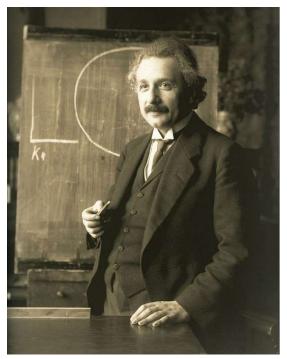
## The Looting of Albert Einstein's Cultural Property



Albert Einstein is one of the more well-known historical figures; a plethora of books and articles have been written about him, his scientific achievements, his political activism and his penchant for music, in particular his violin. In addition, Einstein himself left an incredibly rich written legacy. Yet despite all of this, in-depth research into the looting of Einstein's property, in particular, his cultural property is lacking. While some research was conducted focusing on the theft of his beloved sailboat as well as his bank accounts, there is thus far nothing similar regarding the cultural property that was taken from his Berlin apartment as well as from his summer house in Caputh.

Albert Einstein during a lecture in Vienna in 1921. Photograph by Ferdinand Schmutzer (1921), public domain.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert Einstein#/media/ File:Einstein 1921 by F Schmutzer - restoration.jpg

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## **Biographical Information**

Albert Einstein was born in Ulm, Württemberg, on March 14, 1879. Only six weeks after he was born, his family moved to Munich where he would subsequently attend school.

A few years later, the family moved to Italy and Albert Einstein continued his education at Aarau, Switzerland and in 1896 he entered the Swiss Federal Polytechnic School in Zurich to be trained as a teacher in physics and mathematics. In 1901, the year he gained his diploma, he acquired Swiss citizenship and, as he was unable to find a teaching post, accepted a position as technical assistant in the Swiss Patent Office. In 1905 he obtained his doctor's degree.<sup>1</sup>

In 1908 he was appointed *Privatdozent* in Berne, and a year later, in 1909 he became Professor Extraordinary at Zurich. Two years later, in 1911, Albert Einstein worked as a Professor of Theoretical Physics at Prague, but soon returned to Zurich to fill a similar post. In 1914 he was appointed Director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Physical Institute and Professor at the University of Berlin. In the same year, 1914, he became a German citizen and remained a resident of Berlin or its surrounding until 1933. In 1922, Albert Einstein was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics for the discovery of the Law of the Photoelectric Effect.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/physics/1921/einstein/biographical/ (accessed November 4, 2024)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> https://einstein-website.de/en/timeline/ (accessed November 5, 2024)

Albert Einstein commenced his travels to the United States in 1921.<sup>3</sup> In December 1932, he traveled to the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena. Due to Hitler's rise to power and the ensuing political circumstances, Albert Einstein did not return to Germany. He would never set foot on German ground again.

In 1933, Albert Einstein renounced his citizenship in opposition and defiance to the National Socialist regime. He settled in Princeton, New Jersey, where he accepted a position as Professor of Theoretical Physics at the University. A year after the outbreak of World War II, in 1940, he became a United States citizen.<sup>4</sup>

In 1945, he retired from his position at Princeton. Throughout the war, Albert Einstein was among some of the leading figures opposing Nazi Germany, and instrumental in assisting refugees escaping Nazi tyranny. After the founding of the State of Israel and the passing of Chaim Weitzmann, he was offered the Presidency of the nascent state but declined.

On April 15, 1955, Albert Einstein died in Princeton.

In 1982, after Albert Einstein's death and the death of his secretary, Helen Dukas, who inherited his library, his scientific and intellectual inheritance went to Hebrew University, as stipulated in his last will. It has remained in Jerusalem ever since.<sup>5</sup>

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A small portion of Albert Einstein's cultural property, as well as his bank accounts<sup>6</sup> and his beloved sailboat were confiscated by the Nazis.<sup>7</sup> His summer house in Caputh, which was under the ownership of his daughter, was confiscated by the Nazis as part of their attempt to appropriate communist property. Some of Albert Einstein's property, which remained in the house after Einstein left his beloved summer and nature retreat for the last time in 1932, was looted.

The majority of his intellectual and cultural property, which was kept in his apartment in Berlin, however, was saved and shipped via the French embassy in Berlin to his new home in Princeton. Nonetheless, a small part of his cultural property from his Berlin apartment was looted as well.

