

THE MIKE WALLACE INTERVIEW

Guest: Dr. Leo Szilard

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WALLACE: This is Mike Wallace with another television portrait in our gallery of colorful people. Our guest is a man whose vision and forceful action ushered in a new era of hope and of terror. He is Dr. Leo Szilard who back in 1939 saw the possibility and the urgency for building the atomic bomb and galvanized our government into action. Now he has dedicated his life to trying to end the suicidal arms race he helped to begin. We'll talk to Dr. Leo Szilard about the fateful years of building the bomb, his desperate attempts to stop its use and his current effort for disarmament.

Now to our story with Dr. Leo Szilard, atomic scientist whose work on the atomic bomb was one of the outstanding achievements of the past quarter century....a century of great decisions which is described in a fascinating article by John Gunther in the February 28th issue of LOOK Magazine.

Dr. Szilard, you have often been called the "father of the atomic bomb". In what sense is that true?

SZILARD: I don't know, really. You know, they say the mother is certain but the father is never certain. And I think the people who call me the father of the atomic bomb have some doubts, whether I am really the only father. First, they call me that because I was instrumental in getting the U. S. government interested in developing atomic energy..

WALLACE: By means of persuading Albert Einstein, in some measure..

SZILARD: I wouldn't say persuading, I would say convincing him that something needs to be done and finally a letter was written by Einstein to Roosevelt..and it started the government's interest.

WALLACE: You could not get to Roosevelt yourself..you felt the urgency of the time ..and you figured Einstein could get to him.. so you convinced Einstein.

SZILARD: Well, if I had written Roosevelt a letter, he wouldn't have known who I am..Einstein's name he of course knew.

WALLACE: When your experience showed you that a chain reaction was possible..leading to the bomb. Did you have no forebodings of the problems and of the dangers that lay ahead?

SZILARD: I was quite aware of the dangers...not because I am so wise but because I have read a book written by H. G. Wells called

WALLACE: You read that book..

SZILARD: He wrote it before the first World War and described in it the development of the atomic bombs and warfare with atomic bombs. ~~XXXXXXXX~~ So I was aware of these things. And I was also aware of the fact that we were on the threshold of a war and that something had to be done if the Germans had not to get the ~~XXXXX~~ bomb before we..

WALLACE: If the Germans were not to get the bomb...Was it a question of your ..how shall I say...your fearing Adolph Hitler and what he might do with the atom bomb if he had it and the Nazis therefore had military sway over the Western world?

SZILARD: Well, we know very well what he would have done. He would have threatened to use it and he could have forced us to surrender, if we didn't have bombs ourselves.

WALLACE: And yet you were quoted ..at the same time you were quoted in the Herald Tribune, April, 1960, as saying this: "I can remember saying at some point that I hoped bring a black day to mankind..that the world was headed for sorrow."

SZILARD: Well, what happened was that when the chain reaction was demonstrated..December 2, 1942...there was a crowd there and when this person Fermi and I stayed there alone...Enrico Fermi...I remained.. I shook hands with Fermi and I said I thought this day would go down as a black day in the history of mankind.

WALLACE: You did have the foreboding even then..in spite of the fact that you knew that you had to build the bomb ..

SZILARD: Yes, we had no choice..or we thought we had no choice.

WALLACE: If you could see this future danger, why were you willing to take the bomb out of the scientific community and put it into the hands of the government?

SZILARD..Well, as I said we were just on the threshold of a world war, with Germany, and I just feared that the Germans would get the bomb before we had it. They had the knowledge..they had the people to do it.

WALLACE: Once the work on the bomb began, was there a good deal of discussion among scientists, among physicists about the responsibility of the scientist for what he does. Or were you all just too busy building the bomb to think about the consequences of your work.

SZILARD: Well, there was no discussion about the consequences of this work until after the war with Germany was over. In the spring of 1945 the discussion began. Then, of course, we didn't discuss the responsibility of scientists..we exercised the responsibility of scientists by trying to persuade the government not to use the bomb against the cities of Japan..

WALLACE: You mean to say that all of the time you were building the bomb, and you realized what havoc it could wreak, there was never any conversation among any of the scientists, from Chicago to Los Alamos, Oak Ridge, and so forth, about what the consequences of the work was going to be.

