hence transcription was the only feasible option for their presentation.

Names are another problem. The reporters recorded the names by following their ears. Weitzmann, Weisemann, or Weizmann? These variants cause no trouble because their contexts show they all stand for the name of a well-known person, Chaim Weizmann. But what about Bernstein/Burstein, Hurwitz/Hurevitz, Levin/Lewine, Timen/Teaman? I have left the spelling variants untouched and apologize if any find their ancestors' names misspelled.

You might well wonder whether Einstein really was the kind of Zionist that the journalists portrayed. For a recent discussion of this fundamental issue, please see the seventh volume of *The Collected Papers of Albert Einstein.*

I enjoyed gathering these materials. I hope you will enjoy reading them, even if not everything that was reported on Einstein is true. Indeed, you may find pleasure in unraveling the roots of the errors—as did I.

I express my sincere thanks to Robert Schulmann and Diana Kormos-Buchwald, for encouraging the whole venture; to Jane Dietrich, Rudy Hirschmann, and Rosy Meiron for translating my English into theirs; to Ze'ev Rosenkranz, for help in finding my way in Jewish matters; and to Daniel Kennefick, for his remarks on Irish matters.

I am grateful to Dr. Roni Grosz, curator of the Albert Einstein Archives, for permission to publish the manuscript "Einstein on the Art of Interviewing."

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