

Siegfried Einstein (1919– 1983)



Siegfried Einstein, the youngest of the personalities in this booklet, was a writer of poetry and prose. Because of the great difficulty he encountered in publishing his works, it is not surprising that in his own hometown he remained relatively unknown until his death in 1983. No commemorative plaque marks his birthplace; only the Museum in Laupheim keeps his memory alive.

After the war, Einstein's family kept in touch with but a few people in Laupheim – among them Agnes Nothelfer, the family's Christian housekeeper. The announcement of her death, published by the Einsteins in the local newspaper *Schwäbische Zeitung* in 1963, was more than a simple obituary: 18 years after the end of the NS-era, it was a public denouncement of their former hometown and its people, most of whom were all too quickly inclined to leave their past behind them. It read as follows:

She became our diligent housekeeper on January 24, 1915: when Jewish people had yet to be led toward their death in cattle wagons, when the proud and respected Jewish community of Laupheim was yet to disappear. Our Agnes Nothelfer, whom we all called 'Anna', was there in both our bright and dark days. She embodied all those qualities one would otherwise only hear about in the most beautiful fairy tales. She was

kind and full of love; she was pure of heart and faithful until the end. Faithful – back then: when in a small town only a few people still dared to shake hands with a Jew... (“Unsere Agnes Nothelfer”).

When the National Socialist Party rose to power, Siegfried Einstein was a 14-year-old student of Laupheim’s *Real- und Lateinschule*. This is how he described his family environment: “As it was custom among well-to-do people of the time, my family voted for the Centre Party. This meant Catholic – the opposite of left-wing. In addition, my father was a council member of the Jewish parish of Laupheim. He was the biggest taxpayer... My mother came from a great banking family of Bavaria ... she, too, was bourgeois.” On April 1, 1933, during the boycott of Jewish businesses, the big shop windows of the Einsteins’ clothing store were smashed – there is still a photograph showing members of the SA proudly posing at the scene. The boy’s consequent trauma was only natural, as was the humiliation caused by an episode during his school days that would leave a permanent scar on his psyche. This is how he recalled it even shortly before his death in a 1983 interview:

To a fourteen-year-old boy like me, it was something so outrageous that I was still in shock

when I came back to school two days later. I will never forget how my mathematics teacher, who until 1933 had been a welcome guest in my parents' house, said to me: 'Now, little Siegfried, come to the board.' And I went without suspicion. He said I should hold my head against the blackboard for him to outline my skull with chalk. Then he did. As I stood back from the board, I was appalled at the sight of my profile: Indeed, I had such an enormously long nose ... my ears were so dreadfully oversized ... and he told the entire class, who was laughing and sneering at me, they now knew what a Jewish boy was supposed to look like. What followed was, to a sensitive, sometimes oversensitive boy like me, the most horrible of all things: Apart from one friend of mine, the whole class was laughing and yelling – as was probably happening in similar places all over Germany – that this was the Jew..." (S. Levinson 17)

A few days after January 30, 1933, Einstein's father received a summons from the Gestapo administration in Ulm. The chauffeur and window dresser of the family's store had falsely stated that he had publicly insulted the *Führer*. Einstein's mother fortunately found out the

charge could be dismissed upon an immediate payment of 5,000.00 Reichsmark. Then a few months later Einstein was pelted with stones – a physical and emotional injury he later recalls in his poem “In meine Heimat nur im Tod” (1975). After this incident, his parents decided to send him to relatives in Switzerland. Here he initially attended a boarding school, but then was forced to work in labor camps for more than four years. Such could be the fate of an immigrant. Despite the laudable fact that many German refugees owed Switzerland their lives, Swiss refugee policies were notoriously ambivalent. For the just over 8,000 refugees hosted, there were about 4,500 who were rejected and it was only in 1944 that Jewish people were granted the life-saving status of a political refugee.

After the forced sale of their business and his father’s internment in Dachau following *Kristallnacht*, Einstein’s parents were finally able to flee. Still, the name “Einstein” stubbornly remained on the façade of their department store for years to come. In 1940, Siegfried Einstein met the Nathorffs in England to discuss possibilities to emigrate. He kept correspondence with Hertha Nathorff until his death.

Einstein’s first collection of poems, *Melodien in Dur und Moll* (1946), even brought him some recognition and praise from Herman Hesse and Thomas Mann. This

collection also includes his most famous poem, “Schlaflied für Daniel”, which deals with the theme of the Holocaust, the focus point of all of his writing. It begins as follows:

We’re travelling through Germany, my child
heading through the night.

Windows creaking in the wind so wild
to wake the dead to claim their right

...¹ (Einstein, *Das Wolken Schiff* 70)

In 1953, Einstein came back to Germany. He first went to Lampertheim where he was still met with great hostility, as when, according to his own words, somebody broke his windows and yelled, “Die, Jew!” He then moved to Mannheim where he was a lecturer of German literature. In those years, he worked primarily as a journalist, exploring above all the West German public’s attitude toward the crimes committed by the National Socialists. Since this was a notoriously unpopular topic up until the late sixties, the publication of his articles was mostly limited to left-wing oriented newspapers and periodicals such as the *Simplicissimus*, the *Neue Zeitung* in Munich and the *Andere Zeitung* in Hamburg. This meant that – especially in the post-war era – those newspapers only reached a small audience. In some way, Einstein was ahead of his time.

¹ Unofficial translation from the German original by Markus Ganser.