SZILARD: I would say this...Until the spring of 1945, there was very little conversation - practically nothing.

WALLACE: Simply a question of winning the war?

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SZILARD: It was a question of winning the war. Only when the war was won against Germany, we knew that the Germans didn't have the bomb. Then we began to ask ourselves what the bomb would mean after the war..

WALLACE: Tell me...would you have had, perhaps, less qualms about dropping the bomb on Germany than on Japan? You, yourself..and perhaps the scientific community?

SZILARD: I cannot answer with certainty. You see, while we built the bomb, we thought we were in a race with the Germans. If the war had been won against Germany as it was won against Japan, I think I would have had exactly the same qualms..about dropping it over Germany. I had no resentment against the Germans.

WALLACE: But in your own heart, inasmuch as you had left Nazi Germany..you came from Hungary to Germany, then from Germany to England. You hated Naziism...were you in your own heart and were a good many of the scientists building the bomb to beat Germany more than they were building it to beat Japan ?

SZILARD: I wouldn't think so. What was there to prevent Germany using the bomb against us? And I don't think that scientists hate people. I don't think any of us hated the Germans..of course, we didn't approve of Naziism. Many Germans were not Nazis..many Germans were our friends.

WALLACE: Well, then, how.....you say that war with Germany was over..and still there was this war against Japan that had to be fought and you know that hundreds of thousands of Americans, perhaps, or allies, were going to have to die in an onslaught on the Japanese islands without the bomb, and yet you didn't want to drop the bomb.

SZILARD: After the war with Germany, was won, there was no chance for Japan winning the war, and the Japanese knew this, of course.. Japan could not have won the war. And once the war is won, you have to end the war by political and not by military means. This whole thought that we had to invade Japan simply was derived from the fact that we had postulated unconditional surrender. Of course, the Japanese would not have surrendered unconditionally, but why not have a negotiated peace.

WALLACE: You think really that there was a possibility of a negotiated peace...we wouldn't have had to sacrifice possibly hundreds of thousands...maybe a million human lives?

SZILARD: Well, that is what I thought at that time..but today I know it, because today we know that the Japanese have been suing for peace.

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WALLACE: Were the/scientists in agreement with you about not using the bomb against Japan.

SZILARD: Well, you see, there are many scientists..many people are called scientists who work on this kind of thing. But I would think that of the creative scientists, who contributed the ideas, for releasing atomic energy and building the bomb, that about 95% agreed with me. 5% did not.

WALLACE: Only 5%? There was a study made later on and of one group of scientists polled, only 13% shared your view that under no circumstances..

SZILARD: Yes, but now you're taking all employees of the project, including almost the dishwashers. I am talking about the people whose ideas made this..and those are not many. There may be 12, there may be 15

WALLACE: You told my reporter the other day, Dr. Szilard, that the period following the end of the war in Europe, in which you tried to convince the United States government not to use the bomb against Japan, was like a nightmare. Could you describe that period for us?

SZILARD: You see, the difficulty was this: What I thought of doing, and could have done, was reach Roosevelt about it. But just when I had a date with Mrs. Roosevelt, to whom I would have transmitted my memorandum which I wrote, Roosevelt died. And now we were faced with a new President, and no one whom I knew really knew the new President. So the difficulty I faced was this: we could not go to anybody between our ranks and the President, without violating the rules of secrecy. Very few people in the government knew about it...in fact, none of the Cabinet members knew about it, except Henry Wallace and Stimson. So there was no intermediate through whom we could go to the President. We had to go to the President directly. This was difficult.

WALLACE: You were referred, were you not, to James Byrnes, who had not yet become Secretary of State, but was about to be?

SZILARD: Well, you see finally we did reach the President. A friend of the President talked to him about it. He did not know what it was about, but the President guessed what it was, and he then instructed his Secretary to see us and to refer us to Byrnes. Byrnes was to be Secretary of State...he was appointed a few weeks later. At the time when we saw him he had not been appointed and we did not know why we were sent to Byrnes.

WALLACE: Weren't there 60 scientists who got together to sign a last-minute direct petition to President Truman to refrain from using the bomb on moral grounds?

