

Tracing Back the Sources of Albert Einstein's Political Convictions: The Movement for Ethical Culture

One hundred years ago, in October 1892, the German Society for Ethical Culture was founded. Ninety-nine years ago, Gustav Maier was to deliver a speech at the first national meeting of the GSEC at Eisenach, from August, the 5th, to August, the 15th, 1893. I will dedicate my paper to that man Maier and to the centenary of the foundation of a society, which is known today only to a small group of historians – actually a very small group, as I learned during my research.

1. A gap in Einstein biographical research

Much is known about Einstein's political activities during the twenties¹, but only little about the development of his convictions. Actually, he was shocked into political activity by the outbreak of the First World War, when he signed Georg Nicolai's counter-manifesto to the notorious „Aufruf an die Kulturwelt“.² This sudden evidence of courageous pacifism is usually explained by a deeply rooted – instinctive³ or even inborn – distain for any constraint, any „Soldaterei“, any Prussian military spirit. As earlier manifestations, biographers tend to cite two well-known items. As a child (perhaps of four or five years) young Albertle was frightened by military marching with drums and pipes through the streets of Munich, and expressed his wish, never to become a soldier.⁴ Years later, his fear of the military service was one of the reasons for leaving Germany.⁵ Facts, which do not fit into this short-cut interpretation are usually omitted, e. g. that Einstein was in his Swiss years not disinclined to do military service. According to Seelig he was “nearly injured“, when he received the verdict of the examination board, that he was only qualified for „Platzdienst“, i. e. service at the barracks.⁶

Views, sentiments, convictions may change from childhood through puberty to early adulthood. Concerning Einstein this is documented at least for his religious feelings.⁷

¹ Comp. Otto Nathan / Heinz Norden (eds.): Albert Einstein. Über den Frieden. Weltordnung oder Weltuntergang?, Bern 1975; Armin Hermann: Einstein in Berlin, in: Jahrbuch preußischer Kulturbesitz 1970, p. 90-114; Günther Pflug: Albert Einstein als Publizist 1919 - 1933, Frankfurt/M. 1981; Fritz Stern: Der Traum vom Frieden und die Versuchung der Macht, Berlin 1988, chapter „Einsteins Deutschland“

² Nathan/Norden, l. c. p. 21ff

³ E.g. by Hoffmann, cf. Banesh Hoffmann: Albert Einstein. Schöpfer und Rebell, Dietikon-Zürich 1976, p. 25

⁴ Philipp Frank: Einstein. Sein Leben und seine Zeit, München etc. 1949, p. 21

⁵ Maja Einstein: Albert Einstein - Beitrag für sein Lebensbild, in: John Stachel (ed.): The Collected Papers of Albert Einstein. Vol. 1. The Early Years 1879 - 1902, Princeton 1987 (in the following quoted as CP1), p. lxiii

⁶ Carl Seelig: Albert Einstein. Leben und Werk eines Genies unserer Zeit, Zürich 1960, p. 82, comp. CP1, p. 277f

⁷ Maja Einstein, l. c. p. lixf

Even good biographies contain only some glimpses of Einstein's background – assimilated jewry –, some memories of his time at the Munich Luitpold Gymnasium. Explanation of his mental development sticks mainly to an anecdotal plane. But quite generally, it is very difficult to assess the real importance of anecdotal material, e. g. of the marching soldiers incident. Family “lore“ tends to stylizations, it exaggerates, stresses early hints of a later career. It purports a kind of mythological view, to which some biographers are very susceptible.

At what age have Einstein's political convictions been shaped? In early childhood or during his teenage years? Developmental psychology puts much emphasis on the role that is played by puberty and early adulthood for the formation of social competence and political convictions.

Who are in that age the key persons, which influenced Einstein? His father? Uncle Jacob? Uncle Cäsar? The Einstein-Koch family as a whole? Jost Winteler? What is the relative importance of these influences?

Perhaps, these questions are peripheral for Einstein, the philosopher-scientist, who is and should be, the primary concern of Einstein biographies and Einstein research. But for understanding Einstein the man, these questions are pertinent.

