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# Saving Einstein

WHEN NORFOLK HID A GENIUS

THE DOUBLE LIFE OF  
OLIVER LOCKER-LAMPSON



Stuart McLaren

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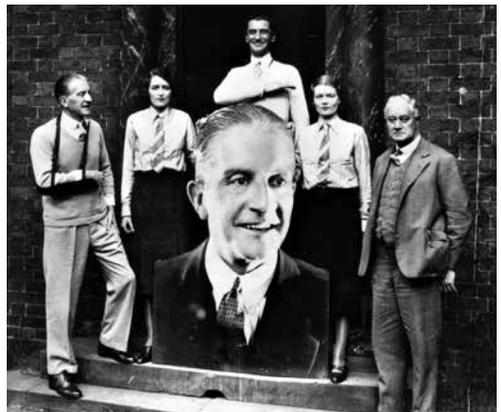
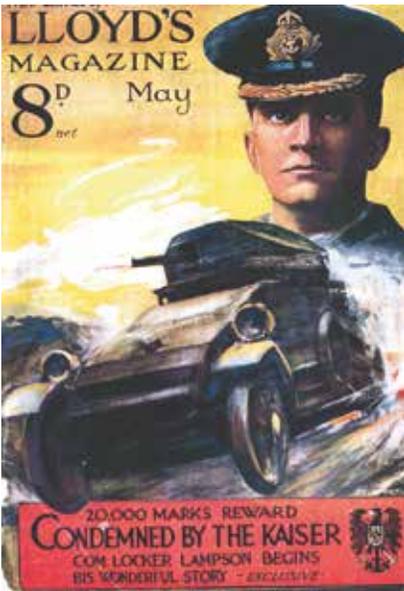
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Einstein on Roughton Heath, September 1933. Left to right: Locker-Lampson, Barbara Goodall, Einstein, Margery Howard, Herbert Eastoe.



Left: Locker-Lampson the WWI hero. Above: Locker-Lampson (left) electioneering with his Blue Shirts, 1931.

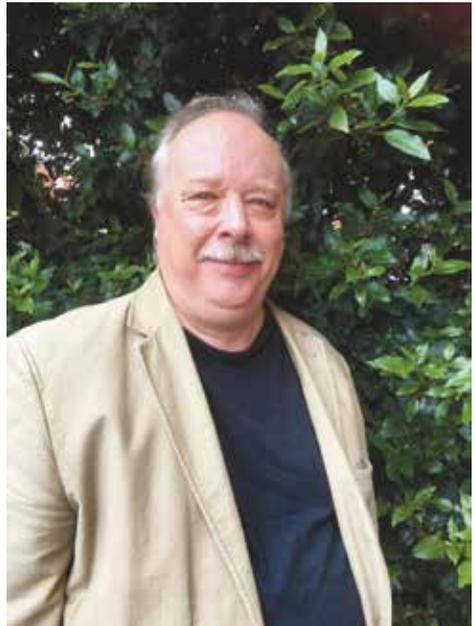
Poppyland Publishing is pleased to announce *Saving Einstein: When Norfolk Hid a Genius. The Double Life of Oliver Locker-Lampson* by Stuart McLaren.

*Saving Einstein* tells the story of the events, politics and personalities behind the month Einstein spent living in a hut at a secret camp on Roughton Heath. It was here where Commander Oliver Stillingfleet Locker-Lampson MP, a larger-than-life character straight out of a Boy's Own adventure yarn, plotted to use Einstein's rescue to awaken the nation to the dangers posed by Hitler and the rise of fascism. The irony is that he had himself only recently led his own fascist movement, the Blue Shirts, and had even been seen as a possible British Führer by the Nazis.

This bizarre interlude in Einstein's life would prove to be the last he would ever spend in Europe. For Commander Locker-Lampson, the encounter would turn him away from the dark allure of totalitarianism. He would help many ordinary Jews escape the Holocaust, which led him to being described by the son of one man he rescued as 'Truly a Righteous Gentile'.

### **About the author**

Born in Kent, Stuart moved to Norwich in 1970 where he worked at Jarrolds before studying for a BA in English at Liverpool University, and an MA in English Renaissance Poetry at York. After ten years working for HMSO Publications he went freelance, in 1997, as a writer and editor. His specialism is local history and has previously published two books on Norwich in the First World War.