SZILARD: This was after all other efforts failed. I finally drafted a petition and sixty of my colleagues signed it.

WALLACE: Did that ever get to President Truman?

SZILARD: We don't know. We sent it through channels. And we don't know whether channels ~~were not clogged up~~ were not clogged up.

WALLACE: And when Byrnes heard what you scientists felt, what did he say to you?

SZILARD: He was not impressed. I had the feeling at the time that Byrnes did not understand what the issue really was. As a matter of fact, I have a feeling sometimes even today he does not understand what the issue is. He looked upon this as ~~another~~ another weapon.

WALLACE: Well, didn't President Truman set up an interim committee to advise him on whether or not to use the bomb?

SZILARD: Yes, this Committee met for the first time after I had seen Byrnes. And Stimson was Chairman of the Committee. Byrnes attended only a few of the meetings. But I don't know..I was very unhappy about the composition of the committee, because many of the people of the committee had a vested interest.

WALLACE: Had a vested interest in what?

SZILARD: That the bomb be used. You see, we had spent 2 billion dollars. Bush and Conant felt ~~shared~~ responsibility for having spent 2 billion dollars and they would I think have very much regretted not to have something to show for it.

WALLACE: The Army...did they want to drop it?

SZILARD: The Army was determined to drop the bomb. Again..they wanted to show that they did it and did it successfully.

WALLACE: Secretary of War Henry Stimson...did he want to drop it?

SZILARD: Stimson, I think, I have the highest respect for. I think Stimson was the most thoughtful of the Interim Committee. But when finally you read in his own words why he decided to drop the bomb, you see that he had no case. He wrote, I think in Atlantic Monthly, ~~xx~~ the following: that we could not demonstrate the bomb, because we had only two bombs, and these could have been duds. If we had demonstrated the bombs and they had proved to be duds, we would have lost face. Now this is a completely invalid argument.

WALLACE: Why?

SZILARD: It is true we had only two bombs. It would not have been necessary to wait for very long ~~xxxxxxx~~ before we would have enough bombs to ~~it~~ eliminate the risk that they were all duds.

WALLACE: Wasn't the possibility of a negotiated peace ever talked about~~X~~ by the Committee?

SZILARD: I don't think it was talked about by the Committee, but I think that John J. McCloy writes somewhere that the possibility of ending the war by political negotiations rather than by military means came up in the very last meeting in the White House which concerned itself with the bomb and he says that had this issue been raised earlier, it is possible the decision would have been quite different.

WALLACE: In other words, events simply moved too fast ..

SZILARD: Well, Stimson's instructions were still ~~to~~ to prepare for invasion and he compared our losses which we would suffer through an invasion with our losses if we just dropped the bomb.

WALLACE: This Interim Committee....Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer was ~~xxxxx~~ a scientific advisor to it.. Did he fight to prevent the use of the bomb?

SZILARD: No. Oppenheimer took it for granted the bomb will be used and he expressed concern about various aspects of this. I know he was quite concerned that we should not drop the bomb on Japan without telling the Russians first..we should not surprise the Russians. He was concerned with this kind of thing, but I think he sort of knew that if he proposed that the bomb shouldn't be dropped, that he wouldn't get very far with it.

WALLACE: And so the bomb was dropped...and you knew, before the bomb was dropped, that this was the beginning of the nuclear arms.race.

~~SZILARD:~~ SZILARD: This I think was pretty obvious to all of us.

WALLACE: In just a moment, I'd like to come back and find out if in the years since the building and the dropping of the bomb, you have been attacked by an awful sense of guilt because of your participation in the making of the atom bomb and the beginning of the nuclear arms race, Dr. ~~Szilard~~ Szilard. And we'll be back with Dr. Leo Szilard in just a minute.

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WALLACE: Now back to our story with scientist with Dr. Leo ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ Szilard, one of the fathers of the A bomb. Dr. Szilard, have you never felt any guilt about your part in the beginning of the nuclear arms race?

SZILARD: No, I never felt any guilt. Because I was always aware of the dangers involved and I just chose the lesser of the two evils. I thought we must build the bomb, because if we don't, the Germans will have it first...and force us to surrender.

WALLACE: As it turned out, they wouldn't have had it first..

