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INTRODUCTION

A Spacetime Interval

Einstein has become a symbol for many, a monument people have built, a symbol that they need for their own comfort.

—*Leopold Infeld*¹

Albert Einstein is dead. Bohemia, too, no longer exists. They have ascended to the realm of myths and legends, become words to conjure with—yet they are not, in general, invoked together. Legends have their own structure and rhythm, their own dominion over portions of our vast cultural landscape, and these two resonate with different groups, adding distinctly separate auras of fascination to anything they brush up against.

For 16 months, from early April 1911 to late July 1912, Albert Einstein lived in Prague. Many people, including fans of Einstein lore or devotees of Prague’s unquestionable charm, skip over this fact. It was, after all, such a short time, and quite early in the physicist’s career too. Einstein was only 32 years old when he arrived in the city, and there was no hint of the international celebrity he would later attain. If you turn to just about any biography of Einstein, the Prague year (and a quarter) is handled with streamlined efficiency. How relevant could 16 months be? Historians have dismissed it as an “interlude,” a “sojourn” (sometimes a “brief” one), a “detour,” a “way station,” and, most frequently, with Italianesque brio, an “intermezzo.”²

We should not be so hasty. For many historical icons whom we associate very specifically with the central places in their biographies, a closer look reveals that a short period spent in an unexpected locale early in their lives transformed their worldviews—and they in turn transformed our world. James Joyce is almost inseparable from the Dublin he

immortalized in his fiction or the Paris where he lived and wrote in his prime, but from 1904 to 1915 he lived on and off in Trieste, then a Habsburg port city, and the impact that these periods had on him is unquestionable. Mohandas Gandhi transformed India using the political techniques he had developed as a lawyer in South Africa, yet his few years studying for the bar in London in the late 1880s profoundly structured his vision of the British Empire and his sense of India. Mary Wollstonecraft, English philosopher and apostle of women's rights, was deeply marked by her unexpected firsthand view, in the early 1790s, of the bloody Terror in Paris. The examples multiply dramatically when we come to the massive displacements caused by the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression, and the rise of Hitler's regime. Einstein would be exiled by the last of these as well; Prague was an earlier, less noticed, displacement.

That Prague would figure into a tale of European history such as Einstein's has been rarely remarked but in retrospect seems almost overdetermined. Once you start to look for it, Prague shows up as an important node in a surprisingly large number of transits across the past millennium. It was a major political center north of the Alps in the high Middle Ages, where it incubated a crucial reform movement within the Catholic Church that would continue to reverberate, often violently, through the Protestant Reformation and beyond. The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), a brutal conflict that left Central Europe devastated, began in Prague with the tossing of two emissaries out of a window (the second of three famous “defenestrations” to occur in the city). A flashpoint of nationalist mobilization in the middle of the nineteenth century, by the dawn of the next it had become one of the most brilliant centers of literature, painting, and architecture, a rival to Paris and Vienna. Subsequently, the city's history turned much darker. The Munich negotiations that enabled Adolf Hitler to expand his territory and his war machine held the fate of Prague and Bohemia in the balance; after the carnage of the Second World War (which left the architectural heart of the city mostly intact), the Communist coup in 1948 again catapulted Prague to the world's attention. Less of a Cold War flashpoint than Berlin, Prague nonetheless grabbed the headlines twice: in 1968, when the Soviet-led invasion ended its eponymous Spring, and again in 1989, when Wenceslaus Square served as

ground zero for the disintegration of European communism. This is the place that, for 16 months before World War I, was Albert Einstein's home.

Besides missing out on the intellectual interest of seeing a person simultaneously adapting to and resisting a foreign place, overlooking Einstein's time in Prague does not make much sense from the physicist's own point of view. When he moved there from Zurich in 1911, he did not know that he would decamp back to the Swiss city three semesters later. He thought he was moving his family to settle for quite some time. It is only after one knows that the Prague period was (relatively) brief that it can be dismissed as a diversion from the ostensibly "ordinary" trajectory of this extraordinary life. What if we did not read the past through the future, or through Einstein's own retrospective haze? Let us take his time in Prague the way he initially did: seriously.

