Albert Einstein is recognized as the brightest scientist of the 20th Century. His simple theory of photo-electric effect broke ground for the later development of quantum physics, but he is more known for his theory of relativity. This, particularly the general theory of relativity, is more abstract and has nearly no direct consequence to everyday life and yet it got him unprecedented fame is a surprise. It probably has to do with his unusual personal looks and simplicity. Apart from science he got involved in socio-political issues after 1915 and that may be another reason for his popularity.

Einstein was born a German and was concerned about the German pride. Germany got defeated in the First World War and had to sign a humiliating treaty. Einstein traveled through Europe for the cause of unity and explaining the German case. He was also a member of the committee of International Co-operation of the League of Nations along with Madam Curie. (League of Nations was formed after the First World War just as the United Nations was formed after the Second World War.)

Later, during 1928 to 1931, he was a member of the War Resisters’ International, the organization fighting the compulsory military enrolment of the youth; it exists even today and works for world peace. These and some other facts of his life are less known. However, when some of the events in his life came out in the open, his fans had a minor problem reconciling with the fact that he was not a man with a consistent mind. His actions did not match with the liberal image that he had. These unknown aspects of his temper and actions came out on two different occasions when his personal letters were brought out in the open.

Sometime in 1986 a bank locker in San Francisco was opened after the death of its owner Hans Albert, Einstein's son. He had done his best to guard the unpleasant truth for 40 long years. There were over 400 letters relating to Einstein's personal life. But the most interesting and informing were 41 letters written by him to his wife Mileva and 10 by her to him which revolved around their love affair. For the first time it came to be known that Einstein and Mileva Maric had a daughter before they married. This information was published for the first time in a biography of Mileva in the German language. These letters could be read in English only in 1992 in a Princeton University Press publication entitled 'Albert Einstein-Mileva Maric, the love letters'. In 1996, they were on display in Jerusalem and were on auction in USA.
Had Einstein been alive or had he been some political figure rather than a scientist, this piece of information could have kicked off a lot of dust. Probably it would have been scandalized. But mercifully the public adoration for him left the matter underplayed. Even during the spurt of extra attention due to the auction of his letters and related litigations, the media did not harp on the topic of his pre-wed daughter.

Albert and Mileva first met in the year 1896 when both were studying at the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, Switzerland. Mileva changed her course from medicine to Physics and came to Einstein’s class. She was a Serbian girl, four years elder to Einstein and had come to study in Zurich just as Einstein had come from Germany.

The first letter indicating closer connection between the two is written by Mileva in 1897, informing Albert that she has already talked to her father about him and he should visit Germany to meet him. The response to this is not known as the first of Einstein’s letters is in February 1898. Though he addressed her as ‘Respected Miss’ in this letter, in later letters he gradually grew informal and then romantic. ‘Respected Miss’ became ‘Dear Miss Maric’ and thereafter ‘Little Cat’ and further to ‘Dear Little Doll’! Mileva began with ‘Lieber Herr E’ (Dear Mr. E) and ended some later letters with ‘thousand little kisses from your D’.

But Einstein could not convince his mother for the marriage. While she made a big hulabaloo, his father felt that marriage should happen only when the boy settled down. He was probably right as Einstein was only 21 then. But the children had already sunk deep into the sea of love. He writes like anyone else, “when I do not have you I feel as if I do not quite exist”. The euphoria ultimately culminated in the birth of a girl in January 1902.

They named her Lieserl. A year later on 6 January 1903 they got married. However, the daughter did not join the wedlock. The last Lieserl is mentioned is in the letter from Einstein to Mileva when she was in her parent’s home, three months
after the marriage. Einstein was worried that the little girl had a bout of scarlet fever. The biographers have failed to locate the girl or any hint about her whereabouts after this.

This part of Einstein's life is embarrassing to those who loved the scientist as a soft spoken and dignified person involved in liberal human rights activities. Many reacted negatively because they are measuring him by the latter day image of his personality as an intellectual. This public perception of him developed after 1921 i.e. the post Nobel Prize period.

However, the Einstein that slipped was in his late teens and early twenties, agreeably the vulnerable period. Yet it should be said to his credit that in spite of strong currents of passion and sentiments, he managed to get through his studies well and also began to think about the theory of relativity at that early age.

His work on special theory of relativity published in 1905 was the work of an extremely innovative mind and at the same time demonstrated that the author had deep understanding of the physics and mathematics available till that day. There were two more important publications and the world celebrated the year 2005 as the centenary of that "Miraculous Year".

Having absolved the scientist of his teenage bouts, how do we rationalize the fissured marital life that followed the ecstatic marriage? Einstein separated from Mileva in 1914 and divorced her formally in 1919. The papers auctioned in 1996 contained a sheet of handwritten draft showing him as a dominant husband laying down a code of conduct for Mileva in and outside the house! It says she must keep his linen and clothes in order and serve him three meals a day. She must not expect to go out with him socializing and many other such things.

No one knows whether this was a piece of a practical joke or a sign of things prevailing in that household. But the period of the letter, 1914, indicates it to be a genuine piece. Mileva and two sons had left Berlin and moved to Zurich in that year. It is perplexing to figure out the reasons rocking their marriage. Mileva was not like Xanthippe (Socrates' wife) who is known to be shrewish. She on the contrary was intelligent and simple by nature. She had a minor limp, which was there since their college days and could not have been a good reason for Einstein to dislike her.