To my best knowledge, there is up to now no thorough study of the development of Einstein's political convictions, of relevant influences. Frank⁸ gives the broad picture of the Jewish background and the political and intellectual environment in Imperial Germany. Seelig⁹ has elaborated the importance of Jost Winteler. Useful insights into Einstein family life and impacts of education and literature are provided by the notes of Einstein's sister Maja¹⁰. Pyenson¹¹ tries to analyse mostly Einstein's science education. Nathan and Norden¹² do not intend any interpretation of the origin of Einstein's views. Hoffman¹³ gives a comprehensive, but sometimes rather sketchy picture. Clarke¹⁴, sometimes very circumstantial, devotes only a short chapter to Einstein's formative period. Pais, in his paradigmatic scientific biography¹⁵ is cutting down personal items into few very informative paragraphs. Taking all biographies together, David Cassidy's conclusion: “Einstein the living, thinking, working man is still missing.“¹⁶ is as true in 1992 as it was in 1979.

One, but perhaps not the decisive reason is the scarcity of material about Einstein's youth. But as in physics, where there is lack of data, a good hypothesis may compensate part of it. In the following I will try to formulate on a rather speculative level such a hypothesis.¹⁷

⁸ Frank, l. c. p. 15ff

⁹ Carl Seelig: Albert Einstein. Leben und Werk eines Genies unserer Zeit, Zürich 1960

¹⁰ Maja Einstein, l. c.

¹¹ Lewis Pyenson: The Young Einstein: the Advent of Relativity, Bristol etc. 1985; see also Pyenson: Einstein's Education: Mathematics and the Laws of Nature. In: ISIS 71(1980)/258, 399-425

¹² Nathan / Norden, l. c.

¹³ Hoffmann, l. c.

¹⁴ Ronald W. Clarke: Albert Einstein. Leben und Werk, München 1984

¹⁵ Abraham Pais: „Subtle is the Lord...“: the Science and the Life of Albert Einstein, New York 1982

¹⁶ David C. Cassidy: Biographies of Einstein. In: H. Nelkowski et al. (eds.): Einstein Symposium Berlin, Berlin etc. 1979, p. 497

lowing I will try to formulate on a rather speculative level such a hypothesis.¹⁷

Albert Einstein was influenced during his most formative years to a great extent by a circle of persons who belonged to the Ethical movement.

Two lines for corroboration (not yet proof) are open to us: 1st to establish biographical connections between Einstein and the Ethical movement, 2nd a comparison of Einsteins convictions with the aims of the Ethical movement.

2. Gustav Maier

On the second page of his biography, Carl Seelig introduces Maier as one of the founders of the Swiss Society of Ethical Culture.¹⁸ Seelig takes this information from a letter from Einstein, who introduced Maier in the same way. Coming from Italy to Zurich, “I was advised there by an old friend of my father, a Mr. Gustav Maier, who was the chairman of a society for ethical culture at that place...”¹⁹

Gustav Maier, born in 1844, is one of the key persons in Einstein's youth. As a son of a merchant he took over his father's business at Ulm, where he got friends with Einstein's father Hermann. Later, he became director of the Frankfurt branch of the new German Reichsbank. Against the upsurge of nationalist feelings he helped to found the Frankfurt Peace Union in 1886 – not the move one would expect from a high-ranking banker. At the beginning of the 1890s he withdrew from business, moved to Switzerland and devoted his life to writing on social, economic, and educational issues, which did not prevent him to accept for the second time the position of a bank director and the “presidency“ of a department store.²⁰

Maier was the man, who took care of Albert, when he – at the age of 16 – came from Italy to Switzerland. Maier persuaded Albin Herzog, the rector of the Swiss Polytechnical School, to permit Albert, despite his lack of age, to take the entrance examination. And when Albert was not admitted to the Polytechnical School, Maier found a place for him at Aarau Cantonal School.²¹ As a student Einstein often returned to the home of Maier²², expecting – as I suppose – last not least a good dinner.

Einstein in his later years mentions in the first place Maier's affiliation to the Ethical movement. I regard this as a strong indication, that young Einstein was well aware of this fact too. One could

¹⁷ I am obliged to Werner G. Zimmermann, the former head of the Zürich Town Archive, for hinting at the Ethical movement (personal communication and his article „Albert Einstein in Zürich“, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* March 10/11, 1979, p. 51).

¹⁸ Carl Seelig: *Albert Einstein und die Schweiz*, Zürich etc. 1952, p. 11. The mentioned paragraph has been retained in the revised editions.

¹⁹ Einstein to Seelig, March 26, 1952. Archive of the ETH Zurich HS 304:12.

