

GIFT OF FORESIGHT:

Leo Szilard, scientist and prophet of the Atomic Age, follows the "sweet voice of reason." If there is a secret to making predictions, he says, it is "seeing the world in historical perspective." How? "Your loyalty must be first to the truth...(it) must prevail over other loyalties... to your nation, your family and whatever else binds you to the way in which you live." At sixteen, in the first of many true auguries, he said Russia and Germany, although on opposite sides, should both lose World War I. In 1934 he moved to England, saying he would move on to America one year before World War II. He did. Szilard, one of the team who proved the feasibility of atomic energy, drafted the letter to President Roosevelt urging the development of a fission bomb. Today Szilard is convinced that the world is headed for all-out nuclear war within ten years. Possible salvation: People who see "the current of events in perspective" must be willing to sacrifice. Szilard is now looking for those "with sufficient passion for truth" to override bias and establish a pressure group for survival, a "Lobby for Peace."

AN INTERVIEW WITH IEO SZILARD

AS TOLD TO CONNIE LIEN

You have asked me from where this peculiar talent comes—to be able to foresee the future. I am not sure that I would regard it as a talent, but as Cassandra's curse, that she would be able to foretell future events, that she would not be able to deflect the course of events. If it is a talent at all, I was driven to it, inevitably starting with the First World War in Hungary, when I was 16. I could go through some prophesies that I made and to what extent I made them. They are quite easy to make unless you delicately close your eyes to what is happening.

The first prophesy that I remember was at the beginning of the First World War when I was 16. After a few months, one of my schoolmates asked me who I thought would win the war. Remember that I lived in Hungary at the time. I said that I didn't know who would win the war, but that I think that I know who ought to lose the war. I thought that Russia ought to lose the war, and Germany ought to lose too. Now this was a rather strange prophesy if you wish, because Germany fought the war on the one side and Russia on the other. How could they both lose the war? But you know, it in fact happened. Still, I don't think that this involved a prophesy. I meant that I didn't believe that it would happen. I just thought that this would be logically what should happen. I was too young to know that what should logically happen does happen.

Well, the next prophesy that I remember was that when you are hit by something like the World War when you are 16, a very sensitive age, when you somehow look upon this century as a century of war, the wars are interrupted by short periods of peace. There are those who grew up in security, who look upon this century as a century of peace interrupted by short periods of war. I was 16 when the First World War broke out, and so I became very sensitive to upheavals and uncertainties, and in 1930, when it was reported that Schacht (?) was at that time Director of the German Federal Reserve System. In his speech in Paris, he declared that Germany would not be able to pay the reparations unless an old colony would be returned to her. This was for me a signal that we were headed for trouble. I didn't think...you see, this conference in Paris was a conference of the top gods to determine Germany's ability to pay reparations. The President of the German Federal Reserve System, making this kind of political statement, showed me that he thought that he could get away with it. This showed me some sort of political fever in Germany must be imminent. You might think that this is great political foresight. The fact of the matter is that the response to his speech resulted in 2 billion marks being drawn off from Germany by foreign depositors within the period of two weeks. So you see, my political insight was shared by many people, not inside of Germany, but outside of Germany. I of course, lived at that time in Berlin, so let's say, there is some merit in seeing this thing from the inside.

In 1932, I was convinced that there would be political upheaval in Germany. I came to New York on Christmas Day, 1932, with the view of establishing residence here. I did explore the possibility of moving here, but I didn't move at the time. I returned to Germany. But I explored it sufficiently well to know that I could live in America if it were necessary. When the Nazis began to throw their weight around in March, 1933, I moved not to America, but England. And while I was in England, I received a visit from two German colleagues who were greatly concerned about German rearmaments. They came to me and visited me and told me about the Germany Hitler was making. They asked me whether I thought

if Germany started another world war for a second time and lost that war, if Germany would be ravaged like Carthage was ravaged by Rome. I remember that I didn't think that this would happen after the Second World War, that I thought it might very well happen if German started a Third World War, and lost it. At that time, as I say, I lived in England, and I heard from my German friends what was going on in Germany and tried to convince my English friends, but they would not see things as I saw them. And I remember that I complained to a friend of mine that I just can't make them see this. They listened to me, but I'm not sure that they would listen to me if they heard what I was saying. The response was that no one is as deaf as the man who doesn't want to hear. It was not I that had a particularly sharp ear, it was my English friends...

In 1934, I was again in New York and I had an offer from one of the American universities and from Oxford University. I wrote a letter to a friend of mine, Mike Palarni, that I had decided to accept the offer to move to Oxford, but to keep my residence in New York City one year before the outbreak of the war. This letter was written early 1935. My friend thought that it was very funny because you can say what you will do one year after the war, but how can you say what you will do one year before the outbreak of the war!