SZILARD: This was a false assumption. But you cannot do better in life than to try to find out what the situation is and then act on that basis. I never blame myself for having guessed wrong.

WALLACE: Do you remember how you felt when you opened your morning newspaper, or you listened to your radio the day after the first bomb, or the second bomb was dropped, and what your feelings were, sir?

SZILARD: Yes. This is rather curious. You see, I knew that the bomb would be dropped..that we had lost the fight. And when it was actually dropped..my ~~entire~~ over-all feeling was a feeling of relief. And a component of this relief is that we were completely bottled up in our discussions..it was not possible to get real issues before the public, because of secrecy. Suddenly the secrecy was dropped and it was possible to tell people what this is about and what we are facing in this century.

WALLACE: Did you know ...what about the human loss involved...what about the loss of life...what about the terror that was involved?

SZILARD: When I thought about dropping the bomb, this was what concerned me. When I knew that the bomb will be dropped, I knew that there would be hundreds of thousands dead.

WALLACE: Truly, was there no sense of accomplishment..a feeling of accomplishment in your heart or mind..

SZILARD: None whatsoever...I didn't think we accomplished anything.. we accomplished trouble.

WALLACE: Has your part in making the bomb given you any special or personal feeling of responsibility now to push for disarmament. I mean, one would push for disarmament undoubtedly under any circumstances but do you feel a special responsibility?

SZILARD: Well, this is a difficult answer, but I would rather..my guess is I do feel a special responsibility. I would not say that I am pushing for disarmament but what I am really doing is trying to make it clear what the difficulties are which are involved and what it would take to accomplish it. I am not one of those disarmament enthusiasts who think "let's disarm and then we'll have peace." I don't think this is this simple. On the other hand, the danger of the arms race

in which we are now engaged is exceedingly great.

WALLACE: Back in 1930, you were suggesting at this time an international organization of intellectuals and Dr. Albert Einstein said this of you..he said: "I consider Dr. Szilard a fine and intelligent man who is ordinarily not given to illusion, but like many people of that type, he may be inclined to exaggerate the significance of reason in human affairs."

SZILARD: Well, that's probably true. But I think that reason is our only hope. So when I exaggerate the significance of reason, I am just hoping..

WALLACE: Are you hopeful about disarmament? I know that you have come back recently from the Pugwash conference in the Soviet Union. ~~XXXXXX~~ Do you have reason to believe that we and the Russians are going to get together on disarmament.

SZILARD: Look, I think it is much more likely that we are going to fail, than that we are going to succeed. But the fact is that the Russians really want disarmament. The fact is that they would be willing to take ...to agree to very far reaching measures of inspection. Where they have not done their home work is rather this: they have not thought through what a disarmed world would be like. They have not thought through how much it would take to keep a disarmed world at peace. We haven't thought through that either. But with the Russians ~~was~~ really wanting it..with the great interest in disarmament which has now developed, in the last six months, at least there is hope that it can be accomplished. I would still think the odds are against it.

WALLACE: Do the Russian scientists feel an equivalent responsibility for the dangers that exist because of the weapons that they, the Russian scientists, have created.

SZILARD: I have the impression they do. ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ They are exceedingly concerned. I saw about twenty of them..all members of the Academy and those with whom I spoke at length privately were very seriously concerned about the situation.

WALLACE: You say they are seriously concerned. Of course they are; ~~But~~ do they feel that their government is equally and genuinely concerned?

SZILARD: Yes, I ~~do~~ think that on this issue they do trust their government.

WALLACE: On this issue they do trust their government. I don't understand...

SZILARD: Well, there may be many domestic problems in Russia ~~which~~ which I did not discuss with them..about which they may not be so happy. But on the issue of foreign policy..the issue of disarmament.. they seem to be entirely...

WALLACE: Is there a sense of ~~gax~~ giving on the inspection, which is the nub of the disagreement between us and the Russians?