This book takes as its point of departure a particular interval of spacetime—Einstein's 16 months as a professor of theoretical physics at the German University in Prague—and follows that union of place and duration both forward throughout the twentieth century and backward to the distant centuries that still reverberated in local memory. This is not how most histories are usually written or how we typically analyze lives, but my purpose here is to demonstrate that we should reconsider the customary approach. At each moment of our lives, a plethora of possibilities lies ahead of us: not just possibilities of action, but also possibilities of interpretation. Events do not possess a single meaning the moment they happen; they are refracted and reinterpreted over and over again as the future, by becoming our present, forces the past to cohere into a single, linear narrative. In the pages that follow, I aim to hold open the manifold junctures and points of departure that mark a history for as long as they resist closure, which is rather longer than you might expect. To put things in Einsteinian terms, the spacetime interval eventually becomes a defined worldline, but that does not happen immediately and is only clearly discernible in retrospect. While it is still our present, history remains open; to see how it changes, we can dive into the records of the past and hold diverse meanings up to view in our mind's eye. We can see the uncertainties implicit in Einstein's and Prague's interactions for quite some time before the narrative becomes static.

Such lines are worthwhile to trace not merely because Einstein is Einstein and Prague is Prague.

What does it actually mean to *be in a place*? We all move here and there at various times during our lives. Some of these locations, overlapping as they do with particular events or moments, assume extraordinary significance for us. We feel that we would be different people if we had not spent one summer out there or moved to that town for three years a few decades ago. We understand that places are important to us without always paying attention to the crucial role that time also plays. *When you were there* can matter enormously, both because of the historical moment of the place and who you happened to be just when you were there. A place can shape you—and you can shape the place—without you being aware of it. This is as true for people in the past as it is for us. We can follow someone's path through the scattered traces he or she left behind (letters, mentions in other people's memoirs, documents maintained by the state, and so on) and look at the ripples these passages propagate through their world, like those triggered by a rock tossed into a pond.

Einstein could be the rock and Prague the pond—or vice versa if you prefer. We can see the implications of that brief entanglement of place and person, neither of which registered immediately. Because, a few years after he left the city, Einstein happened to become the most famous scientist who ever lived, and because Prague has been for over a millennium a central *entrepôt* in European cultural and intellectual life, we have a trove of sources with which to reconstruct their witting and unwitting relationships. Even though he was only there for three semesters, Einstein's time in Prague, the capital of that Bohemia of yore, shaped the science, the literature, and even the politics of that city for decades to come. The same is true in reverse: for the four decades that followed his departure from Bohemia, acquaintances he had made there and ideas that he had been exposed to over a handful of months would continue to occupy him. This does not mean that Einstein's Prague period was “the year that changed everything,” or even that Einstein recurred to it especially often (whether fondly or not), but rather that if we plant ourselves in 1911–1912 and foray from there across the lives of the city and the man,

vast swaths of their histories can suddenly, and often surprisingly, appear connected. Neither Prague nor Einstein looks quite the same again.

You likely have a mental image of Albert Einstein that bears some resemblance to the historical individual who was born in Ulm, Germany, on 14 March 1879 and died in Princeton, New Jersey, on 18 April 1955. Depending on the context, Einstein is routinely invoked as a genius, a physicist, a pacifist, a sage, and more. Much of what is generally presented as relating to the image of Einstein is exaggerated or even apocryphal, but nonetheless a good deal can be grounded in the actions of a flesh-and-blood figure who lived through and played a significant part in some of the most dramatic, traumatic, and awe-inspiring events of the first half of the twentieth century.

Bohemia, these days, is something else entirely. The term might not recall anything other than those who have been dubbed “bohemians”: unconventional artsy types, lolling around like libertines in flouncy clothes and shambolic surroundings. (Einstein, famous in his later years for his disregard of sartorial norms, haircuts, and socks, is frequently called “bohemian” in precisely this sense.)³ “Bohemia” might be understood as the imaginary space where these folks converge. That meaning of the term was a nineteenth-century product of London and Paris and has little to do with the actual place originally known by that name.⁴ The term once referred to a medieval kingdom in Central Europe that later became the far northwestern province of Austria-Hungary.⁵ When the Habsburg Empire disintegrated in the wake of World War I, Bohemia began to shimmer out of existence, replaced by a designation with which it had once coexisted: *Čechy*, which is frustratingly plural. *Čechy*, together with Moravia (*Morava*), comprise the *České země*, “the Czech lands”; there is no space for “Bohemia” anymore. A delicate point of translation compounds this confusion: where German makes the distinction between “Czech” (*tschechisch*), a national identification, and “Bohemian” (*böhmisch*), a regional designation neutral with regard to nationality, in Czech the word *český* serves for both. The famous statement by Count J. M. Thun that “I am neither a Czech nor a German, but only a Bohemian” (*Ich bin weder Deutscher noch Tschech, ich bin Böhme*) is