His book *Eichmann – Chefbuchhalter des Todes*, written in 1961, was printed by a small publishing house that closed shortly thereafter. A new publisher could not be found, even though the book had been translated into many languages. It was his last work to be published in his lifetime. As with Hannah Arendt’s report, Einstein’s work was inspired by Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem. The latter however – which can hardly be assigned to a definite literary genre – combines documentation and quotes, with accusation dressed up in a literary fashion, and a personal recollection of victims with a blend of family histories and contemporary history. Einstein dedicated the book to the memory of his father: “The man who had to kneel with all his fellow Jews before the burning synagogue in Laupheim ... and scream, ‘We set the synagogue on fire!’” Another passage says: “Eichmann alone would not have been able to force a single helpless person into the gas chamber or before the *Genickschussanlage*” (Einstein, *Eichmann* 11). With this, Einstein reveals his real targets: the people behind Eichmann who now belonged to the West German ruling elite. The book’s last chapter, “Ich klage an”, expresses vehement opposition to the mentality of suppression during this era, which mainly endorsed severing all bonds with the past; an attitude that hardly helped the author garner public empathy: “Your words of democracy and freedom are nothing but smoke and mirrors. You served under

Hitler and Eichmann. In the time of greatest need, you had no heart for the ones who were mistreated, tortured or scourged in this Europe – and you, dear Sirs, now want to talk about ‘democracy’? Your words are nothing but lies” (177).

In 1962, Einstein was invited to the World Peace Council in Moscow and two years later he was awarded the Kurt-Tucholsky-Award. As he was frequently holding lectures, he spent less and less time dedicated to his work as a journalist. Two small volumes of poems and essays, partly taken from his literary estate, were published only posthumously: *Meine Liebe ist erblindet* (1984) and *Wer wird in diesem Jahr den Schofar blasen?* (1987). The latter’s cover story evokes memories of the cantor of Laupheim, but also circles back to a life-long topic of interest for Einstein: authors who were, just like him and most German-Jewish poets, outsiders. In some way, what he wrote about Else Lasker-Schüler also pertains to his poems: “She knew, as it was rarely seen in a poet who ... lived with Job’s prophetic knowledge, how to give shape to the looming horror: the depth of the humiliation, the prediction of endless sorrow, the cold sweat of death...” (Einstein, *Wer wird in diesem Jahr* 101). In his afterword, former Chief Rabbi of Baden-Württemberg Nathan Peter Levinson remembered Einstein with admiration: “He was too honest and straightforward to only have friends, and many feared his

tongue. He was one of those men who tell people what they need to hear and not what they want to hear..." (140).

Strikingly, even his late poems were not affected by two dissimilar authors whose influence in the post-war era could not be overlooked, Benn and Brecht. It is equally conspicuous that he did not establish any connection, not even of a personal kind, with the so-called *Kahlschlagliteratur*. Nor did his lyrical work try to pursue the formal boldness of a poet like Paul Celan, even though they were only one year apart and shared a similar political and biographical background. With the suffering self and a damaged life at the center of his poems, especially in his last years, together with the experience of sickness, it is not surprising that there is no trace of what we would usually relate to a left-wing political view. Evidently, "left" meant essentially the same to him as "antifascist". Politically, his poems only deal with the theme of persecution; his purpose surely was not to proclaim any sort of social utopia. His political commitment fed mainly on the hope for an alternative political concept to fascism as he had experienced it, and so it is certainly defined by its negation. Surely, one reason for his relatively small audience was his avoidance of West Germany's flourishing literary scene and its publication forums with all their snobbery, where there was no place for an outsider like him.

The political events that characterized his life left him stateless and rootless, even after 1945, even in West Germany. The poem “In meine Heimat nur im Tod” looks back once again on Einstein’s traumatic youth and at the same time it delineates his relation to his birthplace with the acerbity he himself felt it deserved. By evoking the image of the little piece of land which was home to his ancestors, the poem links this return to death – reconciliation may not be the appropriate name for it. Siegfried Einstein was buried in the Jewish cemetery of Laupheim – as were other former members of the German-Jewish community after 1945. The circle of his life, then, closes with this dual image of the stone:

I have no wish at all to go back home,
not to the place from which they cast me away.
All my life I have felt the cold, hard stone
the jeering crowd bequeathed me that day.

“Let’s punish the Jew,” I heard them howl in pride;
my forehead was their goal: they took good aim
and as I wavered I just saw a light:
it brought a flying dream of death and brain.

I have no wish at all to go back home,
as long as this ill heart carries me through.
But look, men of Laupheim, look for the stone
that hit my body once so straight and true.

Let someone throw that stone at me at last
before I am given three shovels of ground.
The piece of land my ancestors loved and found,
only in death will grant me eternal rest.²

(Einstein, *Meine Liebe* 65)

A commitment to the Jewish faith and the memory of his childhood religion can be felt even in his later works. This is a fundamental difference between Einstein and other left-wing authors of German-Jewish origin in the post-war era. It is important not to forget the role played by Israel as “the enemy” within the politically correct anti-imperialistic view of the time. Einstein did not share this attitude – another reason why he was an outsider. The only place that felt like home, like it did for his brother-in-spirit Heinrich Heine, was the fatherland of Literature. He could not feel at home in Germany.

The interplay of German language and Jewish culture was the main characteristic of a majority of the authors about whom he wrote, and who are more widely acknowledged nowadays than during the time in which Einstein recalled them. Einstein’s work therefore represents a late example of a probably unique and irreversibly lost era of German-Jewish unity.

² Translation in cooperation with Markus Ganser.

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