SZILARD: Look, it is my impression that the Russians will do ~~anything~~ anything within reason once they are convinced that we are willing to have disarmament. I think they will go very far...I think there is no limit to which they will go in inspection provided that in return they can get genuine disarmament, which would really free large economic forces in Russia. You see, one of these colleagues with whom I talked quite a lot, who is quite high up in the Russian ~~hierarchy~~ hierarchy, said: "Now, look, if we have disarmament we have a very large amount of economic resources freed. We have built one Assuan Dam in Egypt. We are going to build 20 Assuan Dams in Africa." I think that they hope in a sense to conquer the world, but to conquer it by these means. Now this I think we ought to welcome.

WALLACE: May I just ask a couple of personal questions of you, Dr. Szilard. I read about a year ago that you had refused surgery for cancer because it might interrupt the time that you have left for your personal campaign for disarmament? Is that correct, and, if I may ask you, what is the state of your health now?

SZILARD: No, I don't think that's accurate. You see, ~~if~~the surgery which was proposed was a very major surgery and if there had been reasonable chance that this would give me ten more years at the cost of being maybe severely ill for a month or two, I would have chosen surgery. But the chances were not as good. And I rather chose to have radiation which certainly will not save my life but which gave me some hope that I will be able to work for some time. And right now.. the radiation was finished about a year ago.. I feel perfectly well and I'm able to work. I don't think this will last forever, but for the time being I feel well.

WALLACE: Only last April you said: "I've been told that I may not have much longer to live." You are more optimistic than you were, last April. Your doctors, also?

SZILARD: I have lived almost a whole year since that time. So to this extent it turned out rather well. And the doctors can't ~~pr~~ prophesy. This is a disease which can ~~recr~~ recur and I don't think I should make ten years' plans.

wallace; Are you a religious man, Dr. Szilard, may I ask?

SZILARD: Well, look, I don't believe in the personal God, but in a sense, I am a religious man. I think that life has a meaning. In this sense, I am a religious man.

WALLACE: When you say life has a meaning, you mean...

SZILARD: Well, this is difficult to define what it means that life has a meaning, but if you press me for a definition, I will say that life has a meaning if there are things which are worth dying for. I don't know whether this gets the message across.

WALLACE: Is there anything undone in your life?

SZILARD: Well, there are a lot of things I could do. I could go on for five years, I think.

WALLACE: Is disarmament the most urgent thing, though, with you? Rather than scientific exploration?

SZILARD: Well, it is the most urgent thing, in this sense: I think that this issue of stopping the arms race really has to be settled during the four years of ~~lx~~ the Kennedy administration. This is the time to see what can be done about it. This cannot be postponed. We have to face this issue and arrive at a conclusion, so in this sense, it is the most urgent.

WALLACE: You have known now four Presidents: Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, and now Kennedy.. Do you think from what you know of our current President that his capabilities, his understandings, measure up to the task that is ahead of him in regard to disarmament.

~~XXXXXX~~ SZILARD: Well, this is very difficult to say. But it is my plan to spend four to six weeks in Washington - the next four to six weeks, and I will ~~xxxxx~~ discover then if there is a market for wisdom.

WALLACE: I thank you very much, Sir, for coming and spending this time with us.

SZILARD: It was a pleasure.

WALLACE: I'll be back in a moment with a footnote to this interview with Dr. Leo Szilard.

WALLACE: Dr. LEO SZILARD IS RUNNING A KIND OF RACE AGAINST TIME. A RACE TO PREVENT THE USE OF A WEAPON HE HELPED TO CREATE AND A PERSONAL RACE AGAINST A DISEASE THAT THREATENS TO STOP HIM FROM REALIZING HIS GOAL. IF MAN COMES TO HIS SENSES IN TIME AND THE POTENTIALS OF ATOMIC ENERGY ARE REALIZED IN A PEACEFUL, DISARMED WORLD, HISTORY WILL GIVE LEO SZILARD A GOOD DEAL OF THE CREDIT. BUT DR. SZILARD REALIZES TOO THAT IF THE PRODUCTS OF ATOMIC ENERGY ARE FEAR, MADNESS AND SELF DESTRUCTION, HE MUST BEAR SOME MEASURE OF THE RESPONSIBILITY.

WE THANK DR. SZILARD FOR ADDING HIS PORTRAIT TO OUR GALLERY.. ONE OF THE PEOPLE OTHER PEOPLE ARE INTERESTED IN.

MIKE WALLACE....THAT'S IT FOR NOW.