

"Shame" at Göttingen

Manhattan Project History The Early Years (1900 - 1939) (Hitler Sows the Seeds of His Own Defeat) "It is a custom of science - and perhaps a principle - to select from the infinite reservoir of unsolved problems only those simple ones the solution of which seems possible in terms of available knowledge and skills. We are trained to subject our results to the most severe criticism. Adherence to these two principles results in our knowing very little, but on the other hand being very certain that we know this little. We scientists seem to be unable to apply these principles to the immensely complex problems of the political world and its social order. In general we are cautious and therefore tolerant and disinclined to accept total solutions. Our very objectivity prevents us from taking a strong stand in political differences, in which the right is never on one side. So we took the easiest way out and hid in our ivory tower. We felt that neither the good nor the evil applications were our responsibility". - James Franck, Nobel Laureate; Manhattan Project Physicist

As World War I came to a close, there were three main areas where atomic research, in its infancy, was being carried out. At Cambridge University in England, there was the famed Cavendish Lab under the direction of Ernest Rutherford, a New Zealander by birth. In Copenhagen, the Dane, Niels Bohr, carried out some of the most innovative experiments of the time. The third area was the Göttingen University in Germany dominated by the trio of academicians: Max Born, James Franck, and David Hilbert. As alluded to in the previous section, the "Beautiful Years" soon made way to the "Desperate Years" as Adolph Hitler rose to power in Germany. But even before this, a group of German physicists had formed around the Nobel prize winners Lenard and Stark. This group boldly declared Einstein's theory of relativity to be "Jewish world-bluff." They attempted to dismiss, under the summary heading of "Jewish physics," all studies based upon the data of Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr. In the spring of 1933, the University of Göttingen, the seat of brilliant achievement in years past, became the focal point of Hitler's anti-Jewish policies. Student demonstrations proclaiming the coming of the "new order" became an every-day occurrence. Respected scholars were brutally expelled. Some of the world's foremost physicists such as Max Born, James Franck, Eugene Wigner, Leo Szilard, Edward Teller, and John von Neumann were forced to flee. Attempts were made by "patriotic German" physicists to prevent the expulsion of so many "brilliant" men, but all to no avail. Even well-known Germans such as Heisenberg and Nobel winners von Laue and Planck were unsuccessful in their attempts at mediation. The clearest account of the state of the once-great Göttingen University was given by the mathematician David Hilbert, by that time well advanced in years. About a year after the great purge of Göttingen he was seated at a banquet in the place of honor next to Hitler's new Minister of Education, Rust. Rust was unwary enough to ask: "Is it really true, Professor, that your institute suffered so much from the departure of the Jews and their friends?" Hilbert snapped back, as coolly as ever: "Suffered? No, it didn't suffer, Herr Minister. It just doesn't exist any more!" According to Robert Jungk, in his book "Brighter than a Thousand Suns", he offers us the following: "The brown-shirted students made a particular onslaught against Jewish and half-Jewish undergraduates who had come from Poland or Hungary to study in Germany. These scientists were already victims of the cold anti-Semitism of their native lands, which had denied them admission to universities under the numerus clausus law restricting the number of Jewish university students to a small quota. Now they were sacrificed a second time to racial prejudice. Talented young scientists such as Eugene Wigner, Leo Szilard, John von Neumann, James Franck and Edward Teller were at that time making notable contributions in Göttingen, Hamburg and Berlin to discussions on the topic of atomic physics. Only a few years later they became the most ardent champions of the construction of the atom bomb. The alarm which they felt at the possibility that Hitler might be the first to possess so terrifying a weapon can only be understood when one realizes what abuse and persecution they had to endure from the Nazis in 1932 and 1933"