There is no itemized overview of what was taken from Einstein's apartment, nor from his house in Caputh.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> From April 2 to May 30, 1921, Einstein visited the United States for the first time. At his side was Chaim Weizmann. The main reason for this journey was to collect money for the still to be founded Hebrew University in Jerusalem. On May 9, he was awarded an honorary doctor degree from Princeton University. <a href="https://einstein-website.de/en/timeline/">https://einstein-website.de/en/timeline/</a> (accessed November 5, 2024)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/physics/1921/einstein/biographical/ (accessed November 4, 2024)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Albert Einstein Archives at Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel. See: <a href="http://www.albert-einstein.org/">http://www.albert-einstein.org/</a> (accessed November 4, 2024)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Guthaben und Depot bei der Dresdner Bank, Albert Einstein. B. rep. 84 WGA 1733/55, Landesarchiv Berlin.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Politische Angelegenheiten im Regierungsbezirk Potsdam, insbesondere Maßnahmen gegen Parteien und politische Organisationen, Religionsgemeinschaften und Juden. 2A I Pol 1165 (1933-1934), Brandenburgerisches Landeshauptarchiv.

## The Looting of Albert Einstein's apartment in Berlin

Address: Haberlandstrasse 5, 10779 Berlin





Layout of Albert Einstein's apartment in Haberlandstrasse 5. The floor plan was reconstructed by Simon Eisinger.

Source: Friedrich Herneck, *Einstein At Home*. Translated, with an Introduction by Josef Eisinger, New York: Prometheus Books, 2016.

Albert Einstein in his study at Haberlandstrasse 5 in Berlin, ca. 1927. Albert Einstein Collection AR 136, Photographer: Ruth Jacobi (1899-1995), Leo Baeck Institute. (https://www.lbi.org/griffinger/record/222552)

Several online references, including that of the USHMM<sup>8</sup>, refer to the erroneous fact that Albert Einstein's Berlin apartment was looted by the Gestapo as early as February or March 1933. There are no archival records that support that claim. This reference, as well as others, are probably based on faulty news reporting that Albert Einstein's apartment was ransacked in February 1933.<sup>9</sup>

Rather, the most concrete evidence in establishing when and what was taken from Einstein's apartment stems from an interview with his housekeeper, Herta Waldow, nee Schiefelbein. Herta Schiefelbein was Elsa and Albert's live-in housekeeper from 1927 until June 1933.

According to Herta Schiefelbein, the Einstein apartment was looted in May or early June 1933, however, members of the SA (Sturmabteilung) first "visited" the apartment in April 1933. The first

<sup>8 &</sup>lt;a href="https://newspapers.ushmm.org/events/albert-einstein-quits-germany-renounces-citizenship">https://newspapers.ushmm.org/events/albert-einstein-quits-germany-renounces-citizenship</a> (accessed November 4, 2024)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> "Hitler Storm Troops lead attacks on Jews in many parts of Germany - Student slain," *The Jewish Independent* (February 10, 1933); "Einstein residence searched by Nazis," *The Salt Lake Telegram* (March 20, 1933); "Nazis raid Einstein villa in

"search" only lasted for about half an hour. As Einstein was not only Jewish, but regarded as an active communist, his apartment might have been searched and looted on the premise of the *Gesetz über die Einbeziehung kommunitischen Vermögens* from May 26, 1933. The law's intention was to deliberately confiscate from communist organizations and individuals any assets "used or intended for the promotion of communist endeavors." In combination with other legal provisions, the law also served above all to confiscate the assets of Jews and non-Jewish "enemies of the Reich." <sup>10</sup>

According to Herta Schiefelbein, the main looting took place in May or early June 1933, when the apartment was ransacked by members of the SA and at a time when Einstein's belongings were packed to be shipped to Princeton. According to Einstein's housekeeper, "they said it was a house search. Fau Dr. Kayser had to open all the cupboards for them and all three of us were told to sit in the library and stay there. (...) While we were sitting in the library, they had me give them keys to the building and the to the elevator, so they could leave the building, which was always locked. At first we heard them running around and then it became very still. (...) When I entered the hall, I saw that nobody was in the apartment, and we noticed right away that the carpets were gone. (...) We had already rolled them up to get them ready for putting them in storage. The pictures were taken, too, but which pictures I naturally can no longer recall. But I do recall very well that my overcoat that had hung in the guest room had also disappeared. (...) They were evidently out to loot the place, even though they said that they came to search the house."