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## September Blow Soft

... till the fruit's in the loft (old English proverb)

NEWS of Lessing's murder reached the Villa Savoyarde on 1 September. It is said to have turned Elsa's normally rosy complexion white the moment she heard it. Although he was neither a close friend nor an academic colleague, Einstein valued his work for Jewish causes in Germany, his advocacy for the creation of a Jewish Homeland and his outspoken criticism of extreme nationalistic rhetoric. In 1922 Lessing had published an article ironically titled "On 'Einstein's error'", in which he forensically analysed the flaws in non-scientific critical attacks on the Special and General theories of Relativity, which he noted inevitably began by fundamentally misunderstanding them and then debunked them based on the author's original misconception.<sup>1</sup>

The following day, a Saturday, Einstein received a visit from a woman who would later become legendary in British left-wing circles as the indefatigable supporter of the Jarrow March, a protest by unemployed shipyard workers in north-east England who walked to

London in 1936. Ellen Wilkinson, the child of a Manchester cotton mill worker, was quick-witted, brave, energetic and shrewd. She had been elected Labour MP for Middlesbrough East in 1924 when her physical appearance—diminutive with vivid red hair—and her socialist principles had earned her the nickname the 'Fiery Particle'. Since losing her parliamentary seat in 1931 she had devoted much of her energy to journalism and anti-fascist causes. She was a member of the British branch of the World Committee for the Relief of the Victims of German Fascism, the organisation promoting *The Brown Book of*



*The 'Fiery Particle', Ellen Wilkinson, 1926.*

the *Hitler Terror*, and had herself written a pamphlet for them exposing Nazi terror tactics. She had met victims of their brutality during a number of visits to Germany, was well aware of the type of person they were using to win political power and knew no one who opposed them was safe. In April she had written in the radical weekly magazine *Time and Tide*:

... neither personal eminence nor past public service could save a man if he be a Jew or a Socialist. The life of an Einstein is at the mercy of hysterical lads of eighteen or tough slum gangsters provided with revolvers with the warm approval of Captain Goering...<sup>2</sup>

Following the Reichstag fire in February she had helped the Committee organise an enquiry into the causes of the fire: a direct challenge to the dubious probity of the official investigation, which had put the blame squarely on Jews and communists. Her anti-fascist activities made her an object of Nazi opprobrium—their mouthpieces in the German press dubbing her “the Jew of Jews”.<sup>3</sup>

Wilkinson visited Einstein now ostensibly to offer him the opportunity of resigning from the Committee and having his name removed from its stationery. According to the cover of the British edition of the *Brown Book* published by Victor Gollancz, Einstein was president of the Committee. Einstein never denied this though his position was purely honorary. On the face of it this was an odd offer, given the withdrawal of such a high-profile supporter at this stage would hardly have mollified the Nazis and would undoubtedly have provided them with more ammunition for their anti-Einstein propaganda. Knowing the character of the man, she had presumably calculated it was unlikely he would be willing to withdraw his support. Wilkinson had in fact been commissioned by the Beaverbrook press to write an account of Einstein in exile. She described the scene that confronted her at the Villa Savoyarde in “Einstein the man”, published by the *Daily Express* on 12 September:

Einstein sat and talked to me in his little sitting room, dressed in a pair of old trousers and a well-worn pull-over. We knew his life was threatened. The detectives stood at his gate. He had made his simple will. ... I implored him to resign, to let us take his name off our notepaper. ‘No,’ he said, quietly, ‘They shall not force me to do that. The work your committee has done is good.’ His wife sobbed. ... I realised what that simple ‘No’ might mean. The life of the best brain of the world is at the mercy of the bullet of a fanatic.<sup>4</sup>

Tension at the Villa had been stoked up by an album received anonymously through the post in which photographs of so-called ‘enemies’ of Germany were printed above lists of their alleged crimes against the Fatherland. Under Einstein’s photograph was printed:

