

# How Britain saved Einstein

Exiled, homeless and on the run from Nazi assassins, 1933 was a grim year for Albert Einstein. Yet not all was lost, writes **Andrew Robinson**, as the famous physicist discovered during three visits to Britain



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. Born Jewish in Germany in 1879, the world's most famous scientist had observed closely the rise of Nazism from his home in Berlin in the 1920s while enduring vitriolic public criticism and even death threats. In March 1933, he had anticipated the German-Jewish exodus and, returning to Europe from the US, gone into voluntary exile in Belgium with his second wife, Elsa. Now he found himself in London on a political mission to help Germany's Jews, looking down from the Distinguished Visitors' Gallery of the House and listening to a speech under the parliamentary 10-minute rule. 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, rightwing Conservative member of parliament, Commander Oliver Locker-Lampson, who was personally – soon to be intimately – known to Einstein. A former admirer of Adolf Hitler, Locker-Lampson now opposed

the Nazis because of their anti-Jewish policy. He had first contacted Einstein in late March out of the blue, offering his home in London as a refuge: an offer declined by Einstein in favour of Belgium. Now the MP had arranged a private meeting between Einstein and Winston Churchill – then a backbencher – at Churchill's country house, Chartwell in Kent, where scientist and politician had agreed on the seriousness of the new Nazi threat to world peace. Churchill "is an eminently wise man", Einstein wrote immediately to his wife in Belgium. "It became quite clear to me that these people have planned well ahead and will act soon." Shortly after, Locker-Lampson had introduced Einstein to a former British prime minister, David Lloyd George. In the latter's house, the MP witnessed Einstein sign the visitors' book, after pausing for a moment at the 'Address' column to write "Ohne" – German for 'Without'.

Opening 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, German leaders seemed to be repeating the earlier misdirection of their countrymen, he said. Then Locker-Lampson made reference to the House's current distinguished visitor: "[Germany] has even turned upon her most glorious citizen – Einstein."

He continued: "[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."

During the business of 'questions', MPs found them-

MPs glanced upwards towards their visitor, as lighting from above threw into relief the white-suited Einstein's world-famous aureole of grey hair

selves constantly glancing upwards towards their almost-legendary visitor, as diffused lighting from above threw into relief the white-suited Einstein's world-famous aureole of grey hair. The House voted to support Locker-Lampson's bill on its first reading. Afterwards, as Einstein stood with Locker-Lampson in the lobby, "Members eagerly came forward to be introduced to the greatest scientist of the age," wrote the *Jewish Chronicle*. 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. His combative references to the predatory "Hun" naturally provoked a bitter Nazi denunciation of the MP.

### Hateful weapons

Einstein returned to Belgium, but soon extremists were targeting him for assassination. The fury of the Nazi leadership had been provoked by two acts of Einstein in August. First, he had publicly repudiated his militant faith in pacifism by calling for European rearmament against the German threat. "I loathe all armies and any kind of violence; yet I am firmly convinced that, in the present world situation, these hateful weapons offer the only effective protection," he informed a severely disappointed Lord Arthur Ponsonby of War Resisters' International in London.

Secondly, Einstein had very publicly endorsed a communist-compiled book, *The Brown Book of the Hitler Terror*. This eyewitness report from Germany with horrifying photographs noted that "the National Socialist leaders... have organised the pogroms and lynchings, the burnings and the pillories, the tortures of the first, second and third degrees". Although the book officially had no author, Nazi leaders were convinced (wrongly) that Einstein had written it.

Belgian policemen, on instructions from the Belgian king, protected Einstein night



**Campaign trail** Einstein near parliament with Oliver Locker-Lampson, July 1933. He went there to throw his support behind the MP's campaign to offer citizenship to Germany's exiled Jews



and day. But he was plainly at risk, especially after the murder by Nazi agents of an Einstein associate, Jewish philosopher Theodor Lessing, in Czechoslovakia on 30 August. On 7 September came international press announcements that a secret Nazi terror organisation, the Fehme (associated with the murder of Germany's foreign minister, Walther Rathenau, a friend of Einstein, in 1922), had placed a price on Einstein's head: £1,000 according to the London *Daily Herald*; 20,000 marks said the *New York Times*.