The SA – according to her recollections – looted carpets, paintings and a few other valuables. Whatever was left, in particular Albert Einstein's scientific and non-scientific papers, were brought to France by sealed diplomatic bag, much due to the support of French ambassador Andre Frangois-Poncet. From France, they were shipped to America.<sup>12</sup>

The assumption that Einstein's property was in part looted following *Gesetz über die Einbeziehung kommunitischen Vermögens* from May 26, 1933, is supported by a protocol of a conversation from August 16, 1933, concerning the "1. Liste der gemäss des Gesetz über den Widerruf von Einbürgerungen und die Aberkennung der deutschen Staatsangehörigkeit vom 14 Juni 1933 auszubürgernden Persönlichkeiten." The conversation took place between *Ministerialrat* Hering, of the Reichs Ministry of the Interior, *Ministerialdirektor* Gaus, of the Foreign Ministry as well as others. During that meeting, the Albert Einstein situation was discussed, and the statement was made that Einstein's property was already partially confiscated in May 1933.

fruitless arms search," *Hastings Daily Tribune* (March 20, 1933); "Einstein home searched for munitions by Nazis," *New York Herald Tribune* (March 21, 1933); "Nazis hunt arms in Einstein home," *New York Times* (March 21, 1933).

10 https://blha.brandenburg.de/index.php/einordnung-und-glossar/ (accessed November 5, 2024)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Friedrich Herneck, Einstein At Home. Translated, with an Introduction by Josef Eisinger, New York: Prometheus Books, 2016, p. 166.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Albrecht Fölsing, *Albert Einstein: A Biography*, London: Penguin,1998, p. 66; see also: Siegfried Grundmann, *Einsteins von den Nazis konfisziertes Eigentum. Der lange Weg bis zur Rückgabe und Entschädigung*, Berlin: Springer, 2017, p. 237.

3. Albert Einstein
Die Vertreter des AA. schlagen vor, mit Rücksicht auf die nun einmal bestehende Weltgeltung E. ungeschtet des Umstandes, dass gegen ihn die gleichen Delikte sprechen wie bei allen anderen in der Liste Gufgenommenen, die Aberkennung nicht nur oder wenigstens

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"Ausbürgerungen 1. Liste A-Z" (1933-1937), pp. 21-22. RZ 214/99638 Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts (PA AA). (online at: <a href="https://politisches-archiv.diplo.de/invenio/direktlink/cca13586-a92d-4d59-a44a-8744fa0d89cc/">https://politisches-archiv.diplo.de/invenio/direktlink/cca13586-a92d-4d59-a44a-8744fa0d89cc/</a>

The document does not specify what was looted, only that the confiscation took place. However, in a separate document, dated November 21, 1933, the reference is made that furniture, books and scientific objects were not looted and that the confiscation already took place as early as April 1933. This might refer to the already mentioned first house search and would also be in line with the recollections of Einstein's housekeeper who referred to the looting of paintings, carpets, silver

objects and other moveable items, but not to the looting of furniture or Albert Einstein's written legacy. The fact that Albert Einstein's scientific legacy was for the most part spared is due to Einstein's international standing and connections, and the hesitation not to unnecessarily antagonize – at least not at that time.<sup>13</sup>



"Ausbürgerungen" (27 Mai 1933 – 15. Febr. 1934), p. 802. RZ 214/98458, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts (PA AA). (online at: https://politisches-archiv.diplo.de/invenio/direktlink/997da315-a72a-4b2e-a826-44ff809b5777/

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Despite the fact that Einstein's scientific legacy was not taken en masse, as well as most of his books and letters, some items might have still been looted, albeit at random. The Library of Congress, for example, noted that "there appears to be a gap in the correspondence between Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein in their collection after 1932, (...)." Albert Einstein papers, 1916-1953. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. [selected documents are available at: <a href="https://www.loc.gov/item/mss3999000553">https://www.loc.gov/item/mss3999000553</a>]



