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Albert Einstein at School

Patrick Pringle

Albert Einstein (1879–1955) is regarded as the greatest physicist since Newton. In the following extract from *The Young Einstein*, the well-known biographer, Patrick Pringle, describes the circumstances which led to Albert Einstein's expulsion from a German school.

"IN what year, Einstein," asked the history teacher, "did the Prussians defeat the French at Waterloo?"

"I don't know, sir,"

"Why don't you know? You've been told it often enough."

"I must have forgotten."

"Did you ever try to learn?" asked Mr Braun.

"No, sir," Albert replied with his usual unthinking honesty.

"Why not?"

"I can't see any point in learning dates. One can always look them up in a book."

Mr Braun was speechless for a few moments.

"You amaze me, Einstein," he said at last. "Don't you realise that one can always look most things up in books? That applies to all the facts you learn at school."

"Yes, sir."

"Then I suppose you don't see any point in learning facts."

"Frankly, sir, I don't," said Albert.

"Then you don't believe in education at all?"

"Oh, yes, sir, I do. I don't think learning facts is education."



“In that case,” said the history teacher with heavy sarcasm, “perhaps you will be so kind as to tell the class the Einstein theory of education.”

Albert flushed.

“I think it’s not facts that matter, but ideas,” he said. “I don’t see the point in learning the dates of battles, or even which of the armies killed more men. I’d be more interested in learning why those soldiers were trying to kill each other.”

“That’s enough,” Mr Braun’s eyes were cold and cruel. “We don’t want a lecture from you, Einstein. You will stay in for an extra period today, although I don’t imagine it will do you much good. It won’t do the school any good, either. You are a disgrace. I don’t know why you continue to come.”

“It’s not my wish, sir,” Albert pointed out.

“Then you are an ungrateful boy and ought to be ashamed of yourself. I suggest you ask your father to take you away.”

Albert felt miserable when he left school that afternoon; not that it had been a bad day—most days were bad now, anyway—but because he had to go back to the hateful place the next morning. He only wished his father would take him away, but there was no point in even asking. He knew what the answer would be: he would have to stay until he had taken his diploma.

Going back to his lodgings did not cheer him up. His father had so little money to spare that Albert had been found a room in one of the poorest quarters of Munich. He did not mind the bad food and lack of comfort, or even the dirt and squalor, but he hated the atmosphere of slum violence. His landlady beat her children regularly, and every Saturday her husband came drunk and beat her.

“But at least you have a room of your own, which is more than I can say,” said Yuri when he called round in the evening.

“At least you live among civilised human beings, even if they are all poor students,” said Albert.

“They are not all civilised,” Yuri replied. “Did you not hear that one of them was killed last week in a duel?”

“And what happens to the one who killed him?”

“Nothing, of course. He is even proud of it. His only worry is that the authorities have told him not to fight any more duels. He’s upset about this because he hasn’t a single scar on his face to wear for the rest of his life as a badge of honour.”

“Ugh!” exclaimed Albert. “And these are the students.”

“Well, you’ll be a student one day,” said Yuri.



“I doubt it,” said Albert glumly. “I don’t think I’ll ever pass the exams for the school diploma.”

He told his cousin Elsa the same next time she came to Munich. Normally she lived in Berlin, where her father had a business.

“I’m sure you could learn enough to pass the exams, Albert, if you tried,” she said, “I know lots of boys who are much more stupid than you are, who get through. They say you don’t have to know anything—you don’t have to understand what you’re taught, just be able to repeat it in the exams.”

“That’s the whole trouble,” said Albert. “I’m no good at learning things by heart.”

“You don’t need to be good at it. Anyone can learn like a parrot. You just don’t try. And yet I always see you with a book under your arm,” added Elsa. “What is the one you’re reading?”

“A book on geology.”

“Geology? Rocks and things? Do you learn that?”

“No. We have hardly any science at school.”

“Then why are you studying it?”

“Because I like it. Isn’t that a good enough reason?”

Elsa sighed.

“You’re right, of course, Albert,” she said. “But it won’t help with your diploma.”