²⁰ Cf. CP1 p. 384 for a short biography of Maier, Seelig p. 6

²¹ CP1 pp. 10-13 give the details of Maier's attempts to put Einstein in the Polytechnical School.

²² cf. Einstein to Maier, 1922, first published in „Gelegentliches von Albert Einstein. Zum fünfzigsten Geburtstag 14. März 1929 dargebracht von der Soncino-Gesellschaft der Freunde des Jüdischen Buches zu Berlin“, Berlin 1929, p. 30f

well imagine, that Maier talked about his activities and that young Einstein was influenced, perhaps impressed by Maier, the unconventional, versatile, humorous man, who had – last not least – a natural rhetorical endowment²³.

As peace activist and free-mason²⁴ Maier joined the German Society for Ethical Culture either at its foundation in 1892 or shortly afterwards, and became soon a member of the board. In 1893 he edited already the proceedings of the Eisenach meeting of the GSEC, where he spoke about the teachings of history: what the GSEC could learn on an organisational plane from history, and esp. from freemasonry.²⁵ In 1894, he travelled in Aegypt and Lebanon. Returning to Europe, he spent some time at Berlin, where he came to crosses with Berlin society. The German Emperor, Wilhelm II, had just written and composed a “Song of Aegir“. On the occasion of a family party, Maier parodied the Emperor with a song (to the Emperor's melody) “To the Lord of Rain in the Tiergarten“. In a short toast he threw a glimpse forty years into the future, where Germany is a republic, August Bebel and Eugen Richter share the chair of the German chancellor, and Wilhelm II is president of the United States of Europe – with the right to declare himself at any moment dictator.²⁶ The audience was shocked about the daring performance.

In the following years Maier published lots of articles in the weekly journal of the GSEC „Ethische Kultur“. Their topics include the controversy over working hours, “Why Ethics?“, freemasonry, Charles Fourier and socialism, sketches from Maier's travels, reviews of books on anarchy, on the social question, on welfare institutions. He polemises against conservative free-mason lodges employing a kind of Mandeville's fable of the bees. He depicts antisemitism as an offspring of anti-capitalism, fostered by wrong governmental decisions. He criticises exaggerated promotorism and especially trusts. “The Allgemeine Elektrizitäts Gesellschaft at Berlin, a hybrid between industrial and financial activity, which I do not at all regard with sympathy, wants to supply the town of Genua on a large scale with electricity.“²⁷ – Hermann Einstein, constructing small power stations and networks in upper Italy, could have expressed his fears of the superior competitor in a like manner.²⁸

In April 1895 Maier moves to Zurich, just some months before young Albert needs his help. Maier immediately promotes the formation of a Swiss branch of the Ethical Society, perhaps with the idea, that Switzerland could be an excellent seat of a secretariat of an international union of ethical organizations – in analogy to the Red Cross or the World Postal Union²⁹. On January 31, 1896,

²³ Compare e. g. the journal *Ethische Kultur* no. 45/1894, p. 380 for Maier's „extremely impressive“ way of expressing his thoughts.

²⁴ Concluded from Maier's contributions to the free-mason journal *Bauhütte*, cf. *Ethische Kultur* no. 30/1895, p. 234

²⁵ G. Maier (ed.): *Die Eisenacher Zusammenkunft zur Förderung und Ausbreitung der ethischen Bewegung*, Berlin 1894

²⁶ Gustav Maier: *Siebzig Jahre politischer Erinnerungen und Gedanken*. Unpublished manuscript, 1918, in possession of Dr. Beatrice Anner-Maier, Conignon/GE, copy at the Town Archive Zurich

²⁷ *Ethische Kultur*, volumes of 1894 to 1896, quotation from no. 23/1896, p. 180

²⁸ Comp. CP1, p. liif, and Lewis Pyenson: *Audacious Enterprise. The Einsteins and electrotechnology in the late nineteenth-century Munich*, in: *Historical Studies in the Physical Sciences* 12(1982), p. 373-392

²⁹ This idea was expressed by Wilhelm Foerster at the Eisenach meeting; cf. G. Maier (ed.): *Die Eisenacher Zusammenkunft...*, p. 11f.

