

Albert Einstein's Long Island Summer

by Chuck Rothman



David Rothman and friend

In the summer of 1939, Albert Einstein spent his summer on Nassau Point, in Peconic, NY on eastern Long Island. My grandfather, David Rothman, was owner of Rothman's Department Store in nearby Southold.

One June day, Einstein came into the store. Of course, my grandfather recognized him at once. He decided, though, to treat him just like any other customer.

"Are you looking for something in particular?" he asked

"Sundials," Einstein said in his thick German accent.

Now, Rothman's has always had a large variety of items -- just about everything from housewares, to fishing tackle and bait, to hardware, to toys, to appliances. But no sundials. Not for sale, anyway. But...

"I do have one in my back yard," my grandfather said.

He led Einstein -- who seems a bit bewildered -- to the back yard, to show him the sundial. "If you need one you can have this."

Einstein took one look and began to laugh. He pointed to his feet. "No. *Sundials*."

Sandals. Those, he had.

As he was ringing up the sale, Einstein heard the classical music playing on the record player. Talking about it, my grandfather mentioned he played the violin.

Einstein lit up. "We must play together some time."

They set a date. As he prepared, my grandfather wasn't sure which music to bring, and finally decided on an assortment from simple to a Bach piece that was the most difficult thing he played. When he arrived at the summer cottage Einstein rented (still referred to as "The Einstein House"), he was welcomed warmly. Einstein looked over the music and chose the Bach.

They began to play. It was obviously quite quickly that my grandfather was out of his league; Einstein was just too good. After a couple of minutes, Einstein set down his violin. "Let's talk instead."

The rest of the evening was spent out on Einstein's front porch, just talking. My grandfather only had grade school education, but was intensely interested in science and philosophy, and the two men found they had some common ground.

After several hours, Einstein's housekeeper came out and scolded my grandfather. "You are keeping Dr. Einstein awake," she said.

"No," Einstein said. "I am keeping *Mr. Rothman* awake."



My grandfather spent a good deal of time that summer with Einstein, talking about all sorts of things. Some highlights:

At one point, Einstein offered to explain relativity to my grandfather. Now my grandfather only had a grade school education, but he also had a love of science. He agreed, but on one condition: that Einstein didn't use any mathematics. Einstein agreed. As he started the explanation, he took out a sheet of paper and began to jot numbers on it. "Remember," my grandfather said. "No mathematics." Einstein said it was only to help him to compose his thoughts and went on. He continued to give the explanation, all the time writing the math on the paper. Finally, he tried to use it. My grandfather told him about their agreement. "But these are so **trivial!**" Einstein said. (I think these were the Lorentz transformation equations, by the way.)



While Einstein was staying in Peconic, the best-known thing he did was when he wrote a letter to President Roosevelt that led to the start of the Manhattan project. The letter was written at the request of Leo Szillard and Eugene Wigner, who drove out from New York to ask Einstein to write it. When Szillard and Wigner arrived, Einstein was on the front porch talking to my grandfather.



Another time Einstein was asked (through my grandfather) to come to a local meeting that was organizing attempts to get refugees out of Germany. The person in charge said that they merely wanted his presence, and my grandfather warned them not to ask him to speak. They agreed.

The day of the meeting, my grandfather went to pick him up. My grandfather wore a suit and tie. Einstein came down to meet him wearing his usual attire: an undershirt and baggy pants tied with a rope. "My, you're looking elegant," he said. Einstein got the point; he went upstairs to change.

Halfway through the meeting, the moderator introduced Einstein and (of course) asked him to give a speech. He gave my grandfather a funny look, but went up to the dais. When it was his turn to speak, he said, "You must organize just as we Jews have organized. Otherwise you will have a big problem." Then he sat down.

After the meeting, a crowd of people congregated around Einstein. After answering a question or two, he whispered to my grandfather, "Get me out of here."



Around this time, Riverside Church in Manhattan planned to put up statues to the eight most famous scientists who ever lived. Einstein, of course, was included. My grandfather asked him how it felt to be immortalized (he was the only living scientist included).

Einstein said, "From now on, and for the rest of my life, I must be very careful not to commit a scandal."



At the time, Einstein was working on developing his Unified Field Theory. He described it as an attempt to work out a relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm. My grandfather pointed out the parallel between the planets in their orbits and electrons in theirs. Einstein said, "I not interested so much in the particles as I am in the spaces between them."



Once, Einstein describing his leaving Germany: One night, Storm Troopers came to his house and took him and his wife outside, then went in to search for weapons. A little while later, they returned with a set of carving knives. "See?" they said. "Weapons." Then they smashed Einstein's sailboat. He said to his wife, "Look good at this place, for you will not see it again." They left the country that night. "You know," Einstein said, "if they had caught me, they would have killed me."



Einstein the Sailor

One of Einstein's favorite form of recreation was sailing on his boat "Tinef" (Yiddish for "junk"). It was small, maybe about 15 feet or so, and very unprepossessing.

One day he decided to sail to visit my grandfather. That was a fairly long trip. My grandfather got a call in the morning that Einstein was on his way.

The afternoon dragged on; no sign of Einstein. My grandfather began to be worried: Einstein couldn't swim. The sun was setting and still no word. Finally, he got a call from a local policeman, saying that there was this weird-looking guy who needed a haircut wandering the beach and asking for David Rothman.

(One time, Einstein actually fell into the water and had to be rescued by a teenager who had been passing by and heard his calls for help. The kid left and didn't even tell his name.)



Einstein and my grandfather met for the last time in 1946, with Einstein saying, "I have had the most wonderful summers of my entire life, and this I owe to your initiative." And every year, my grandfather sent him a pair of sandals.