Apart from books on science his only comfort was music, and he played his violin regularly until his landlady asked him to stop.

“That wailing gets on my nerves,” she said. “There’s enough noise in this house, with all the kids howling.”

Albert was tempted to point out that most of the time it was she who made them howl, but he decided it was better to say nothing.

“I must get away from here,” he told Yuri, after six months alone in Munich. “It is absurd that I should go on like this. In the end it will turn out I have been wasting my father’s money and everyone’s time. It will be better for all if I stop now.”

“And then what will you do?” Yuri asked.

“I don’t know. If I go to Milan I’m afraid my father will send me back. Unless...” His eyes gleamed with a sudden idea. “Yuri, do you know any friendly doctors?”

“I know a lot of medical students, and some of them are friendly,” said Yuri. “Doctor, no. I’ve never had enough money to go to one. Why?”

“Suppose,” said Albert, “that I had a nervous breakdown. Suppose a doctor would say it’s bad for me to go to school, and I need to get right away from it?”



“I can’t imagine a doctor saying that,” said Yuri.

“I must try,” said Albert, “to find a doctor who specialises in nerves.”

“There are plenty of them,” Yuri told him. He hesitated for a moment, and then added, rather reluctantly, “I’ll ask some of the students if they know one, if you like.”

“Will you? Oh, thank you, Yuri,” Albert’s eyes were shining.

“Wait a moment, I haven’t found one yet...”

“Oh, but you will!”

“And if I do I don’t know if he’ll be willing to help you...”

“He will, he will,” declared Albert. “I’m going to have a real nervous breakdown, to make it easier for him.” He laughed merrily.

“I’ve never seen you looking less nervous,” remarked Yuri.

“A day or two at school will soon put that right.” Albert assured him.

Certainly he had lost his high spirits when Yuri saw him next.

“I can’t stand it any longer,” he said, “I really shall have a nervous breakdown that will satisfy any doctor.”

“Keep it up, then,” said Yuri. “I’ve found a doctor for you.”

“You have?” Albert’s face lit up. “Oh, good. When can I see him?”

“I have an appointment for you for tomorrow evening,” Yuri said. “Here’s the address.”

He handed Albert a piece of paper.

“Doctor Ernst Weil— is he a specialist in nervous troubles?” asked Albert.

“Not exactly,” Yuri admitted. “As a matter of fact he only qualified as a doctor last week. You may even be his first patient!”

“You knew him as a student, then?”

“I’ve known Ernst for years.” Yuri hesitated for a few moments. “He’s not a fool,” he warned Albert.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t try to pull the wool over his eyes¹, that’s all. Be frank with him, but don’t pretend you’ve got what you haven’t. Not that you’d deceive anyone.” Yuri added. “You’re the world’s worst liar.”

Albert spent the next day wondering what to tell the doctor. When the time arrived for his appointment he had worried over it so much that he really was quite nervous.

¹ cheat or deceive him



“I don’t really know how to describe my trouble, Dr Weil,” he began.

“Don’t try,” said the young doctor with a friendly smile. “Yuri has already given me a history of the case.”

“Oh! What did he say?”

“Only that you want me to think you have had a nervous breakdown, and say that you mustn’t go back to that school.”

“Oh dear.” Albert’s face fell. “He shouldn’t have told you that.”

“Why not? Isn’t it true, then?”

“Yes, that’s the trouble. Now you’ll say there’s nothing wrong with me, and you’ll tell me to go back to school.”

“Don’t be too sure of that,” said the doctor. “As a matter of fact I am pretty sure you are in a nervous state about that school.”

“But I haven’t told you anything about it,” said Albert, wide-eyed. “How can you know that?”

“Because you wouldn’t have come to see me about this if you hadn’t been pretty close to a nervous breakdown, that’s why. Now,” said the doctor briskly, “if I certify that you have had a nervous breakdown, and must stay away from school for a while, what will you do?”

“I’ll go to Italy,” said Albert. “To Milan, where my parents are.”

“And what will you do there?”

“I’ll try to get into an Italian college or institute.”

“How can you, without a diploma?”