seventy interested persons meet, a working committee is formed to which Maier belongs. On the second meeting in March Maier is elected to the first directing board. Nearly on a par, the board consists of three women and four men³⁰, among them besides Maier the parson Paul Pflüger, who edits a series of socialistic propaganda writings „sozialwissenschaftliche Volksbibliothek“³¹, the writer and professor for German language and literature at Zurich Industrial School Otto Haggemacher (1843 - 1918)³², and Dr. Luise Dodel (1863 - ?), a botanist, who stressed in an preparational meeting in December 1895 the importance of the Ethical movement for women, struggling for equal rights.³³ Her husband, the botanist Prof. Arnold Dodel (1843 - 1908) of Zurich University participated in this meeting, but did not become member of the board. He was known among his colleagues as the first socialist in the teaching staff and an extreme partisan of darwinism. He gained much fame by his comparison of “traditional and newer“ histories of creation „Moses oder Darwin?“ , which was quite controversially received.³⁴

Another member of the board is to be mentioned: Prof. Auguste Forel (1848 - 1931), director of the Burghölzli Clinic in Zurich, a psychiatrist, brain anatomist – and social democrat, who liked to demonstrate at his syphilitic and alcohol-addict patients the causes and effects of degeneration in man. He had much influence on Alfred Ploetz, the founder of „Rassenhygiene“, racial hygiene – a German version of eugenics.³⁵ Five years later, in 1901, Einstein and Mileva Maric read – for what reasons ever – Forel's monograph on hypnotism. The idea of suspending the will of a person did not please Mileva, nor Albert.³⁶

On April 24, 1896 the Swiss Society for Ethical Culture meets again. Maier reports on the principles of the Ethical movement. “He emphasized, that many aims of the ethical movement, e. g. moral education without confessional fixation and the absolute equality of all parties, have been attained in many Swiss cantones; but it seems now necessary to give safe asylum not so much to persons as to the German spirit, while in its home country so much reactionary cravings come to light. This idea was vividly supported especially by Prof. Winteler (Aarau).“³⁷

At that time Albert boards already with the Winteler family. In the next years, visiting Maier's home, student Einstein meets e. g. the philosopher and germanist Robert Saitschik (1868 - 1926), to whose lectures on the Work and Weltanschauung of Goethe he inscribes in his second semester.³⁸

³⁰ *Ethische Kultur*, no. 2/1896 p. 15f, no. 9/1896 p. 72, no. 13/1896, p. 103f

³¹ *Ethische Kultur* no. 22/1898, p. 174

³² *Historisch-biographisches Lexikon der Schweiz*, edition of 1927, entry on the Haggemacher family

³³ *Bürger-Etat der Stadt Zürich*; *Ethische Kultur* no. 2/1896, p. 16

³⁴ *Comp. Die Universität Zürich 1833 - 1933 und ihre Vorläufer*, Zürich 1938, p. 696ff, and Arnold Dodel: *Moses oder Darwin? Eine Schulfrage*. Allen Freunden der Wahrheit zum Nachdenken vorgelegt. Zürich 1890

³⁵ Cf. Ludger Weiß (ed.): *Die Träume der Genetiker. Gentechnische Utopien von sozialem Fortschritt*, Nördlingen 1989, p. 93

³⁶ August Forel: *Der Hypnotismus. Seine psycho-physiologische, medicinische, strafrechtliche Bedeutung und Handhabung*, 2nd, rev. ed., Stuttgart 1891; for its reception by Einstein and Maric, see CP1, p. 317f

³⁷ *Ethische Kultur* no. 19/1896, p. 152

³⁸ Saitschik recalls meeting Einstein at Maier's home in a letter to Seelig, Archive of the ETH, HS 304:963; the curriculum is given in CP1, p. 363.

Perhaps without being a member of the SSEC, Robert Saitschik, still at the beginning of his academic career, is acquainted with Maier and involved in Ethical movement matters. As the SSEC organises end of August, beginning of September 1896 an international meeting of the Ethical Union, which is attended even by the founder of the movement, Felix Adler (see below), Saitschik is reading on the reform of high school education at a series of “ethical social-science“ lectures, held in conjunction with the meeting.³⁹ Einstein's later friend, the professor of criminal law Emil Zürcher (1850-1926) also lectured in a SSEC course.⁴⁰

Immediately after the meeting, Maier spends – accompanied by Felix Adler – a short holiday at Menaggio at Lake Como. They are visited by Saitschik. Maier claims later, that their discussion about the educational value of biographies inspired Saitschik to write a book on the character of Goethe, one of the first of his biographical studies on genius and character.⁴¹