untranslatable into the Czech language.⁶ Geographically, the land that used to be known as Bohemia came to constitute after World War I the western portion of what was Czechoslovakia and became in 1993 the Czech Republic (or, if you will, *Czechia*). Although Bohemia as a historically specific term has now vanished in the wake of global conflict, genocide, communism, and the end of the Cold War, one can occasionally find glimpses of it when strolling around its principal city: Prague.

* * * * *

Stories about Einstein and Bohemia double back, overlap, and mutually reinforce at almost every turn. A character you meet at the beginning of one narrative shows up unexpectedly years or miles later; an arcane debate about an abandoned theory of gravitation shapes ideological debates among Soviet philosophers after decades of dormancy; the medieval past proves stubbornly persistent during fin-de-siècle modernity. The diversity is so amazing, such an elaborate tapestry woven from such basic threads, that it might seem like just about everything Prague could be linked to everything Einstein, and the other way around. This is of course not the case. There are important episodes in the history of science in Prague—such as the flourishing of alchemy in the city in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries or the important epistemological reflections of the early modern Bohemian thinker Jan Amos Komenský (Comenius)—that will not register in these pages at all. Likewise there are eminent figures who occupied Einstein's Bohemian spacetime interval who left no demonstrable trace on the man and his subsequent life, however much we might wish otherwise.

A case in point concerns another famous German-speaking Jew who lived in Prague during 1911–1912 and who was enmeshed in precisely the same social circles as Einstein: the writer Franz Kafka, author of the posthumously published novels *The Trial* (1925) and *The Castle* (1926) and the 1915 novella *The Metamorphosis* (about a man turned into a dung beetle, published nine years before Kafka's early death from tuberculosis). For much of the world today Kafka represents Prague. Because of his

massive impact on global literature and thought, derived in no small part from his incisive dissection of the psychological pressures of modernity, Kafka has attracted a voluminous scholarship, some of which meticulously situates his creative energies within the city of his birth.⁷ Given that both were Jewish, both stand in as symbols of important transformations of the tumultuous twentieth century, and both were in Prague at the same moment, it is overwhelmingly tempting to imagine Einstein and Kafka engaged in a meeting of minds.

The meeting happened, but the minds did not register it. On 24 May 1911, Einstein gave a talk about relativity theory in front of the local discussion circle of Bertha Fanta, an erudite, philosophically ambitious, and well-connected woman who lived above her husband's pharmacy in Old Town Square. Fanta's group had become a magnet for German-speaking intellectuals, especially those affiliated with the German University, and a pronounced complement of Jews (she and her family became increasingly Zionist over the course of the 1910s). Albert Einstein was introduced to the circle as a way to satisfy his desire for companions with whom he could play his violin. It was a matter of courtesy that the physicist, who had already earned a strong reputation for his foundational contributions to special relativity and quantum theory, would deliver a presentation about his work among them. In attendance on 24 May were his university assistant Ludwig Hopf, the prominent Prague author Max Brod, and (according to the latter's diary) Brod's friends Robert Weltsch and Franz Kafka. The discussion was apparently lively, and Hopf also held forth on the work of psychiatrists Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud. Kafka apparently did not say anything in particular.⁸ The next day the group reconvened but Kafka stayed home.