“I’ll ask my mathematics teacher to give me something about my work, and perhaps that will be enough. I’ve learnt all the maths they teach at school, and a bit more,” he added when Dr Weil looked doubtful.

“Well, it’s up to you,” he said. “I doubt if it will come off, but I can see you’re not doing yourself or anyone else much good by staying here. How long would you like me to say you should stay away from school? Would six months be all right?”

“This is very kind of you.”

“It’s nothing. I’ve only just stopped being a student myself, so I know how you feel. Here you are.” Dr Weil handed him the certificate, “And the best of luck.”

“How much...”

“Nothing, if you have anything to spare, invite Yuri to a meal. He’s a good friend of mine, and yours too, I think.”

Albert had no money to spare, but he pretended he had and took Yuri out to supper.



“Isn’t it wonderful?” he said after showing Yuri the certificate.

“Yes, it’s fine,” Yuri agreed. “Six months is a good period. This way you won’t actually be leaving the school so if the worst comes to the worst you’ll be able to come back and carry on for your diploma.”

“I’ll never go back to that place,” Albert assured him. “I’m going to take this certificate to the head teacher tomorrow, and that will be the end of it.”

“Don’t forget to get a reference in writing from your mathematics teacher first,” Yuri reminded him.

Mr Koch willingly gave Albert the reference he wanted.

“If I say I can’t teach you any more, and probably you’ll soon be able to teach me, will that be all right?” he asked.

“That’s saying too much, sir,” said Albert.

“It’s only the truth. But alright. I’ll put it more seriously.”

It was still a glowing reference, and Mr Koch made the point that Albert was ready immediately to enter a college or institute for the study of higher mathematics.

“I’m sorry you’re leaving us, although you’re wasting your time in my class,” he said.

“It’s almost the only class where I’m not wasting my time,” said Albert. “But how did you know I’m leaving, sir?”

“You wouldn’t have asked me for this reference otherwise.”

“I thought you’d wonder...”

“There’s nothing to wonder about, Einstein. I knew you were going to leave before you knew yourself.”

Albert was puzzled. What did the teacher mean?

He soon found out. Before he had a chance to ask for an interview with the head teacher, he was summoned to the head’s room.

“Well, it saves me the trouble of having to wait an hour or two outside,” he thought.

He hardly bothered to wonder why he had been sent for, but vaguely supposed he was to be punished again for bad work and laziness. Well, he had finished with punishments.

“I’m not going to punish you,” the head teacher said, to Albert’s surprise. “Your work is terrible, and I’m not prepared to have you here any longer, Einstein. I want you to leave the school now.”

“Leave school now?” repeated Albert, dazed.

“That is what I said.”

“You mean,” said Albert, “that I am to be expelled?”



“You can take it that way if you wish, Einstein.” The head teacher was not mincing words. “The simplest thing will be for you to go of your own accord, and then the question won’t arise.”

“But,” said Albert, “what crime have I committed?”

“Your presence in the classroom makes it impossible for the teacher to teach and for the other pupils to learn. You refuse to learn, you are in constant rebellion, and no serious work can be done while you are there.”

Albert felt the medical certificate almost burning a hole in his pocket.

“I was going to leave, anyway,” he said.

“Then we are in agreement at least, Einstein,” the head said.

For a moment Albert was tempted to tell the man what he thought of him and of his school. Then he stopped himself. Without another word, holding his head high, he stalked out.

“Shut the door after you!” shouted the head.

Albert ignored him.

He walked straight on, out of the school where he had spent five miserable years, without turning his head to give it a last look. He could not think of anyone he wanted to say goodbye to.

Indeed, Yuri was almost the only person in Munich he felt like seeing before he left the town he had come to hate almost as much as the school. Elsa was back in Berlin, and he had no other real friends.

“Goodbye—and good luck,” said Yuri when he left. “You are going to a wonderful country, I think. I hope you will be happier there.”

1. What do you understand of Einstein’s nature from his conversations with his history teacher, his mathematics teacher and the head teacher?
2. The school system often curbs individual talents. Discuss.
3. How do you distinguish between information gathering and insight formation?