Discovered a much-contested theory of relativity. Was greatly honoured by the Jewish Press and the unsuspecting German people. Showed his gratitude by lying

atrocities propaganda against Adolf Hitler abroad. (Not yet hanged.)<sup>5</sup>

It was also about this time an old friend of the Einsteins, the biographer Antonina Vallentin, visited the Villa Savoyarde. In 1931 Einstein had provided the foreword for her biography of his friend Gustav Stresemann, the late Chancellor and Foreign Minister of the Weimar Republic and a joint Nobel Peace Prize winner with Locker-Lampson's old chief, Austen Chamberlain. The official purpose of Vallentin's visit was to bring a message from the French Minister of National Education, Anatole de Monzie, reminding Einstein of his offer of a professorship at the Collège de France in Paris, which he had made in person at Le Coq-sur-Mer in August. Her real mission, however, was to urge him to leave Europe as soon as possible, working, if necessary, on Elsa's anxiety if Einstein proved to be imperturbable. She had done the same at their summer home at Caputh the previous year, passing on a warning by a prominent right-wing politician, General Hans von Seeckt, a former head of the German Army, who had told her she should urge all her Jewish friends, Einstein in particular, to leave Germany as "His life is not safe here any longer".<sup>6</sup> Considering it is now known that General Seeckt had been instrumental in setting up the secret Black *Reichswehr* terrorist corps after the war, charged with eliminating suspected communists and collaborationists in the Occupied territories, his warning could be taken as serious. By the early 1930s the Black *Reichswehr* had been revived by the Brown Shirts and had become more overtly anti-Semitic in its choice of targets under the name the *Fehme*. According to Vallentin, recalling her visit in her biography of Einstein twenty years later, Elsa was by now thoroughly alarmed; her fears leading to sleepless nights, alert to every creaking floorboard and, inevitably, given the stress they were under, to heated arguments in which she begged her husband to at least seek temporary safety in England. "A threatened man lives longer" was his defiant response but she would not be brow-beaten this time—he had to go.

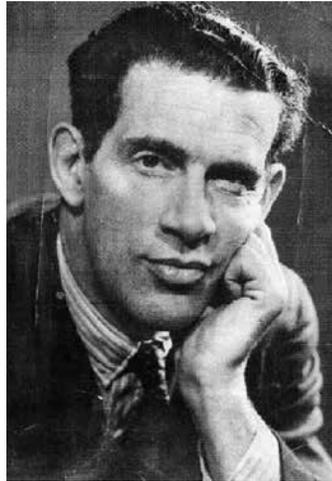
Einstein's hasty flight to England in September 1933 closely paralleled an episode almost ten years earlier, in November 1923, when he had fled over the border into Holland during Hitler's failed Munich Beer Hall Putsch. The similarities are striking, including the fomenting of ultra-nationalist hysteria by the press, mounting political tension, death threats and the assassination of a leading Jewish intellectual. In 1923 it had been the Weimar Republic's Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau, in 1933 it was Professor Theodor Lessing. Einstein's decision to leave Belgium at this time may, however, have had been given another, more private impetus. Given the revelations concerning his private life that have emerged in recent years, the possibility exists that fears for his safety, while primary, were not Elsa's sole concern. After Elsa's death in 1936 Einstein confessed to close friends to having had a number of extramarital affairs. Among

the visitors to the Villa Savoyarde that summer was a married Viennese Jewish friend, Grete Lebach. Nearly sixty years later, Einstein's godson, Micha Battsek, 6 years old in 1933, recalled happy days spent with his parents visiting Einstein at Le Coq-sur-Mer. He particularly remembered Helen Dukas feeding him chocolates and "a very nice-looking lady" who often seemed to be in Einstein's company around the town and at the beach much more than Elsa, whom he hardly remembered.<sup>7</sup> Years later his parents told him that she was Einstein's lover, Grete Lebach. Born Margarete Bachwitz in 1885, she had been a regular visitor to the Einsteins' summer home at Caputh just outside Berlin, bringing boxes of Viennese pastries. There was gossip in the neighbourhood arising from Einstein's unaccompanied outings with 'the Austrian woman', sailing on the nearby Havel Lakes while Elsa was away in Berlin. On one occasion, after Einstein and Lebach had been sailing, a woman's bathing costume, evidently too small to fit Elsa, had been found in the small cabin on his boat and this had been brought to Elsa's attention. It is now accepted by Einstein's biographers that Grete Lebach was one of the more enduring of his lovers. A letter Einstein wrote from Oxford to his stepdaughter Margot in May 1931 all but admitted the affair: "Out of all the women, I am in fact attached only to Mrs. L. who is absolutely harmless and decent."<sup>8</sup> It was apparent to close friends Elsa knew what was going on and her anger sometimes led to rows. Lebach's reappearance on the scene in Belgium at this time may therefore provide another reason for the heated arguments Elsa told Antonina Vallentin about. It was not the end of their relationship. Grete Lebach was photographed sailing with Einstein on his small sail boat *Tinef* in Long Island in 1937, the year after Elsa's death. Following the Nazi's annexation of Austria in May 1938, he tried to arrange for her and her husband to move to America permanently without success. Meanwhile, the Battsek family continued to keep up with her in Austria. According to Micha's parents she died of cancer in Vienna in August 1938 after the Nazi-controlled hospitals there refused to give her medical treatment because she was a Jew.