Such was the fabled meeting between Einstein and Kafka: they likely shook hands and little more. There was no extended discourse on metaphysics and spacetime, no exploration of the fate of the individual in industrial civilization, no debate about aesthetics in music or literature. Neither Einstein nor Kafka ever mentioned the encounter. In itself, that might not be surprising: lots of people meet at cocktail parties and then forget their interlocutors. But these two became very prominent people in later years. In 1919, British reports of the confirmation of Einstein's

theory of general relativity—work on which he began in earnest while living in Prague—catapulted the scientist to international recognition. He was front-page news around the world and in 1921 made a celebrated return to Prague to give a standing-room-only public talk. Kafka seemingly paid no attention. It is implausible that he was ignorant of either Einstein or relativity—in fact, he made a rare, and characteristically wry, mention of the latter in his diary on 10 April 1922, noting that as a child his engagement with sexual topics was “so innocent and uninterested approximately as it is today in regard to relativity theory.”⁹

What about from Einstein’s side? People in Berlin who knew Einstein and his second wife Elsa claimed that it was possible that Kafka had visited the physicist in his apartment on Haberlandstraße, since the two did share a mutual friend, the Hungarian-born physician Robert Klopstock. These strands are flimsy (as are the unreliable reports that Einstein returned a copy of *The Castle* to Thomas Mann in Princeton, claiming that its “perversity” kept him from finishing it).¹⁰ Just as Kafka did not recall having met the famous Einstein after 1919, Einstein did not remember a meeting with the posthumously famous Kafka once his novels began to appear in the mid-1920s. A great deal of energy has been fruitlessly expended over the decades trying to confirm a mutual regard between these two towering figures of twentieth-century intellectual history. You can be together with someone and still be alone.

Between Einstein and the controversial Rudolf Steiner, founder of anthroposophy—an esoteric movement that argued for cultivating the mental faculties to access an objective spiritual dimension beyond the senses—a different lack of recognition took place. Welcomed across Europe, Steiner was very popular in Prague, especially among the Fanta group. (He corresponded with Bertha Fanta and visited her home on his trips to the city.) Hugo Bergmann, Fanta’s son-in-law and a frequent interlocutor with Einstein during his time in Prague—and a person who we will encounter often in these pages—claimed in his diary that he “tried once, ca. 1911, to bring Einstein together with Rudolf Steiner, and also brought Einstein to Steiner’s lecture, but unfortunately he had no comprehension of it.”¹¹ A Prague-based anthroposophist named Franz Halla

stated after Einstein's death that he had met the physicist at Steiner's 1911 lectures in the city on "Occult Physiology."¹² Both Bergmann and Halla were dismayed that Einstein had no appreciation for what they saw as Steiner's particular genius, especially when it came to scientific topics like non-Euclidean geometry. But their recollections depict events that could never have happened. Steiner did give lectures in Prague in 1911, but they ended in March, when Einstein had not yet left Zurich.¹³ (In a bizarre coincidence, Kafka went to one of these lectures and even visited the anthroposophist in his hotel room before the latter left Bohemia.)¹⁴ At least with Kafka and Einstein, we know they met but just did not care about the meeting. With Steiner, Einstein neither cared nor made Steiner's acquaintance.

Why do these non-events matter? They demonstrate the distinction between history and myth. The former are stories we produce in the present from the traces the past has bequeathed to us. History is fundamentally constrained by the evidence. Myths are different. They are not necessarily false, but their form is not dependent on the surviving traces of the past. They grow from our present aspirations, which enable us to find meaning in them. The interconnection of Einstein and Bohemia is a historically tractable domain, amenable to excavation in libraries and archives (in the case of the present book, those were located in Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Israel, and the United States). The interconnection of Einstein and Kafka is another matter entirely. It is understandable that we want to have our heroes align, to enjoy simple stories in which the good guys meet, something important happens, and everyone recognizes it. That, alas, is not always the case. The histories we *can* write are stranger and less straightforward, and therefore vastly more interesting. Throughout this book, I focus on those aspects of Einstein's time in Prague (and its aftershocks) that are trapped within our shards of evidence, and I steer away from the apocryphal or the invented, however satisfying they might feel. There is universe enough in the documents.

Situating Einstein in a place turns out to be rather common: over a dozen volumes and many more scholarly articles fall into the genre we

might call “Einstein in X.” You can easily find Einstein in Zurich, in Bern, in Switzerland, in Paris, in Berlin (several books on that), and even in Ulm, the birthplace that he left while an infant.¹⁵ Many of these works appeared around 1979, the centenary of Einstein’s birth, when celebrations around the world marked the launch of what has become a veritable Einstein industry. It is thanks to these works that the present book is possible: Einstein’s archive is so comprehensive, his published collected papers (an ongoing project) so well curated, his image so vividly recorded in the memoirs of his colleagues and acquaintances that a historian can reconstruct a good deal of Einstein’s life and circle to an astonishing level of resolution. The same is true for Prague in the early decades of the twentieth century, a bequest of the equally impressive Kafka industry, which has uncovered many valuable details of cultural life in the city—its art, philosophy, literature, public life—especially among its intellectual Jewish inhabitants. So, even though Einstein and Kafka never met in a significant way, we now know a vast amount about the cultural history of the city they both occupied at one moment, enough to flesh out manifold connections between person and place.