Albert and Maja Einstein chocolate cups. (ca. 1880). Albert Einstein Collection AR 136, Leo Baeck Institute. (online at: https://digipres.cjh.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps\_pid=I E3019215)

There is no overview of what kind of silver objects or carpets Albert Einstein collected, or if any of these objects were inherited or gifted to him by his parents. The Leo Baeck Institute in New York holds in its collection a pair of porcelain cups that Albert Einstein was able to transfer to Princeton. These two cups were made for him and sister by his parents a few years after he was born.

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## Albert Einstein's library

Einstein's library consisted of app. 2,400 titles, including not only books, but also a small collection of journals, several hundred musical scores and 200 records. The Einstein Archive, which inherited Einstein's library, holds about 1,500 books. Most of the books within Einstein's library relate to subjects other than physics. Many of these books included autographs or dedications from the authors for Einstein.<sup>14</sup> It is assumed, following the above documents and the recollections of Einstein's housekeeper, that the Nazis did not systematically loot his library. However, that does not imply that no books and other written material were partially confiscated from his Berlin apartment as well as from his summer house in Caputh (see below). Since Einstein's housekeeper and Ilse Kayser, his stepdaughter, were confined to Einstein's library while the apartment was ransacked in May or June of



Photograph of Albert Einstein Ex Libris. CJA-28289-0028070, Center for Jewish Art at the Hebrew University. (online at: https://www.nli.org.il/en/images/NNL\_ARCHIVE\_AL997004287460405171/NLJ#\$FL29151998)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Marianna Gelfand, "Albert Einstein Library: From Princeton to Jerusalem," *American Journal of Information Science and Technology*, 3. 4 (2019): 80.

1933, it can be assumed that only a minimal amount of books and manuscripts were looted during that time.

According to Helen Dukas, Einstein's secretary, everything of importance in his Berlin apartment was saved and subsequently transferred to America. <sup>15</sup> Before Einstein's library was partially transferred to Princeton via the French Embassy in Berlin, it was catalogued and organized by Mrs. Johanna (Hanne) Fantova, the wife of Professor Otto Fanta. <sup>16</sup> According to the Einstein Archive in Jerusalem and the Department of Special Collections, Firestone Library, at Princeton Library, which holds a mirror copy of the Einstein Archive in Jerusalem, Fantova's inventory is not accessible, or might no longer exist. <sup>17</sup> Without Fantova's inventory it is practically impossible to determine what and how much was looted from Einstein's apartment in Berlin as no comparison is possible between what was received in Princeton and Einstein's original library in Berlin.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 82.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Marianna Gelfand, "Albert Einstein Library: From Princeton to Jerusalem," *American Journal of Information Science and Technology*, 3. 4 (2019): 82.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> A librarian at Princeton University noted that she was not able to find Hanna Fantova's inventory within the <u>Albert Einstein Duplicate Archive (C0701)</u>. However, the collection covers some 94-boxes with minimal description, which could imply that a copy might be in one of the folders. The similar response was received from the Einstein Archive in Jerusalem. See also: <u>Albert Einstein Duplicate Archive</u>, 1859-1979 (mostly 1912-1955). Collection overview available at: <a href="https://findingaids.princeton.edu/catalog/C0701">https://findingaids.princeton.edu/catalog/C0701</a> (accessed November 5, 2024)]

# The Looting of Albert Einstein's summerhouse in Caputh

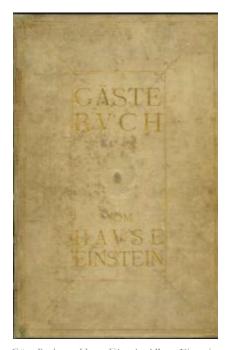
Address: Am Waldrand 15-17 14548 Caputh



https://www.mapquest.com/de/brandenburg/caputh-282241094



Albert Einstein Collection 1700s-1998 Bulk: 1879-1998
AR 136/ MF 549, Center for Jewish History. (online at:
<a href="https://digipres.cjh.org:443/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps-pid=IE2991">https://digipres.cjh.org:443/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps-pid=IE2991</a>
416)



