

REMINISCENCES*

by LEO SZILARD

edited by Gertrud Weiss Szilard and Kathleen R. Winsor

[EDITORS' NOTE: Leo Szilard at various times considered writing his own biography, but he never did. He had a sense of history, however, and carefully preserved, in folders marked "History," all correspondence and other documents which he thought to be of historical significance. In 1951, when he seriously contemplated writing the history of the Manhattan Project, he organized the pertinent documents into ten folders, by different topics and time periods. The documents which are appended here come largely from this collection which Szilard selected himself. He also drafted an outline for his memoirs.

During a period of serious illness in 1960, which kept him in the hospital for a year, he used a tape recorder—which had been put into his sick room for the purpose of an oral history project—to dictate instead the first draft of *The Voice of the Dolphins and Other Stories* (New York, 1961), a whimsical history of the future twenty-five years, which seemed vastly more important to him than the history of the past quarter century.

However, at times he enjoyed giving interviews to interested visitors. On a few such occasions his wife switched on his tape recorder. What follows is an exact transcription of parts of these tapes, with editing limited to the minimum necessary to change spoken to written English.

These highly personal, pungent, and incisive comments by a leading participant in three great episodes in recent American history—the migration of intellectuals from Hitler's Europe to America; the development of a nuclear chain reaction; and the effort to prevent the use of atomic bombs and to establish civilian control of atomic energy—are published here by courtesy of Mrs. Szilard and with the cooperation of the M.I.T. Press, which will include them in a forthcoming edition of Szilard's scientific and other writings.

The selection and editing has been a collaborative effort of Gertrud Weiss Szilard and Kathleen R. Winsor, with the help of Ruth Grodzins for part of the manuscript. The annotations were prepared by Kathleen R. Winsor. Unpublished papers referred to in the notes are in the possession of Mrs. Szilard. Although many others helped and advised in the project, Mrs. Szilard wishes particularly to thank Mr. Melvin Voigt, University Librarian, and his staff, who made available space and other facilities of the Library of the University of California, San Diego, to gather, store, and process the Szilard papers.]

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I REACHED the conclusion something would go wrong in Germany very early. I reached this conclusion in 1930, and the occasion was a meeting in Paris. It was a meeting of economists who were called together to decide whether Germany could pay reparations, and just how much she could pay. One of the participants of that meeting was Dr. Hjalmar Schacht, who was at that time, I think, president of the German Reichsbank. To the surprise of the world, including myself, he took the position that Germany could not pay any reparations unless she got back her former colonies. This was such a frightening statement to make that it caught my attention, and I concluded that if Hjalmar Schacht believed that he could get away with it, things must look rather bad. I was so impressed by this that I wrote a letter to my bank and transferred every single penny I had out of Germany into Switzerland. I was not the only one, as I later learned. Within a few months after this speech of Schacht's, a very large sum of money, mainly by depositors from abroad, was drawn out of Germany. Apparently there are many people who are sensitive to this kind of signal.

I visited America in 1931. I came here on Christmas Day 1931, on the *Leviathan*, and stayed here for about three months [until May 4, 1932]. In the course of 1932 I returned to Berlin where I was privat-dozent at the University. Hitler came into office in January '33, and I had no doubt what would happen. I lived in the faculty club of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Berlin-Dahlem and I had my suitcases packed. By this I mean that I literally had two suitcases which were packed standing in my room; the key was in them, and all I had to do was turn the key and leave when things got too bad. I was there when the *Reichstagsbrand* occurred, and I remember how difficult it was for people there to understand what was going on. A friend of mine, Michael Polanyi, who was director of a division of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Physical Chemistry, like many other people, took a very optimistic view of the situation. They all thought that civilized Germans would not stand for anything really rough happening. The reason that I took the opposite position was based on observations of rather small and insignificant things. I noticed that the Germans always took a utilitarian point of view. They asked, "Well, suppose I would oppose this, what good would I do? I wouldn't do very much good, I would just lose my influ-

From Feld Folde

Vol. II

Widener J

June 2, 1969

Dr. Gertrud Weiss Szilard
2380 Torrey Pines Road
La Jolla, California

Dear Trude:

I have gone over the box of materials you sent for the "enlarged reminiscences" which got to me safe and sound. The new material consists largely, I find, of quite heavy documentation bearing on the experiments leading up to nuclear fission; the relations with the United State government about fission and the bomb; and the later efforts to gain control over atomic energy. The earlier reminiscences, on childhood and adolescence are fairly thin in substance I think, and there is a tone about them--in explaining why he was, almost from birth, a seeker after truth, and why he was popular at school despite the fact that he was smarter than anyone else--that is not quite as ... I'm not sure of the exact word, dignified, perhaps ... as I expected. The documentation for the main part, however, is as I expected extremely interesting in itself, and, as far as I can tell, quite important. It is, though, a bit excessive in length, and needs some pruning.

My feeling is that the structure of the volume should be that of Bertrand Russell's Autobiography: a smallish section of text (in this case the taped reminiscences with perhaps italicized interpolations from what I take to be the fragments of an autobiographical memoir Leo started) followed by a longish documentary section set in smaller type. There should be this difference, however, that the reminiscence-text should be annotated, as Russell's was not, in the style of the Perspectives article, with references forward to the documents that appear later in the book. As to the selection of documents, that will have to be done by an expert in the recent history of physics and of the politics of nuclear fission.

Some of the correspondence is of very great interest-- that with Lewis Strauss, for example, and with Keller-- while some of the more technical material may not be of equal interest, and some,--telegrams, procedural matters, etc.--seems to me rather trivial. So there should be some weeding. But my main impression is that the combination of the fairly brief but quite fascinating reminiscence-memoir and the quite extensive documentation will make a fine volume, of both personal and historical interest.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Mr. Bowen and Professor Feld, and will see to it that the box of manuscript gets safely to the ~~MIT Press~~ ^{Prof. Feld}. I will have left Cambridge for a trip to Connecticut and then back to England when you receive this letter but since I now have the manuscript pretty well in mind, let me know if I can do anything more by mail. The main job left, as I say, seems to be some weeding of the documentation by an expert, and the completion of the annotation by Mrs. Winsor.

With best regards,

Sincerely,

Bernard Bailyn

BB:jar

cc: Mr. Carroll Bowen
Professor Bernard Feld

X

OUTLINE FOR BOOK (June 14, 1960)
to June 23

1. Childhood 1898 - 1908
2. ~~Adolescence~~ Adolescence 1908 - 1914
3. The First World War 1914 - 1920
4. Berlin 1920 - 1933
5. England 1933 - 1938
6. America 1938 through November 1940
7. America November 1940 to December 31, 1941
8. America December 31, 1941 to December 2, 1942
9. America December 2, 1942 to August 6, 1945
10. America August 6, 1945 to the passing of the Atomic Energy Act (July 20, 1946 - *present*)

7/12/67

Outline for Book

JWS has it

c Spencer stuff

~~taken to other office 5/14/75~~

~~translation of "The Bund" 3-7~~

~~Khrushchev's~~