It should not, therefore, be a shock that there is a volume called *Einstein and Prague*, though it is only available in Czech. Like so many of its brethren, it appeared in 1979, under the editorship of the gravitational physicist Jiří Bičák, who is still active today at the Charles University in Prague. A slim paperback of 63 pages, it is not so much a history of the subject at hand as a collection of documents: an introduction by Bičák; a translation into Czech of a section of the biography of Einstein by the physicist and philosopher Philipp Frank; Einstein’s most famous scientific paper produced in Prague, proposing that light bends by a certain amount when passing massive bodies like the sun; and Einstein’s preface to the Czech translation of his popular book on relativity from 1916.¹⁶ Bičák’s book serves as a fitting Czechoslovak contribution in the context of the festivities of 1979, but it does not take a wider view of Einstein’s interaction with the city. Likewise, the few shorter studies that have examined this moment have concentrated rather strictly on the scientist himself. One of the things it means to be in a place, however, is that you are usually not there by yourself. To understand Einstein in Bohemia, we

need a larger cast of Bohemians (none of whom happened to be lower-case bohemians).¹⁷

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A major theme of this book concerns precisely this question of belonging to a larger community, a matter that is especially tricky to nail down for Einstein, who in later years was fond of speaking of himself as a loner (despite decades of evidence of him as a social and socially engaged individual). Some forms of belonging in the modern world are thrust upon us; citizenship is a good example. It is also an instructive one for teasing out Einstein's relationship with Prague. That might seem like a non sequitur, but the conflict over citizenship has everything to do with Einstein's relationship to the category of "German," perhaps the crucial issue that shaped his every experience in the Bohemian metropolis. A brief survey of the chaotic story of the citizenship of the famously antinationalist Einstein serves to highlight many of the political and cultural assumptions that structured his world both in Prague and beyond it.

The first time we encounter documents expressing Einstein's views on citizenship, he was trying to get rid of one. He was born in Ulm, located within the German state of Württemberg, and he retained that citizenship after the family's departure for Munich, capital of the state of Bavaria, shortly afterward. As his graduation from secondary school approached, however, Einstein refused to enlist in the obligatory military service. At a month and a half shy of his seventeenth birthday (and thus still a minor) he asked his father to renounce his citizenship for him. As of 5 February 1896, when the decision was confirmed by the town of Ulm, Einstein was officially stateless, a status rather more thinkable in his day than in our own highly legalized international order.¹⁸ He visited his family in Italy and soon settled in Switzerland to complete a year of preparatory schooling before enrolling at the Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zurich. He became a Swiss citizen on 21 February 1901, almost five years after he had forsaken his previous citizenship. Despite his birth within the newly formed German *Reich*, Einstein seemed happier being

Swiss. The tension between those two forms of belonging would burst into head-on conflict two decades later.

It is hard to determine how important questions of citizenship were to Einstein. He traveled extensively internationally—at first around Europe in the 1910s and then around the world in the decade after—and he kept his passports in order. In notes to himself, however, the man who had moved from Zurich to Prague (in Austria-Hungary), back to Zurich, and finally in 1914 to Berlin, the capital city of both the state of Prussia and the German Empire, toyed with the idea that perhaps citizenship was not that important. In a document he drafted between late October and early November 1915, when the Germany he lived in was in the grips of World War I, he wrote: “The state to which I belong as a citizen plays scarcely any role in my emotional life; I consider the affiliation with a state as a business arrangement, something like the relationship to a life insurance policy.”¹⁹ So he wrote, but then he crossed it out. It was to his advantage to keep quiet about questions of citizenship. Although he was now a professor at the University of Berlin and a director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Physics (and thus a German civil servant), he insisted that he remained a Swiss citizen. The state at least tacitly concurred: unlike many of his colleagues, Einstein, as a foreign national, was not approached for war work.²⁰ He confirmed this status in a letter to the Berlin-Schöneberg Office of Taxation in 1920: “I am Swiss, here in Berlin since spring 1914.”²¹

