

EINSTEIN

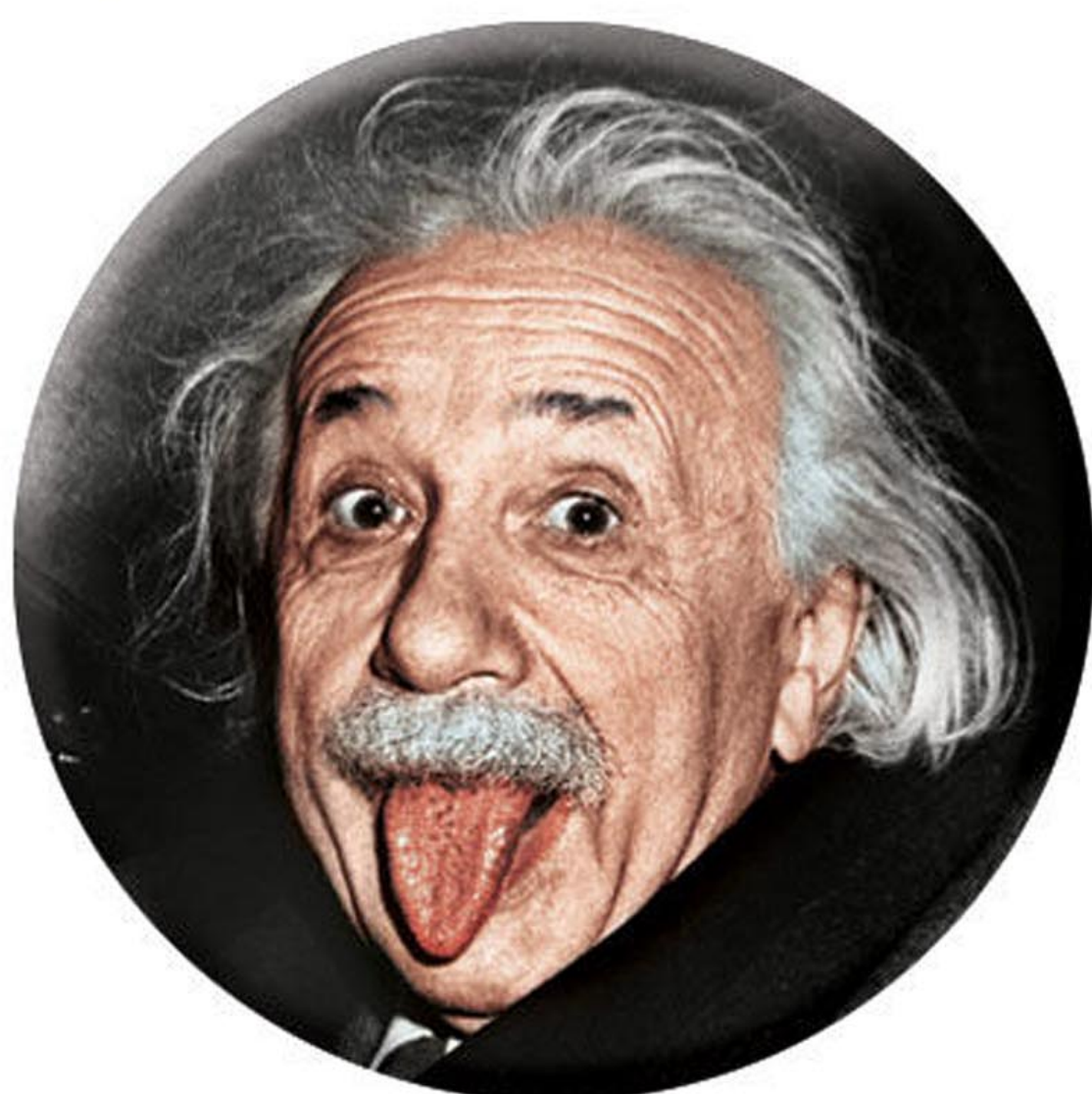
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UNFORGETTABLE

BY KONRAD KELLEN

A close friend's recollections of the great physicist whose heart and mind warmed a cold science

The man who gave the world E-MC² could also poke fun. To Einstein it was all a matter of relativity.



Konrad Kellen was born in Germany, as was his friend Albert Einstein. Their friendship, which began in Europe and continued in the United States, spanned 30 years. Kellen himself is a translator, magazine contributor, and consultant to the Rand Corporation, as well as the author of "Khrushchev, a Political Portrait." It was just 50 years ago this year that Einstein published his theory of relativity. To honor that momentous event, Konrad Kellen has written the following memoir.