The various forces now moving behind the scenes to effect Einstein's flight to England are difficult to disentangle. The whole business was characterised by a baffling mixture of secrecy and publicity. At least three parties seem to have been involved: King Albert and the Belgian Government, anxious to avoid an international incident; the Beaverbrook-owned newspapers, the *Daily Express* and *Sunday Express*, looking for a scoop that would put clear blue water between them and the fascist-supporting Harmsworth press; and Locker-Lampson, still vigorously pursuing his own agenda of securing Einstein under his protection in England as a propaganda tool. Stories subsequently arose he had been smuggled out of Belgium on Locker-Lampson's yacht, which had landed him on either the Kent or Norfolk coast. It was also rumoured he had fled to South America, a story possibly planted in the press by the Belgian authorities as a red herring.<sup>9</sup>

Locker-Lampson, perhaps knowing Einstein was about to be moved, seemed to be doing his best to spread misinformation. On Friday 8 September the *Eastern Daily Press*, in which he seems to have been able to place stories at will, included a brief report Einstein was in hiding and Mrs Einstein was “very perturbed” in Blankenberge, which is about 6 miles (9 km) up the coast from Le Coq-sur-Mer. In fact both were still at Le Coq sur-Mer. That morning Irish journalist Patrick Murphy knocked at the front door of the Villa Savoyarde, having shown the gendarmes his credentials. According to an account he published many years later, he had been despatched there by the editor of the *Daily Express*, Beverley Baxter, who had heard of Einstein’s predicament at Le Coq “by some mysterious means”.<sup>10</sup> There can be little doubt the source was Locker-Lampson via Lord Beaverbrook, of whom Baxter said “He is Allah, and the rest of us are his prophets”<sup>11</sup>. Murphy’s report appeared two days later in the *Sunday Express*. The door was opened by Elsa. To begin with she was cautious, telling him the professor was out, which she invariably did with visitors she did not know. “Never have I seen more eloquent terror in a woman’s eyes”, he wrote. Then, after a whispered word from one of the detectives, who had clearly been briefed to verify him, she admitted her husband was at home after all and would see him. A few minutes later Einstein came into the room “smiling like a shy schoolboy”.

Murphy began by asking Einstein about his security at Le Coq-sur-Mer—a gifted linguist, he spoke in German. While agreeing it was an impossible situation, Einstein still seemed reluctant to leave. Everyone had been more than nice, he explained, he had even had a letter from King Albert saying “Belgian soil is honoured by your presence”, telling Murphy that to flee to England now would be discourteous to his host. Losing her temper at this point, Elsa shrugged her shoulders in despair, blurting out: “He does not understand the danger. He does not understand. He is a man and also he is just a boy. Someone must look after him. There are reasons why I cannot leave. Where will he be safe and secret?”<sup>12</sup> Elsa then asked Murphy if he would make a telephone call to “A great friend. A noble friend in England”, having presumably either remembered Locker-Lampson’s offers of refuge, which Einstein had declined



Patrick Murphy, the Irish reporter who brought Einstein to England.