Einstein’s cavalier attitude toward his belonging in Germany put him at odds with some of his closest friends. Unique among his colleagues living under the Central Powers, Einstein was not subject to the boycott and travel ban that the victorious powers of France, Belgium, Britain, and the United States imposed on the defeated states after the war. A well-known pacifist and opponent of the war, he was an ideal ambassador to Paris or New York (the latter of which he visited as part of a fundraising expedition for the London-based Zionist Organization) once the confirmation of general relativity hit the newsstands. He endured his celebrity in part in hopes of helping end the boycott. The eminent chemist Fritz Haber, discoverer of the eponymous process for fixing atmospheric

nitrogen—and also an architect of the system of gas munitions during the Great War—vociferously protested against Einstein traveling to these (in his view) still quite hostile powers:

If you *at this moment* journey to America, where the new president postpones the ratification of the law through which the peace between the United States and Germany ought to be proclaimed, if you *at this moment* travel with the English friends of Zionism while sanctions allow the opposition between England and us to persist with new acuity, then you are announcing publicly before the entire world that you want to be nothing other than a Swiss who by chance has his residence in Germany. I ask you to consider whether you really want to make that announcement now. Now is the moment in which adherence to Germany has a bit of martyrdom to it. . . . For the entire world you are today the most important of the German Jews. If you *at this moment* fraternize ostentatiously with the English and their friends, then people here at home will see that as a testament to the faithlessness of the Jews.²²

(Haber's linkage of Germans and Jews as compatible but occasionally conflictual identifications broaches another theme of this book.)

Einstein's response was characteristically dismissive. "I have declined many attractive calls [i.e., professorial appointments] to Switzerland, to Holland, to Norway, and to England without even considering accepting one," he wrote. "I did that however not out of allegiance to Germany but rather to my dear German friends, of which you are one of the most excellent and wish me the best. Allegiance to the political structure of Germany would be unnatural for me as a pacifist."²³ He went on the trip to the United States, and many other places besides: Japan, China, the British Mandate of Palestine, and even Prague, all on his Swiss passport.²⁴ He declared in 1922 to Gilbert Murray, the Australian-born British man of letters, that "I am not an appropriate representative for German intellectuals, because I am not seen by them in their full number as *their* representative. My outspoken international attitude, Swiss citizenship, and Jewish nationality work together so that I would not be met with in

a political relationship by the majority of the masses with the trust that a representative of a country must possess to be able to serve as a liaison with success.”²⁵

It would soon become harder for Einstein to maintain this attitude, because in 1922 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics for the prior year. Neither the diplomatic imbroglio that ensued nor its resolution would be thinkable without a globalized world intimately connected by steamships and telegraphs. In the fall of 1921, Einstein had left on an invited trip to East Asia, ignoring a not-so-subtle communication from Swedish colleagues who suggested he postpone the trip because of an impending special announcement. Einstein received notification of the prize in Japan by telegram. Now there was a problem. Nobel Prizes needed to be received in person; if the laureate was not personally able to do so, his (or, disappointingly rarely, her) ambassador could stand in. Naturally, the Swiss ambassador presented himself for the honor, given that Einstein was at that very moment traveling as a citizen of the canton of Zurich. So did Rudolf Nadolny, the German ambassador to Sweden. The German version was that when Einstein assumed his Berlin position, German citizenship attached to him as a requirement of the post. Einstein had objected to this clause during negotiations in December 1913, and the Germans had not felt it necessary to resolve the matter. (A similar condition had applied when Einstein moved to Prague, and he had ignored it then as well.)²⁶ After 1923, Einstein relinquished his opposition to the state’s narrative and settled in as a German citizen—though he still traveled on his Swiss passport at times.²⁷

Einstein’s newly regained German citizenship only remained settled until 25 August 1933, when Germany’s National Socialist government rescinded it, transforming him into the world’s most famous refugee. He was granted asylum in the United States and offered a position at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, where he became a prominent advocate for those tragically displaced by Hitler’s racial laws and the conflict in Europe. In 1935, the Einstein family traveled to Bermuda so that they could reenter the United States on permanent visas. On 1 October 1940, after the obligatory five-year waiting period, Einstein, his

stepdaughter Margot Einstein-Marianoff (*née* Löwenthal), and his secretary Helen Dukas traveled the short distance from Princeton to Trenton, New Jersey, to take their oath of allegiance as American citizens.²⁸ Even then, as visible and as prominent as he was—he was likely the most recognizable American alive—J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI explored in 1950 the possibility of stripping Einstein of his citizenship as an undesirable alien for his open pronouncements in favor of civil rights and nuclear disarmament.²⁹ That limited effort failed, and Einstein died as an American citizen.