■ EINSTEIN RARELY wore socks; he avoided the telephone and felt that the zipper was one of the most ingenious mechanisms ever invented by man. He drank no liquor and served none to his guests, who were offered tea or ginger ale instead. He was interested in almost everything and gave every topic and visitor his undivided attention. But sometimes he would rise abruptly—even in

UNFORGETTABLE

the middle of a sentence—and state apologetically yet firmly, “I have to work now.” He would then retire to his study without any further ceremony, leaving it to his wife and faithful secretary to entertain the guests a little longer. There was nothing in the least offensive about this; it was obvious that on such occasions Einstein’s brain had suddenly begun to spin and that thereupon, without further delay, he “had to work,” whether he or anybody else liked it or not. It seemed as though he had received orders from elsewhere, and he followed them good-naturedly, expecting the very same attitude from those around him.

He had very definite likes and dislikes, and his personal judgment about individuals or groups was by no means of Olympian detachment. In particular, he disliked and distrusted politicians and professors. He sometimes would declare some dignitary to be a “great crook,” on no more evidence than a newspaper photo. He had particular disdain for public-opinion surveys but felt that they were part and parcel of modern democracy. A moderately talented young man in search of a profession was advised by him as follows: “Become a public-opinion pollster. There you will never be unemployed. We know, after all, that people are ruled by being told tall stories—so the rulers must constantly test and see what they can get away with.”

Einstein was no great admirer of the American university system. He told a visitor that he preferred the European system, where the students were not “treated like schoolboys” but left free either to work or waste their time in pubs. “Naturally,” he added, “most of them waste their time in pubs. But those few who don’t receive a better education than those in the United States. The European system of education is aristocratic,

UNFORGETTABLE

and, at least as far as education is concerned, I'm in favor of an aristocratic system."

In most other respects, however, Einstein preferred American institutions. He liked the political freedom, the democratic equality, and the social mobility of this country. He took his citizenship very seriously and was very indignant when his wife suggested during the 1952 Presidential elections that he should stay home because he had caught a cold. He insisted that he would go to the polls and vote for Adlai Stevenson, whom he called "an intelligent man, and not a demagogue."

At the same time his attachment to any country, even the United States, which he preferred to any other country he had ever lived in, had definite limits. When he was queried by an FBI agent about a man who had applied for a government job, he replied that the applicant was a good and honorable man.

"But is he patriotic?" asked the agent.

"Well," said Einstein, "he is as patriotic as an intelligent man can be."

The agent, reported Einstein, had seemed a little taken aback, and Einstein was worried lest he had done the applicant some harm. But he insisted that his reply had been reasonable and that it would be wrong to chalk it up against the man.

The fact that he was a Jew and that the Jews in the entire world were so terribly proud of "their" Einstein pleased him and sometimes amused him, sometimes embarrassed him. He was able to forget his exposed position at times and almost agreed to be godfather to the newborn son of a Christian friend, until he was reminded by his wife that the Jews from Tel

UNFORGETTABLE

Aviv to Los Angeles would be petrified if he did anything so wicked. In this connection the following words of his come to mind. When he was once asked if he thought that his theories might ever be proved wrong, he said: "I cannot tell. But should they stand, the Germans will say that I was a German, while the French will say that I was a European. Should they prove wrong, the French will say that I was a German, and the Germans will say that I was a Jew."

His personal relations were uncomplicated and unsentimental, and it seemed that he never tried to impress anyone in any way whatever. Even if his behavior seemed at times unusual, he never played the eccentric. He merely did as he pleased, and was therefore almost always pleased. He did not enjoy going to barbershops, for example, and therefore never went; whatever haircutting was administered to him was done by his wife. He never hurried and never permitted anyone to hurry him. Once, at a time when transcontinental telephone calls were still a romantic rarity, an excited fellow astronomer called him from India to tell him about a breathtaking discovery. Einstein told his secretary to advise the impatient Indian to sit down and write him a letter instead. "If he really has made an important discovery," Einstein then said to his visitor, "it certainly should keep for a week or two." He never carried money on his person, and he refused to wear a hat. A straw hat presented to him in Panama, which was made of the finest straw and could be folded like a handkerchief, was worth several thousand dollars. Would it not have been more eccentric if he had worn it or gone shopping or to the barber like an ordinary citizen?