Probably his preoccupation with science could have tempted him to be aloof from family affairs. To achieve unusual success one needs to have an excessively single-minded pursuit which is bound to tell on family life. We know how Gandhiji was harsh on his wife and children because for him every thing was secondary to the country’s freedom. Einstein’s son Hans Albert indeed indicated this reason for the separation of the couple in an interview over the radio, but elsewhere in a letter to his father he casti-gated him for neglecting the needs of his mother.

But this seems to be only a part of the story. Abraham Pais, a student of Einstein who was also close to him personally, has noted in his biography that Einstein had started leaning towards another lady around this time. More than love, it was affection and intimacy because the lady in question, Elsa Einstein was his cousin. After Mileva left him, Einstein fell ill with jaundice and ulcer sometime in 1917 and Elsa took good care during the illness. They eventually married in 1919 after Mileva was divorced.

F.D. Roosevelt
President of the United States
White House, Washington D.C.

Sir:

Some recent work by E. Fermi and L. Szilard, which has been communicated to me in manuscript, leads me to expect that the element Uranium may be turned into a new and important source of energy in the immediate future. … I believe therefore to bring to your attention the following facts and recommendations.

… it may become possible to set up nuclear chain reactions in a large mass of uranium by which vast amount of power and large quantities of new radium like element would be generated.

This new phenomenon would also lead to the construction of bombs, and it is conceivable – though much less certain – that extremely powerful bombs of a new type may be constructed. A single bomb of this type might very well destroy the whole port together with some territory. However such bombs may very well prove to be too heavy for transportation by air.

(He then requests urgent research work to start and procurement of uranium ore from Canada, Czechoslovakia or Belgian Congo.) … I understand that Germany has actually stopped the sale of uranium from the Czechoslovakian mines which she has taken over. That she should have taken such early action might perhaps be understood on the ground that the son of the German Under-Secretary of State, von Wiszsacker, is attached to the Kaiser Wilhelm Institut in Berlin, where some of the American work on Uranium is being repeated.

Yours Very truly,
A. Einstein
The court decreed that the Nobel Prize money, which was just about expected, should go to Mileva and her two sons. But the money could not recover their younger son Eduard from schizophrenia which he presumably developed as a child in a broken family. The Elsa-Einstein union lasted till she died in 1936. But his relationship with Mileva remained cordial as testified by his son and many biographers. However, it is difficult to ignore the gentle hint by Pais that even in the midst of the second marriage Einstein was courting another pretty lady.

The other controversial letter concerns his public life unlike the first one. It was addressed to the American President, and was written in August 1939, much after the Mileva letters, but revealed to people much earlier during the 1950s after the declassification of the World War papers related to the first atom bomb. In fact, there were three letters that he wrote to the President on the same subject. The first one requesting him to begin work on a super bomb, the second a reminder when no progress was seen and the third one requesting him not to drop the bomb on anyone, after its unlimited destructive power became known.

The letters were actually inspired by a scientist named Szilard and Einstein had only lent his signature. The last letter has no significance because it was never read by the President as he died before doing so. But the first letter is remarkable because it was written in 1939, when it was not yet practically established that uranium could sustain a chain reaction. It was proved three years after this letter by Enrico Fermi. Yet Einstein forwarded this letter because, he, like others, thought that Germany might be on the job and should not succeed in making a bomb before USA does. Being a letter from the most respected scientist of the times, if got the due attention, but eventually affected the other scientists who wrote in his personal diary on 17th April 1927 reads, "Strange people these Germans. I am a foul smelling flower for them and yet they keep tucking me in to their buttonholes!" His house was ransacked when he was away. Even non-Jewish German students of his were ridiculed. Heisenberg, a famous German scientist, was called a 'white Jew' and not given his due in the University for a long time.

After Hitler came to power, it was impossible for Einstein to continue to live in Germany and hence he migrated to USA. But this departure from Germany shocked him immensely. He loved that country as his own. He spoke and wrote only in German. All his outstanding scientific contributions were first published in Germany's scientific journals. Even the three celebrated papers of 1905 were in Annalen der Physik, a German journal. (Even his letter to Roosevelt mentioned earlier, requesting a defence against Germany, was dictated in German and translated later by a scientist called Wigner!)

He was abruptly disillusioned by what he got in return. To this end we can expect him to do anything within his power to prevent Germany from acquiring the nuclear bomb before the Allied nations had it.

But he was bound by a pledge. Being an active member of the War Resisters International he had pledged not to lend his service to war for whatever cause it came and he had openly declared so. How do we then take his letter requesting a deadly weapon to end a war? It looked quite intriguing to all who knew him. There were some who said they knew him better and expected that. French littérateur and thinker Romain Rolland was one such person who wrote in his personal diary on a similar occasion, "It is quite clear to me that Einstein, a genius in his scientific field is weak, indecisive and inconsistent outside it. I have sensed this more than once."

Now, what Rolland knew, people at large did not. They loved him for his childlike simplicity. They learnt about his support to war against Germany only after the epoch making letter was made public. Japanese pacifist Shinahara disturbed by this volte face, wrote to him to declare the letter as a regrettable mistake. He said, "I often wonder what Gandhi would have done if he had been in Einstein’s place? He would not have acted as you did!" He is right because Gandhi’s commitment was from the heart.

That is where lies the answer to the variation between the public image of Einstein and his actions: his commitment, be it for his wife Mileva or for peace came from the brain, and not from the heart. Therefore, he could rationalize a change in his stand. After all he was a scientist!

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