I lived in England and I remember the day when the German military marched into the Rhineland. Now this was again not such a very unexpected even. It was controlled between Germany and England. Cardinal Beck (?) foresaw the possibility that such a thing might happen, and it provided that the occupation of the Rhineland by German military was regarded the cause for war. The day that it happened I was at Oxford. I visited one friend, and I asked him what would England do now. He explained to me that peace is so dear to the heart of the English that they would not do anything. To me it seemed that this was the last time that Hitler could have been stopped without war, because Germany was not prepared for war, and if England had acted, Germany would have collapsed. But I said to him, if you aren't going to do anything about it, I am going to leave England. And in fact, I did.

At the end of 1937, I got a leave of absence which allowed me to spend six months in America and six months in England. I went to say goodbye to Dires(?), a very distinguished English physicist, and we had dinner at his college. After dinner, I told him that I was leaving England. Why do you do that, he asked. I said that I thought that there was going to be war, and that the political system of England was going to war without any proper preparations. Do you think that the political system of America is so much better, he asked me. I said no, but that the geographical position of America is so much better. And then I said that what makes me so pessimistic about the future is not so much the behavior of mad men like Hitler and Mussolini. At this point, the director, Otto McMann, said that there were people like Mr. Baldwin (?), and this was precisely the words that I would have used. Again, it shows that I am not the only one who sees it.

I was in America at the time of the Munich Crisis. At that time, I listened to the various changes and modulations of the Munich negotiations. When it was all over, I wrote a letter to Lord Chavell. In this letter, I said that I thought I would not want to come back to England in the very near future unless I could do war work in England, but England was quite reluctant to let foreigners do such work, and I took the position that if I couldn't do that, I would rather not be sent to England.

If you ask me what the secret is to making predictions, there is really no secret to it. What you have to do is see the world in historical perspective. I am not sure that anybody can do this. In order to see the world in the historical perspective, your loyalty must be first to the truth and ~~this~~ loyalty to the Truth must prevail over other loyalties, such as to your nation, your family and whatever else binds you to the way in which you live. This is as much as I can tell you.

I have been watching the events very closely the last six months, and I am convinced that if you observe our response to Russia's actions, and how the Russians respond to our responses, then it is quite clear that if this path is continued over the years, we will be at war.

Nuclear war?

Only if we are able to achieve the present talk, and this will not be easy. I think that it is more likely than not that we will in ten years have an all-out war. That is my present prophesy. I am not despairing because I think that we have the chance to change the present course of events. But I think that if we take political action on the part of enlightened people to keep this up. All the things that we have been following during the last four years lead to war.

Lobby for peace?

It is clear that the people who see the current of events in perspective are in a minority, and unless this minority is willing make greater sacrifices... its political contribution, its political activity, I think nothing much can be done. If they are willing to make greater sacrifices, then, out of this frustration of where we are going, there could arrive a political movement. Perhaps, it could change with luck.

What I can do is mail you a copy of the speech that I have made---to expose the possibility of getting such a movement started. I have not started such a movement. I am exploring whether such a movement, if it were started under the proper auspices, where it could get off the ground. I do not know the answer to this question. I have given four talks so far, one at Harvard, one at the University of Chicago, Swarthmore College... And I am now scheduled for more talks at California University at Berkley, Stanford University, Madrid College in Portland Oregon and the University of Oregon. In all of these talks, I am asking the students to cooperate in this experiment to determine just how strong this enlightenment is, how strong the minority would be dedicated, how strong do they feel about the need to do something.

Why college student?

I think that I have a good communication with young people. They understand what I am after. They talk my language, and I think that they are more likely to cooperate in the experiment. Students that are convinced are willing to talk in the home community and report back to me what kind of a response that I got.

Political foresight more than any other kind? Yes.

Have you made any serious mistakes?

I think yes. Early in the war, I thought that the Germans might win the war,

but as it turned out, we have been ~~out~~-bungled about it. The issue that would win the war was the fourth premise which I shared with Churchill, Roosevelt and Hitler that if Germany fought against Russia, Russia would have been bushelled. If this premise had been correct, then Hitler would have been ready when he attacked the Russians, because if he had been able to stay out of the war a few more months, he would have won the war. I think that this time I made a mistake because of misinformation about Russian military strength.

Result of all out war?

I am not very much interested in the post-world war. What remains after a nuclear war would be so little, so different from what we have now that I don't dare to make a prophesy anymore. I think really that the one thing that can be predicted about an all-out nuclear war is that it is totally unpredictable.

What about China?

Well, it will really take some time before China becomes a major military power. Just to have a few bombs is not decisive. It can bring on war, but it does not influence the outcome of war.

The state of the future of countries is largely dependent on the relationship of Russia and the U.S.?

I would think so. In the next ten years, yes. After ten years, this could change of course.

Born 1898, Hungary.