His use of language, even out-

UNFORGETTABLE

side his chosen field, was as carefully weighed and scientifically accurate as that of few people. To a friend who had sent him an article on some political question, he wrote: "I think it [the article] comes closer to the truth than anything I have read on the subject." He did not say, as others might have: "Very true!" He would not presume to know the truth. Nor would he think that it might be *the* truth; that it came "closer to the truth" was his way of putting it, and characteristic for his attitude. Finally, he did not say, as most others would out of thoughtlessness or even presumption, "than anything else"; he would say "than anything I have read on the subject," leaving open the possibility that someone else might have written something still closer to the truth. And, of course, to introduce his judgment with the words, "I think," instead of saying, as most people, that such-and-such *is* so-and-so, speaks for itself.

EVERY PERSON who talked to Einstein was taken completely seriously by him. He once carried on a lengthy conversation with a 12-year-old boy on the subject of whether the earth was turning or not. The boy took the position that it just did not seem as though the earth were turning and that he therefore did not believe it. Einstein told the boy that he was merely stuck in the pre-Galilean view, that astronomical observations indicated that either the entire universe with all constellations was turning around the earth in the most convoluted, complicated, and improbable fashion or that the earth, too, was moving in certain ways, and that of the two explanations for the constantly changing situation in the heavens the second

UNFORGETTABLE

was by far the more probable. When the boy replied that there might be a third as yet undiscovered answer to the observed phenomenon, Einstein said: "Of course. But have you found it? If so, we shall discuss it."

Einstein did not feel that his fame or accomplishments entitled him to any particular privileges. He lived in his simple house in Princeton, New Jersey, and permitted himself no luxuries except to sail occasionally in his small boat. (Once, at 71, he capsized and had to be pulled out of the water. But this did not dampen his enthusiasm for the sport.) In fact, he did not even feel comfortable about the ordinary amenities of life. He always worried lest he use up too much of another person's labor. The fact that a cook, a tailor, an architect, or even the combined crew of a public utility were, after all, paid for their labor did not assuage his misgivings on this point; he insisted that it was parasitic to use up the labor of others.

This attitude toward human labor was somehow connected with his political views, and these were often misinterpreted. Many considered him a Communist or at least a fellow traveler. This was wrong, even if he refused to preface a highly critical book on the Soviet Union with these words to the author in a friendly letter: "One must not forget that communism has provided an acceptable minimum living standard to the Soviet masses." But he hated every form of dictatorship and was at all times an outspoken individualist.

Everybody knows that Einstein played the violin; he also played the piano. The difference was that on the violin he played a considerable range of standard compositions, while he used the piano

UNFORGETTABLE

mostly to play his own creations as they came to him while he played. An overenthusiastic visitor once suggested to him that these effusions, or at least some of them, should be recorded for posterity, but Einstein rejected this. He laughed and said: "There is already much too much material about me that those poor researchers will have to wade through after my death. Why add to their burdens?"

Einstein was married twice, the first time to a Swiss citizen to whom he used to refer as a "wild woman," the second time to a distant cousin who became something of a general manager for him. He once told a friend that the sight of a pretty young woman tended to make him sad, as it reminded him of the short span allotted to people on earth. But this was not in conflict with his generally positive views of life, even if he complained from time to time that there were so many "crooks" who always "got away with it." His optimism was, in fact, of a different and grander type than that of most people. When he once told a visitor that he felt that an atomic chain reaction, poisoning the entire atmosphere, was a definite possibility, and the visitor thereupon sadly concluded that "that would be the end of everything," Einstein laughed: "But, my dear friend, you forget the fish in the oceans! They would come to the shores, and in a few million years everything would be just as it was before!"

BEFORE EINSTEIN died on April 18, 1955, in Princeton, he regained consciousness during his first night at the hospital, after having lost it in the afternoon. He talked for quite a while. But he talked in his German mother tongue, and it was one of those tragic, or perhaps not

UNFORGETTABLE

so tragic, turns of fate that there was nobody around who knew German. Nurses and doctors, more concerned about the patient's physical situation than the parting words of the genius, did not know German and merely recorded the fact that he spoke. In this way his last words were forever lost. Whether this is a misfortune for humanity or not, it seems a form of higher justice. For in his later years, indeed during all his life, Einstein did not seem to be a man who expressed every thought that came to his mind. Thus, what he said on his deathbed he might not have said to friends and posterity, anyway. ■ ■