

From the *Sag Harbor Express*

EINSTEIN, BACH AND

THE ATOMIC BOMB

WW II Physicists Met

On Little Peconic Bay

In September 1939, Hitler invaded Poland, starting WW II and inflicting years of suffering on the world. Only a couple of months earlier, the famous scientist Albert Einstein was vacationing in a rented cottage on Nassau Point, across Little Peconic Bay from Noyac, not knowing he would play a reluctant part in ending the war. In July two refugee physicists from Hungary, Leo Szilard, then at Columbia University, and Eugene Wigner of Princeton, drove out to the North Fork to see Einstein. They had information that German scientists had smashed the atom and were working to develop a nuclear weapon. They feared that, if successful, it could well enable Hitler to dominate the free world. They wanted Einstein's help in convincing the Roosevelt administration to take action against the looming danger. Einstein agreed and though concerned about the morality of creating such a doomsday device, he wrote a letter that eventually reached Roosevelt and helped persuade him to order the secret American effort, the Manhattan Project, to build an atomic bomb.

One of Einstein's pleasures that summer was sailing a 14-ft catboat called "Tinef" which means "junk" in Yiddish, and according to Dr. Marilyn Weigold of Pace University, writing in the Summer 2000 issue of Long Island Forum, local boys came to Einstein's aid when he capsized the little boat in a strong breeze. One of the boys, Robert Fisher, gave Einstein sailing

lessons but said that the 60-year old scientist was quite inept on the water. The Nobel Laureate probably more enjoyed playing Bach on his violin, joined by David Rothman who ran the local department store and sold Einstein a pair of sandals. Walter Isaacson gives a similar account in his fine biography of Einstein.

Isaacson quotes Szilard on their search for the scientist, “We knew that Einstein was somewhere on Long Island, but we didn’t know precisely where.” Szilard called Einstein’s Princeton office and was told he was renting the house of a Dr. Moore in the village of Peconic. After a number of misdirections they finally found him there on Old Cove Road. Then, “Sitting at a bare wooden table on the screen porch of the sparsely furnished cottage, Szilard explained the process of how an explosive chain reaction could be produced in uranium...”

The three scientists agreed that a letter to the State Department signed by the famous Einstein might get proper attention. Fortunately Szilard later met Alexander Sachs, an economist at Lehman Brothers and a friend of Roosevelt, who offered to hand-deliver the letter to the president. But the letter needed revision and Szilard, this time accompanied by another refugee physicist, Edward Teller, drove out again to Peconic in Teller’s 1935 Plymouth. “Einstein dictated a revised letter in German,” Szilard recalled, “which Teller took down, and I used this German text as a guide in preparing drafts of a letter to the President.” It took months for Sachs to get in to see the President, and to the dismay of the Hungarian scientists who were extremely worried about Germany’s progress towards the bomb, it wasn’t until two years later, on December 6, 1941 that the United States finally launched the secret Manhattan Project. The resulting atomic bomb is credited by many historians as the deciding factor in ending the war with Japan while others believe the Japanese were ready to quit anyway.

According to Isaacson, Einstein was not asked to join the Manhattan Project or even told about it, though he suspected the work had started when his physicist friends departed to obscure towns around the country. A few people in government, including FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, thought Einstein a security risk because of pacifist and political groups he had supported in his past. Yet Vannevar Bush, director of the office supervising the Manhattan Project, asked for his help on a problem involving the separation of isotopes, and later in the war Einstein assisted the Navy in analyzing ordnance capabilities. The bushy-haired scientist joked “I am in the Navy but not required to get a Navy haircut.”

When he heard that the atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima with a huge loss of life, Einstein blurted out, “Oh, my God.” He regretted his participation in development of nuclear weapons and began a political mission, says Isaacson, “that would dominate the remaining decade of Einstein’s life” to create a world authority that could peacefully resolve disputes between nations.

The Long Island Forum article said that despite his sailing misadventures, Einstein considered his two summers on Little Peconic Bay the most enjoyable days of his life.

#

Word count 767

