Physicist Dr. Eugene Paul Wigner to present initial Maria Goeppert Mayer Memorial Colloquium

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One of the world's outstanding theoretical physicists, Dr. Eugene Paul Wigner of Princeton University, will present the initial Maria Goeppert Mayer Memorial Colloquium, Friday, February 22, at the University of California, San Diego.

The lecture is scheduled for 4:00 p.m. in Room 2722 of the Undergraduate Sciences Building on the Revelle College campus at UCSD. Professor Wigner will speak on "Epistemology Dictated by Quantum Mechanics and Our Escapes," a critical evaluation of quantum mechanics.

The colloquium, to be given annually, is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Maria Goeppert Mayer, Professor of Physics at UCSD and the only woman aside from Marie Curie ever to win the Nobel Prize in Physics. It is supported by a memorial fund created by Professor Mayer's friends and colleagues.

Professor Mayer and her husband, Dr. Joseph Mayer, came to UCSD in 1960 as Professor of Physics and Chemistry respectively. Mrs. Mayer died in February, 1972.

Professor Wigner, Thomas D. Jones Professor of Mathematical Physics, Emeritus, was named to share the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1963 for adding to man's knowledge of the structure of the atomic nucleus and for his work on symmetry principles. He has been associated with Princeton University since he first came to the United States in 1930. In 1938 he was named the incumbent of the Thomas D. Jones Chair in Mathematical Physics, an endowed Princeton professorship designed for a "creative scientist of high distinction."

A native of Budapest, Hungary, Professor Wigner was educated in Berlin. His first professional interests were in the general area of chemical engineering. He turned to physics in the 1920's when the science was undergoing some of the most revolutionary changes in its history and, in the "new physics," now known as quantum mechanics, he rapidly became an influential leader. His leadership has been confirmed in recent years through several honorary degrees and by the Franklin Institute in presenting him its highest honor, The Franklin Medal, in the fall of 1950.

In 1939 Dr. Wigner, with Dr. Leo Szilard, persuaded Albert Einstein to write to the late President Roosevelt suggesting the possibility that the element uranium might be turned into a new and important source of energy, as well as a weapon, in the immediate future.

President Roosevelt ordered the creation of an Advisory Committee on uranium. In June, 1940, the committee was placed under the newly created National Defense Research Committee - later the Office of Scientific Research and Development. Dr. Wigner, on leave from Princeton, joined this project at the University of Chicago in 1942 and remained there through 1945. He devoted considerable time to research in postwar applications of nuclear power while carrying on his duties as Director of Theoretical Physics at the Metallurgical Laboratories and later (1946) as Director of Research and Development at the Clinton Laboratories in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. During the early war years he was a consultant to the Office of Scientific Research and Development, and since 1947 has been a consultant to the AEC.

Professor Wigner was one of the handful of scientists who actually witnessed the "birth of the atomic age." He was in the now famous squash court underneath the west stand of Stagg Field, on the University of Chicago campus, on December 2, 1942, when the first atomic fire on earth was lighted. (more)

In recognition of his numerous contributions to the development of nuclear reactors, both for military and civilian purposes, and to the training of scientists and engineers in the field, Professor Wigner received the Atomic Energy Commission's Enrico Fermi Award in 1953. In the summer of 1955 he was one of four Princeton scientists who were among the technical advisers to the United States delegation at the Atoms-For-Peace conference in Geneva, Switzerland, under the auspices of the United Nations. Three years later he attended the second international Atoms-For-Peace conference also in Geneva.

In addition to the Nobel Prize, the Fermi Award, and the Franklin Institute Medal, Professor Wigner shared the Ford Foundation's Atoms-For-Peace Award in 1960, and, in 1961, won the Max Planck Medal of the German Physical Society. He received the National Science Medal in 1969 and the Albert Einstein Award in 1972.

Professor Wigner retired from the Princeton faculty in 1971 and has served in an emeritus capacity since that time.

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