

after World War II was minimal. By contrast, Fermi's influence and contributions as both a researcher and teacher were immense. He thrived by "being a young physicist."

While Fermi focused on theoretical physics in Michigan, Szilard was redoubling his political activities. Along with Edward Teller and Eugene Wigner, Szilard sought ways of lessening the danger of Germany's developing a nuclear weapon. All three Hungarians agreed that limiting Germany's access to world supplies of uranium would be a strategic first step. There was little that could be done about the Czechoslovakian mines, already in German hands, but perhaps Belgium could be dissuaded from selling Hitler anything from its extensive uranium deposits in the Congo. Szilard remembered that Einstein was a close friend of Belgium's queen; he had taken refuge there between leaving Germany and settling in Princeton. If Einstein asked her, maybe a ban on uranium sales would ensue.

Wigner and Szilard went on the sixteenth of July to inform Einstein about the recent physics findings and to ask if he would compose a letter to the queen. Learning of the possibility of a chain reaction, Einstein famously said, "*Daran habe ich gar nicht gedacht*" ("I hadn't thought of that at all"). However, Einstein felt it would be more appropriate to go through diplomatic channels than to write directly to the queen.

That scheme changed almost instantly as a result of a meeting Szilard had with one of his influential friends. Alexander Sachs had worked on Franklin Roosevelt's 1932 presidential campaign and had been a member of the National Recovery Administration before joining the Lehman Brothers investment firm in 1936. When Szilard described the situation to him, Sachs suggested that President Roosevelt be informed posthaste. If they obtained a letter from Einstein, Sachs would make sure it reached the president.

Szilard went back to Einstein, accompanied by Teller. With Einstein agreeing on the new plan, Szilard drafted a letter for him to be transmitted to Sachs. Dated August 2, 1939, the letter warns:

In the course of the last four months it has been made probable—through the work of Joliot in France as well as Fermi and Szilard in

America—that it may become possible to set up a nuclear chain reaction in a large mass of uranium, by which vast amounts of power and large quantities of new radium-like elements would be generated. Now it appears almost certain that this could be achieved in the immediate future. This new phenomenon would also lead to the construction of bombs and it is conceivable—though much less certain—that extremely powerful bombs of a new type may thus be constructed.

Drafts of the letter had been written by Szilard and then rewritten by Einstein in German, his native tongue. The revisions went back and forth. When Szilard dictated the final version of Einstein's letter into English, an innocent secretary at Columbia concluded Szilard was "a nut." A letter from a Hungarian pretending to be Albert Einstein, writing to the president and talking about bombs? It stretched credibility and sanity.

The letter called for quick action. Its main recommendations were to secure uranium deposits, provide funding for research related to the use of uranium, and maintain a liaison between the physicists involved in this research and the government. The letter was delivered to Sachs on the fifteenth of August, but it was not until the eleventh of October that Sachs got to see the president. Fortunately Roosevelt's reaction was not the same as the incredulous secretary's. The president retorted, "Alex, what you are after is to see that the Nazis don't blow us up." Sachs replied, "Precisely."

Roosevelt rapidly authorized the formation of the Advisory Committee on Uranium, to be headed by Lyman Briggs, the director of the National Bureau of Standards. Its members included an aide of Briggs's and an army ordnance expert, Merle Tuve from the Carnegie Institution, Sachs, and—at his recommendation—Fermi, plus the three Hungarians.

The newly constituted committee met in Washington on the twenty-first of October. Convinced little would result from the meeting, Fermi decided he would not attend. He asked Teller to represent his point of view. Tuve, who had a conflict, asked to be represented by Richard Roberts, the physicist who had shown Bohr and Fermi the fission-produced pulses at the Washington Conference.