As one can see from the turbulent history of Einstein’s citizenship, calling him a “German” is not a straightforward matter. Although he was born in Germany, he spent much of his life trying to avoid being considered a citizen of the German state. Likewise, his confessional status as a Jew meant that for many people in the land of his birth he was not straightforwardly German as a matter of ethnicity. On the other hand, it seems obtuse simply to go by his last passport and call Einstein “American,” full stop. Rather than attempting to resolve these issues by reference to strict categories, Einstein’s biography urges us to recognize the complexity of personal and state identifications of individuals. They are not the background to history—they are often its very substance.

The simultaneous malleability and solidity of categories was equally true in the context of Prague. According to the census, during Einstein’s time in Prague the city’s population was 93 percent “Czechs” and 7 percent “Germans,” defined by how individuals listed their “everyday language” (*Umgangssprache*). (The proportions for Bohemia as a whole were not so lopsided, with roughly a third of all residents set down as German.) As is true for accounts of the many aspiring nation-states that emerged out of multinational empires during this period, nationalism has been the dominant framework for histories of the region that would be called Czechoslovakia from 1918 to 1993. Sometimes, Prague is identified as a “city of three peoples,” with Czechs, Germans, and Jews living cheek-by-jowl, sometimes discordantly but often productively.³⁰ (Set aside for a moment that many of the city’s residents were bilingual to some degree and that there were Jews to be found among both linguistic

communities.³¹) More often, the history that has been told has been one of implacable hostility between Prague Germans, who despite their small numbers benefited enormously from Habsburg privileges, and nationalist Czechs, who wanted autonomy or even independence.³²

Einstein was largely unaware of all this complexity. He interacted exclusively with people who identified as German because that was who he met at the German University. Outside of more intimate contacts, such as those he made in the Fanta circle, he only conversed with German-speakers because, knowing no Czech, he had no alternative. Nonetheless, every local he met would peg him as part of a group, as a German and sometimes as a Jew, depending on the context. Neither was a good fit. His Jewishness was, as we shall see, somewhat of a murky matter during this period, his Germanness no less so. He was neither a German citizen nor a Habsburg German; still less was he a local “Prague German.” If he had to be categorized, it would be as a Swiss—a fact that almost lost him the position in Prague in the first place. The problem of *identity* is truly central to this story.

So central, in fact, that I am going to avoid using the word. Following the suggestion of the sociologist Rogers Brubaker and the historian Frederick Cooper, I opt for “identification” over “identity.” As they note, doing so “invites us to specify the agents that do the identifying. And it does not presuppose that such identifying (even by powerful agents, such as the state) will necessarily result in the internal sameness, the distinctiveness, the bounded groupness that political entrepreneurs may seek to achieve. Identification—of oneself and of others—is intrinsic to social life; ‘identity’ in the strong sense is not.”³³ Those in Prague who called themselves “Germans” or called Einstein “German” were making deliberate, highly politicized choices, just as those historians who write “German history” by confining themselves within the borders of what was after 1871 (or 1918, or 1945, or 1990) the German state without taking into account the German-speaking populations of Austria-Hungary, Switzerland, Romania, Russia, France, Belgium, Italy, Namibia, and the United States are doing.³⁴ For the purposes of this book, “being German” means much less than “speaking German,” and thus much of what follows will be told in terms of people who were Germanophone (or Czechophone).³⁵

In this way we can avoid assuming national identification and instead watch it in the process of construction.