In 1899 Maier has to abolish his small newspaper „Ethische Correspondenz“, which was distributed as a supplement to the „Schweizerische Blätter für Wirtschafts- und Sozialpolitik“. He continued writing articles and lecturing, e. g. about “The most appropriate form of organisation of consumer co-operatives“, in which he prophesies future large-scale consumers' halls – supermarkets. He issues a monthly „Ethische Rundschau“⁴². In 1898 he publishes the first edition of his main oeuvre “Social Movements and Theories“.⁴³

Without being a social democrat, Maier had a clear comprehension of the needs of the workers, the so-called social question. Cutting down working hours, giving everybody a chance for education, pensions, assurance and industrial safety were important issues for him. Starting with 1900 he became an activist of the Zurich Peace Union⁴⁴, he aimed at overcoming nationalist prejudices, and at fostering religious tolerance.

Whereas Jost Winteler's influence on Einstein has been studied to some extent by Seelig and especially by Holenstein⁴⁵ – there are published recollections by Winteler⁴⁶ and some articles about him⁴⁷ – the influence of Gustav Maier on young Einstein remains unfathomed.

In 1922, Maier and his wife celebrate the golden anniversary of their wedding. Einstein congratulates him: “You were dear friends to my parents in Ulm, when the stork was just taking me from his inexhaustible store-room. You have given me a caring helpful hand, when I arrived in Zurich in

³⁹ The programme of the course is given in *Ethische Kultur*, no. 29/1896, p. 231f; about Saitschik cf. Rainer-Friedemann Edel (ed.): *Ein Weiser lebt unter uns*, Marburg 1958.

⁴⁰ Zimmermann, *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, l. c.

⁴¹ *Ethische Kultur* no. 22/1898, p. 174. The book is Robert Saitschik: *Goethes Charakter - Eine Seelenschilderung*, Stuttgart 1898

⁴² All information from *Ethische Kultur* no. 4/1899, p. 28; no. 22/1899, p. 176; no. 21/1900, p. 167

⁴³ G. Maier: *Soziale Bewegungen und Theorien bis zur modernen Arbeiterbewegung*, Leipzig 1898 et passim (nine editions)

⁴⁴ CP1 p. 384

⁴⁵ Seelig, l. c.; Elmar Holenstein: *Albert Einsteins Hausvater in Aarau: der Linguist Jost Winteler*, in: *Schweizer Monatshefte für Politik, Wirtschaft, Kultur*, 59(1979)/3, p. 221-233

⁴⁶ Jost Winteler: *Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben*, in: *Wissen und Leben* 17 (1916/17), 525

⁴⁷ E. g. Hans Rudolf Hilty: *Jost Winteler - nie gehört*, in: *Tagesanzeiger Zürich*, Aug. 16, 1977, p. 17

autumn 1895 and failed the examination. Your hospital home was always open to me during my studies, even when I came down from the Ütliberg with mud at my boots...“⁴⁸

3. Parallels: The issues of the Ethical movement and Einstein's political convictions

The Ethical movement is of American origin. It grew out of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, but had been given a broad humanistic impetus by the lecturer and scholar Felix Adler (1851-1933), who founded in 1876 the Society for Ethical Culture in New York. His goal was to enlighten society and to better mankind: “So live as to evoke the best in others and therefore in yourself“⁴⁹. Adler's aspirations – an “ethical“ life without confessional fixation and a society based on moral authority not authoritarian power – met fertile soil in post-„Kulturkampf“ Germany.⁵⁰ Geheimrat Prof. Wilhelm Julius Foerster (1832-1921), director of the Berlin observatory, became its main promotor. In his speech at the foundation meeting of the GSEC in October 1892 he puts the Ethical movement in direct contrast to the ruling vulgar social philosophy of his days: its aim is to overcome the struggle for life between human beings and its detrimental impacts on nations, people and even individual passions and cravings, and to promote human perfection.⁵¹ It is no accident, that he and five other leading members of the GSEC helped to establish the much more explicit and political German Peace Society one month later.⁵² Georg von Gizycki, co-founder of the GSEC, called war mankind's “most serious infantile disease“ and observed that “wars will certainly be made eternally impossible once we attain a higher level of civilization.“⁵³ This faith into the progress of mankind easily combined with faith into science, which brought the Ethical movement into close touch with positivist aspirations: the life of society has to be governed by scientific principles.⁵⁴ Through personal links and political aims, the GSEC belonged to the broad stream of reform movements in Imperial Germany. It dissolved later – at least partly – into the Monist movement (Monistenbund) of Ernst Haeckel.