earlier in the year, or been prompted to do so by the well-briefed Murphy, who said he would call him immediately—he presumably had his London or Cromer phone numbers with him—offering to accompany him to England. Elsa then told Einstein: “I think the young man is right. You should go to England with him.” She again made it clear she was unable to go with them. Her reasons for staying have never been explained. Given her fears for his safety, fully justifiable by recent events, it seems strange she was now prepared to let him out of her sight. Nothing seemed to tie her to Belgium at this time. Her daughter Margot’s husband, Marianoff, believed there had been a plot by the Nazis to kidnap both Ilse and Margot in March while they were still in Berlin but both were now safely out of Germany.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, by staying behind Elsa exposed herself to the possibility of being kidnapped and held as a hostage to secure Einstein’s silence or a humiliating retraction of his anti-Nazi statements. A Reuter’s report the following week stated that the armed guard was withdrawn from the Villa Savoyarde after Einstein’s departure but Mrs Einstein was now surrounded by relatives—Ilse and Margot. During their journey to London Einstein told Murphy that his wife had “another worry on her mind almost as great as that which concerns my safety”. The worry was perhaps connected with her own health or more likely the health of Ilse, although there seems to have been no confirmed diagnosis at this date of the cancer that would kill her the following year or of the kidney disease that would hasten Elsa’s death three years later. Additionally, she may have been concerned about relatives still in Germany or simply anxious over the arrangements for returning to America in the autumn.

Late the following afternoon Murphy and Einstein took the little coastal tram to Ostend, where they boarded the Dover ferry, on which a private cabin had been reserved. The reason they didn’t catch the morning ferry might be explained by the fact that in the morning Ostend had been occupied by a party of six hundred French- and German-speaking ‘New Belgians’, including a choir and a full marching band, who were travelling to England to lay a wreath at the Folkestone war memorial in honour of British soldiers who had lost their lives to liberate Belgium in the Great War. The ‘New Belgian’ cantons of Eupen and Malmédy, where the majority were German-speaking, had been ceded to Belgium from Germany in 1920 under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Had the Belgian secret service judged it unwise for Einstein to have been associated, if only accidentally, with such a demonstration? The issue was still highly controversial, even more so since the coming to power of Hitler. A large number of the cantons’ German-speaking population were active revanchists, agitating for reunion with a newly resurgent, nationalistic Germany. It was just the sort of coincidence the Nazi press would have pounced on had it become known.

During the crossing Murphy observed that Einstein had the air of a schoolboy

off on his holidays, recalling Elsa's description of him only the day before. No wonder; he had just been plucked from a seething cauldron of political intrigue and domestic tension, and could now look forward to a few weeks of restful, undisturbed work before leaving for America in October. During the crossing Einstein spoke to Murphy of how bad matters had become in Germany, both for himself and for his fellow Jews. Hitler had, he thought, some sort of inexplicable appeal for the masses but he was not intelligent and would probably not last beyond the following summer. He feared, however, he would be succeeded by someone just as bad. Expressing his faith in Zionism, Einstein was convinced the Jews would never be free of fear until they had their own country. They must organise in order to be able to help themselves. As for himself, he was a fatalist: "If tomorrow I should wake, finish my little work, and then find that I was to be shot—well, what could I do about it?"<sup>14</sup>

Having said his piece, Einstein pulled out some papers from his briefcase and worked on them in silence until they reached Dover. Here Einstein and Murphy boarded the train for London. Murphy noted that once in the carriage Einstein's boyish good humour returned, observing mischievously "English trains are fast, yes? We must be patient, I suppose." His thoughts then turned to Elsa and her anxiety over his safety. Murphy observed that women were often selflessly brave when it came to their own perils but terror-stuck when a loved one was in danger. To this Einstein replied that he didn't know what to say about women, except that even though they took two huge trunks with them when they travelled together, his wife always managed to have a little extra paper parcel with her. Did he perhaps mean this both literally and metaphorically? That with women in general or his wife in particular, there was always a little additional psychological baggage that troubled and confounded his equilibrium?

At Victoria Station a press photographer was waiting. The pictures that appeared in the *Sunday Express* the next day showed Einstein dressed in a dark three-piece woollen suit with a soft wing-collared shirt and loosely knotted tie. Stepping from the train in the early evening he wore a black felt hat and carried a check-lined mackintosh over one arm and a valise in the other hand. Also waiting for him on the platform were Locker-Lampson and his private secretaries, Margery Howard and Barbara Goodall. He had been in Cromer when Murphy's telephone call came through on Friday and he had travelled down to London the following morning. In keeping with the air of secrecy surrounding the trip he had to wait for instructions telling him when and where Einstein would arrive. At some point in the afternoon he received a telegram from Belgium that he would arrive at Victoria Station at about 6 p.m. More than forty years later Margery Howard recalled the scene:

I was too young to know the significance of his visit, and when he did arrive there

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