* * * * *

The same strategy helps us navigate the kaleidoscopic history of Prague. The city was at various points the seat of the Přemyslid dynasty, the medieval capital of the Holy Roman Empire, a troublesome and rebellious counterweight to Habsburg centralism, a prosperous provincial node between the two major Germanophone imperial centers of Berlin and Vienna, the capital of a fledgling state—at first a republic, then occupied by Nazi forces, and then a communist polity—and more besides and in between. Any close acquaintance with the history of Prague in a specific period quickly teaches you that stories have a way of breaching the dams between political regimes and occasionally bending back to wash up medieval flotsam on the beaches of modernity. Although obviously physically fixed in the landscape and forced, as we all are, to move through the years in a linear fashion, when it comes to the spacetime of memory, the city demonstrates a persistent capacity to contravene expectations.

No wonder that one of the most enduring ways to speak of the place—popular among folklorists of the past and tourists of the present—is as “Magic Prague,” the domain of alchemists and Golems, mystical rabbis and deranged princes, heroic mercenaries and fantastical scribblers. The shelves are lined with book after book promising a portrait of a Bohemian wonderland amid the Baroque towers and Cubist apartment blocks of the city on the banks of the Vltava (or, if one prefers the German, the Moldau).³⁶ Thankfully, these are not the only surveys of the history of Prague available. Instead, a series of vivid, *longue durée* narrative histories stress the harsher realities of national conflict with a decided emphasis on artistic creativity.³⁷ It seems that you must either choose a Prague populated by poltergeists or one abounding in aesthetes. This book offers a third option.

While the Prague one finds in these pages does have its share of poets and eerie coincidences—though you would strain to find them supernatural—the central characteristic of this Prague is as a city of knowledge,

a place where science, philosophy, and rationality were serious business. Largely because of the Cold War, Prague has fallen in the popular, especially Anglophone, mind on the far side of a divide that snakes through Europe, like the erstwhile Iron Curtain, cleaving the West from the East.³⁸ During most of its history, up to and including Einstein's time there, that was not the case. Not only was Prague not a mystical wonderland, but it was a hub of European science, the home of Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler, Christian Doppler and Ernst Mach, and, yes, Albert Einstein. Bohemia as a whole was unquestionably modern. It was the seat of Austria-Hungary's large chemical industry, producing 37.7 percent of its chemicals as well as 65.5 percent of its food and 95 percent of its sugar. Prague already had an electric tram system in 1891. It hosted international conferences and was plugged into a transnational network of Germanophone universities.³⁹ That was, after all, how Einstein got there.

Now that we are situated with our protagonist, his city, and his time, let us turn to what kind of book this is. In each chapter, we will follow Einstein and Prague, though in some there will be rather more Einstein than Prague, and in others the reverse. There is no single way of being a person in a place at a specific time, and I hope to capture that multiplicity by guiding you in and out of the entangled pair of Einstein and Bohemia before that interaction dissipated from the memory of the public and historians alike. In order to fully grasp how Einstein understood his context and how Praguers made sense of him, sometimes I have to wander rather far from the mustachioed theorist. He will always come back. None of the stories here are arbitrary—they are all tightly connected to man, place, and time—and they are all verifiable in the documentary record. Some good stories did not make it in because they were digressions, and others were excluded because they were simply not true. Instead, we move through Einstein's life in, out, and around Prague both in real time and in later recollections of it. Einstein is a tool for narrating the history of Prague, and Prague is a tool for narrating the scientist's life.⁴⁰

The first chapter explores the seemingly simple question of why and how Einstein settled in Prague in the first place. The next two chapters trace his life in the city, both in his scientific work to formulate a

relativistic theory of gravitation and in his social life at home and with acquaintances. By the beginning of chapter 4, Einstein has left Prague, returning only once for a brief visit. Yet some of the most significant resonances of his Bohemian moment were felt in the years after he left, both by those in the city and by the physicist in Berlin and Princeton. The next three chapters explore the ripples of Einstein's Bohemia in philosophy of science, Germanophone literature, and Jewish and Zionist politics. The final chapter returns us to the unsung majority—those who identified as Czechs—and the way they fashioned their own image of Einstein at different points across the twentieth century. Historical narrative, like memory, does not always flow linearly, and sometimes the story doubles back or sneaks ahead. Likewise, the cast of characters beyond Einstein do not stay confined in cameo roles. Some, such as the philosopher and physicist Philipp Frank, the novelist and critic Max Brod, and the Zionist intellectual Hugo Bergmann, prove just as essential as our main character.

Albert Einstein is dead. Bohemia, too, no longer exists. But in the pages that follow they come together again, bringing their worlds into view once more.

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