In 1893 Gustav Maier lists the following goals of the GSEC⁵⁵:

⁴⁸ Einstein to G. Maier, 1922

⁴⁹ Encyclopedia Americana, entry on „Ethical Culture“

⁵⁰ Comp. Hermann Lübke: Politische Philosophie in Deutschland. Studien zu ihrer Geschichte, Basel / Stuttgart 1963, p. 146

⁵¹ Wilhelm Foerster: Rede gehalten bei Begründung der deutschen Gesellschaft für ethische Kultur, in: Wilhelm Foerster: Wissenschaftliche Erkenntnis und sittliche Freiheit. Sammlung von Vorträgen und Abhandlungen (Vierte Folge), Berlin 1896, p. 144 - 162

⁵² Friedrich-Karl Scheer: Die Deutsche Friedensgesellschaft: (1892-1933), Frankfurt/M. 1981, p. 60

⁵³ Roger Chickering: Imperial Germany and a World Without War. The Peace Movement and German Society, 1892-1914, Princeton 1975, p. 126

⁵⁴ Comp. Wilhelm Foerster's opening of the Eisenach meeting, G. Maier (ed.): Die Eisenacher Zusammenkunft..., I. c., p. 3f

⁵⁵ G. Maier: „Die Organisation der Ethischen Bewegung gemäss den Lehren der Geschichte, unter besonderem Bezug auf die Freimaurerei. „, Speech, given on August 7, 1893, at the Eisenach Meeting of the GSEC. Published in: G. Maier (ed.) „Die Eisenacher Zusammenkunft...“ I.c., p. 17 - 48

- universal education, aimed not at the formation of disciplinary experts, but at educating human personalities
- universal education in a second sense: to give everybody a chance to acquire knowledge (including adult education, evening classes for workers etc.)
- the necessity and ethical utility of a certain cultus for the community and the family (as a kind of non-dogmatic spiritual recreation; “cult of the natural, of truth and beauty“⁵⁶)
- equal rights for women (Frauenfrage)
- peace and international understanding (Friedensfrage)
- not to meddle into party affairs.

In one phrase: “We got to go ahead with it, return to classical antiquity, unearth the unrealized ideals of the great ethicist Schiller!“⁵⁷

With its blue-eyed ideals and its abstention to take sides in party struggles, the GSEC had a difficult standing as Foerster and Maier experienced soon⁵⁸. For the social-democrats the GSEC was a bourgeois enterprise, which could divert forces from workers' movement. Conservative circles regarded the adherents of the GSEC as disguised socialists. The churches disliked the idea of faith without confession. Nationalists despised their pacifist ideals, freethinkers thought “ethicists“ half-hearted. His Majesty The Emperor cut them, cut even Foerster, who once taught him the secrets of the sky.⁵⁹ Imperial disgrace had good reasons. In 1895 Foerster's son Friedrich Wilhelm Foerster (1869 - 1966), who edited the journal „Ethische Kultur“, dared to criticize the “Sedan Speech“ of Wilhelm II., which was aimed against the social-democrats. The issue was confiscated, although only for a short period; Friedrich Foerster accused of lèse-majesté and sentenced to three month confinement in a fortress.⁶⁰ After release in 1896, Friedrich Foerster moved to Zurich, where he became secretary general of the “International Ethical Union“⁶¹ and made friends with Robert Saitschik.⁶² In 1899 he converted to Catholicism and withdraw from the Ethical movement. He became later one of the leading German pacifists and a sympathizer of the „Bund Neues Vaterland“⁶³. In later years he recalls having met Einstein only after the First World War,⁶⁴ which seems implausible. It is much more probable, that he simply did not take notice of Einstein, neither of the student, nor of the professor of physics, who became his colleague in 1909. Einstein, on the contrary, knew the Privatdozent Foerster, who lectured in ethics. One of their common students, Hans Tanner, was – as Einstein puts it – “so fascinated by Foerster's course of lectures, that he was of no great use for any other thing.“⁶⁵

⁵⁶ G. Maier, l. c. p. 35

⁵⁷ G. Maier, l. c. p. 36

⁵⁸ Comp. G. Maier, l. c. p.47

⁵⁹ G. Maier, Siebzig Jahre politischer Erinnerungen, l. c. p. 40f

⁶⁰ Ethische Kultur, no. 37/1895, p. 289f; no. 49/1895, p. 388ff

⁶¹ Bruno Hipler (ed.): Friedrich Wilhelm Foerster: Manifest für den Frieden. Eine Auswahl aus seinen Schriften (1893-1933), Paderborn 1988, p. 195

