
Einstein's Days and Works in Prague

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*The price of achievement is toil; and the gods
have ruled that you must pay in advance.*

Hesiod: Days and Works

Ninety-three years ago, in July 1912, Albert Einstein left the city of Prague after a sixteen-month long stay at the German University¹⁾ – following a period during which his interest in the quantum theory slowly diminished and his systematic concentration on the problems of a new theory of gravity began. Before touching upon the ideas and results which Einstein's stay in Prague yielded, let us briefly recall the atmosphere of his days in Prague.

No view of Einstein in Prague can be more original and immediate than that of Philipp Frank, Einstein's successor as head of the Institute of Theoretical Physics in Prague (until 1938) and one of his brightest biographers.²⁾ Frank, when writing Einstein's biography from 1939 to 1941, did not have manuscripts, letters and other documents at his disposal, and so, for an earnest Einstein biographer, other sources are of importance.³⁾ Most of the other literature on Einstein carries over the material (including a curious misinterpretation to be mentioned later) from Frank's book.

THE DAYS

Einstein was appointed a full professor of theoretical physics from the first April, 1911, but in Austria-Hungary the summer semester did not start until after the Easter holidays, on April 20, so that it is not known precisely when Einstein arrived at Prague. He came with his wife Mileva and two young sons. The Einsteins lived in Smíchov, not then considered a fashionable part of the city, but their flat on what is now Lesnická Street (No. 7) was modern and Einstein liked to recall his walks to the Institute over the Vltava River. (In 1979, on the occasion of Einstein's centenary a bust was unveiled at Lesnická 7; see photo on p. 73)



Einstein and his first wife, Mileva Marić, taken in 1911. In April 1911 they moved from Zürich to Prague together with their two sons, Hans Albert and Eduard. “When Einstein arrived in Prague he looked more like an Italian virtuoso than a German professor, and he had, moreover, a Slav wife”, writes one of his most vivid biographers, Philipp Frank. Mileva Marić was Serbian, born in southeastern Hungary; she had a Greek Orthodox background. Einstein met her in Zürich where she was one of his fellow students at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule (The Federal Institute of Technology). The correspondence reveals that Mileva enjoyed Prague much less than Einstein. She preferred Zürich where she also spent the rest of her life after separating from Einstein in 1914. It was perhaps partly Mileva’s dislike of Prague that led to the Einsteins return to Zürich after less than two years.

How did it happen that Einstein was invited to Prague? The German University in Prague had a section of mathematical physics headed by F. Lippich who was due to retire in the autumn of 1910. In addition, the German University considered it a drawback that it had only a section of mathematical physics rather than the Institute of Theoretical Physics that existed in the Czech University. The professorial staff of the German University therefore decided to establish an Institute of Theoretical Physics and to appoint as its head a professor who would play a full part in then rapidly developing field of theoretical physics. Among three candidates, the professors’ first choice was Albert Einstein, associate professor of theoretical physics at the Technical University in Zürich.