"Whether the story is true or not we do not know," warned the *Sunday Times* on 10 September, but if it were, "the Nazi hot-heads" should "take fair warning and think twice of this folly before it is too late. If they should commit this crime against humanity, the conscience of the whole civilised world will rise against them, and the German government will find itself execrated and isolated as no German government has been before or since the war."

By the time this comment appeared, Einstein was again in England. On 9 September, at his wife's insistence, he had packed a few bags with vital books and papers and caught a boat and train from Belgium to London. He was heading not for Oxford – whose university had welcomed him in 1921 on his first visit to Britain, and again in 1931 and 1932, then sheltered him as a refugee in May–June 1933 – but instead a wooden holiday hut belonging to Locker-Lampson on a remote heath in Norfolk. There he could supposedly concentrate on theoretical physics, away from prying eyes.

### Hovering gunmen

In reality, a bizarre mixture of secrecy and publicity surrounded his four-week British visit in September and October – no doubt partly calculated by Einstein's publicity-hungry host, Locker-Lampson. On 12 September, the front page of British national newspapers carried a dramatic photograph (shown overleaf) of Einstein sitting outside his hut with a "private guard of friends": the commander in the foreground with a wind-blown Einstein, and a local gamekeeper hovering in the background – the two Englishmen holding guns – plus one of the commander's two female secretaries, apparently attentive to the mathematical calculations of the professor. The secret location on Roughton Heath was given only as "near Cromer", but without too much detective work any Nazi agent worth his salt could have worked it out.

In early October, after the sculptor Jacob Epstein had visited the Norfolk encampment to model a bust of the physicist (held by the Tate, but not on display), Einstein headed back to London. There Locker-Lampson had



**Call to arms** Einstein (second left) at a 'No More War' rally in 1923. A decade later, confronted by Nazi militarism, the scientist renounced his pacifism and urged European rearmament against the German threat

### Marked man

With the mathematician Walther Mayer on the beach at Le Coq-dur-Mer, Belgium, his exiled home. In September 1933, amid rumours of a bounty on his head, Einstein fled to Britain



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**Armed guard**  
Einstein at Commander Locker-Lampson's holiday hut in Norfolk. With him are Locker-Lampson (left), a local gamekeeper and one of the commander's secretaries



**Seeing double**  
With the sculptor Jacob Epstein in the Norfolk hideout. Epstein's bust of Einstein is part of the Tate's collections

**"No matter how long I live I shall never forget the kindness which I have received from the people of England," Einstein told a reporter**



**Making a point**

Arguing against the production of the H-bomb in 1950. Einstein warned of the existential threat posed by nuclear war until his death five years later

organised a public meeting at the Royal Albert Hall at which the German physicist and British speakers might raise charitable donations for academic Jewish refugees from Germany. Einstein, as the star attraction, spoke on "Science and civilization" in his hesitant, peculiar and touching English, to massive applause from an overflowing audience, excluding a group of Blackshirts from the British Union of Fascists. Without the "intellectual and individual freedom" won by our ancestors, said Einstein, "there would have been no Shakespeare, no Goethe, no Newton, no Faraday, no Pasteur and no Lister" – and of course no Einstein. As William Beveridge, another speaker, remarked in his live broadcast on BBC radio that evening: "I had never seen him before. Einstein was a legend to me. It is like seeing Christopher Columbus or Julius Caesar."

Afterwards, on the steps of the hall, Einstein told a 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." He concluded: "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."

Einstein kept his word. Although he would live the rest of his life in America, based at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton – deeply involved with both physics and Cold War politics – and would never return to Europe, he remained at heart an Anglophile. The only scientists portrayed on the walls of his house in Princeton were British: Isaac Newton, Michael Faraday and James Clerk Maxwell.

In July 1955, three months after Einstein's death, the British philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell announced the Russell-Einstein Manifesto to an audience in London. Signing this stirring document, which presciently warned the world of the dangers of a nuclear war, had been Einstein's last public act. It was a fitting end to his long association with the British people. **11**

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**Andrew Robinson** is the author of 25 books in the arts and sciences. His latest, *Einstein on the Run: How Britain Saved the World's Greatest Scientist*, was published by Yale in September

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