⁶² Saitschik to Seelig, April 17, 1952, Archive of the ETH, HS 304:963; R.-F. Edel, l.c., p. 10

⁶³ Comp. e. g. Pierre Grappin: Le Bund Neues Vaterland (1914-1916). Ses rapports avec Romain Rolland, Lyon / Paris 1952

⁶⁴ Friedrich Foerster to Seelig, April 3, 1953, Archive of the ETH, HS 304:634

⁶⁵ Einstein to Seelig, August 1, 1952, Archive of the ETH, HS 304:20

Perhaps for this reason, Einstein called Friedrich Foerster in a letter to Grossmann a “questionable educationist”.⁶⁶

Despite its active members, the GSEC had no great direct impact on German home affairs. For some time it helped to integrate different reformist circles, but it lacked a practical, political programme. It had somewhat of a coherent political philosophy, not much more, despite minor differences between Wilhelm Foerster and Maier on some questions. But if we elaborate a programmatic nucleus, we find lots of parallels between the aims of the GSEC and Einstein's political convictions at the beginning of his political activities⁶⁷:

- disapprobation of war, of chauvinism and of the militarization of Wilhelminian society
- stress on education (Einstein was to give lectures at evening classes)
- stress on moral values (the ideals of German classical literature and some German philosophers)
- rejection of intolerance (especially religious one)
- belief in science
- and a certain kind of religiosity beyond all traditional confessions (Einstein was in his own words a “religious infidel”).

There are gradual differences: despite occasional cooperation with social-democrats, ethicists would never proclaim themselves socialists, as Einstein did. In later years, Einstein would stress other issues, esp. after his contact with Zionism. Perhaps there is even a shift from an ethics of conviction (Gesinnungsethik) to an ethics of responsibility (Verantwortungsethik) as Herbert Strauss supposes.⁶⁸

As most of the German peace movement, the GSEC was surprised and disabled by the outbreak of the First World War. Only a small group of persons resisted the nationalistic uprise of summer and autumn 1914. When Nicolai⁶⁹ looked for support for his counter-manifesto „Aufruf an die Europäer“, he could engage besides Einstein and a certain Otto Buek only Wilhelm Foerster. In some way, a circle closes here.

During his Princeton years, Einstein sympathized with the American Ethical movement. His address to the Society for Ethical Culture on January 6, 1951 “On the Necessity of Ethical Culture“ has even been included into „Mein Weltbild“ by Carl Seelig.⁷⁰

Einstein “has been a sponsor of some of our work with young people,“ Algernoon Black of “The Society for Ethical Culture“ informed Carl Seelig⁷¹, “and (he) was generous enough to send us

⁶⁶ Seelig: Albert Einstein und die Schweiz, p. 103

⁶⁷ A source, albeit a very journalistic one, to Einstein's opinions during the First World War is Alexander Moszkowski: Albert Einstein. Einblicke in seine Gedankenwelt, Berlin 1920.

⁶⁸ Herbert A. Strauss: Albert Einstein - Gedanken zu seiner politischen Entwicklung in Deutschland, in: Martin Stöhr (ed.): Von der Verführbarkeit der Naturwissenschaft, Frankfurt/M. 1986 (This paper contains some minor factual errors.)

⁶⁹ For Nicolai's relation to Einstein comp. Bernard vom Brocke: Wissenschaft versus Militarismus: Nicolai, Einstein und die „Biologie des Krieges“, in: Jahrbuch des italienisch-deutschen historischen Instituts in Trient X (1984), Bologna 1985, p. 405 - 508

⁷⁰ Carl Seelig (ed.): A. Einstein: Mein Weltbild, new, enlarged edition, Zürich 1953

⁷¹ A. Black to Carl Seelig, July 17, 1953, Archive of the ETH, HS 304:200

a letter on the occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the Ethical Society commending us for our stress on a faith in man.“

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Final note

This paper was written in 1992. I have changed nothing, despite some more recent Einstein biographical research (e. g. in connection with the next volumes of the *Collected Papers of Albert Einstein*). To my knowledge, these more recent publications do not provide more specific insights into the relation of Einstein to the GSEC.

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