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KING'S CROWN HOTEL

OPPOSITE
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

UNDER KNOTT MANAGEMENT

420 WEST 116TH STREET, NEW YORK N.Y.

August 6, 1940

Professor E. O. Lawrence
The Radiation Laboratory
The University of California
Berkeley, California

Dear Professor Lawrence:

Turner sent me a copy of his letter which he wrote you on July 11 and I should like to make the following comment on his letter:

If it were shown that element 239 has a fission cross-section for thermal neutrons of the order of 25×10^{-24} cm² or larger, then we would have to expect that the line of work which Fermi and I are following up at present may lead in the near future to practical applications which are rather important from the point of view of national defense. I should be glad to give you a more detailed account if necessary.

In the meantime, I am writing to you primarily because I am anxious that if fission of element 239 by thermal neutrons is discovered in your laboratory information about it should not leak out in the newspapers or otherwise. In case of a publication through regular channels such as the Physical Review you would be probably officially approached about the matter and I assume you would be requested to delay the publication of such a phenomenon.

This year I had hoped as I did in the past two years to be able to visit Berkeley in the summer time, and I have not yet given up hope altogether; but I don't know if I can get away from New York just now.

With best wishes and kind regards to all,

Yours sincerely,

(Leo Szilard)

420 West 116th Street
New York City

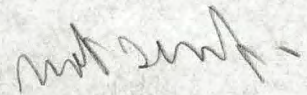
July 12, 1940

Dear Lawrence:

Some time ago Turner has sent me a manuscript for a note to the Editor, which he sent to Physical Review and the publication of which is being delayed because it is considered that it is not in the public interest to have it appear in print. After the publication of McMillan and Abelson's note on element 239 I wrote Turner according to the enclosed copy, and I understand that he has already taken up the matter with you.

The purpose of the present letter is to draw your attention to the fact that if element 239 shows fission for thermal neutrons it would be highly advisable to keep this a closely guarded secret. Looking at this question from the perspective of my own work I would say that a fission cross-section for thermal neutrons in excess of 10 to 20 x ⁻²⁴ 10 would have to be considered as one of the most important single facts which have a bearing on the possibility and scope of the chain reaction. Since I do not know whether you are at present investigating the fission of element 239 I do not propose to go into details in this letter. My main purpose in writing it is to prevent that if you should obtain a result concerning the fission of element 239 the result should be made public inadvertently. If you want to know reasons for secrecy I shall be glad either to write you about them myself or to have the information sent to you through official channels.

Yours sincerely,


(Leo Szilard)