Gäste Buch vom Hause Einstein, Albert Einstein Collection AR 136, Leo Baeck Institute. (online at: https://digipres.cjh.org:443/delivery/Deliver yManagerServlet?dps\_pid=IE2991416)

The land on which the house in Caputh was standing was officially owned by Einstein's daughter-inlaw, Ilse Kayser. Nonetheless, between 1929 and 1932, Albert Einstein spent much time in the house. The house was also the setting of many important meetings. A surviving guest book provides insight into the many important figures that paid a visit to Einstein at his house. Those included Max Born, Fritz Haber, Otto Hahn, Käthe Kollwitz, Heinrich Mann, Franz Oppenheimer, Max Planck, Erwin Schrödinger, Chaim Weizmann, and for example Arnold Zweig.<sup>18</sup>

Einstein and his wife left Caputh for the last time on December 6 in 1932 to go from Antwerp to California by ship on December 10, 1932.<sup>19</sup>

From April 1, 1933, until April 1, 1935, the house in Caputh was rented out to the Jewish *Landschulheim* by the town itself. On July 14, 1933, the "Gesetz über den Widerruf von Einbürgerungen und Aberkennung der deutschen Staatsangehörigkeit" was taken as a first incentive to confiscate Einstein's house in Caputh, along with his belongings that were left in the house. However, it took a year and a half longer, on January 10, 1935, for an official decree to follow through with the confiscation. This is confirmed by a letter from March 18, 1935, from the head of the Landrat, Kreis Zauch-Belzig to the Potsdam *Regerierungspräsident*, that referred to the Einstein's house as a place where communist and anti-governmental efforts were being launched, and thus needed to be confiscated.<sup>21</sup>

After Einstein's house was officially expropriated in March 1935, for the benefit of Prussia's state, in 1936, it was sold to one third of the estimated value to the municipality of Caputh. During that time, the house was home to the Hitler Youth, followed by the "Bund Deutscher Mädchen" and later by air force officers. In 1945 the Soviet military office had instructed the municipality to repair the house for a possible return to Einstein. But, as Einstein had decided to never set a foot on German soil again, the house was given to the municipality.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly to the partial looting of Einstein's apartment in Berlin, the household items were never "officially" looted. Even so, Elsa Einstein recalled that "the Nazis took over the house in Caputh [Einstein's weekend home near Berlin] and confiscated everything they found there. That was the beginning of the last campaign in the war between Einstein and Germany."<sup>23</sup>

On June 12, 1933, Einstein's beloved sailboat was officially confiscated by the Nazis.<sup>24</sup> A month earlier, and prior to the "Gesetz über die Entziehung kommunistischen Vermögens," on May 10, 1933, Einstein's bank accounts were confiscated.

<sup>20</sup> Siegfried Grundmann, Einsteins von den Nazis konfisziertes Eigentum. Der lange Weg bis zur Rückgabe und Entschädigung, Berlin: Springer, 2017, p. 238.

<sup>18</sup> https://einstein-website.de/en/caputh/ (accessed November 4, 2024). A digital copy of Einstein's guest book can be accessed at: https://digipres.cjh.org:443/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps\_pid=IE2991416

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> https://einstein-website.de/en/caputh/ (accessed November 5, 2024)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Letter Landrat, Kreis Zauch-Belzig (?) to the Potsdam Regerierungspräsident, March 18, 1933. Helmut Eschwege collection, Accession Number: 1994.A.0057, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington. <sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Elsa Einstein letter to Abraham Yehuda, July 27, 1933. Yahuda files, Jewish National and University Library, Hebrew University, Jerusalem. Here cited after Fritz Stern, *Einstein's World*, Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016, p. 153.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Note, Belzig, April 16, 1933. <u>Politische Angelegenheiten im Regierungsbezirk Potsdam, insbesondere Maßnahmen gegen Parteien und politische Organisationen, Religionsgemeinschaften und Juden (1933-1934).</u> 2A I Pol 1165, Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv.

However, in a letter from the Regierungspräsident to the Herrn Landrat, February 8, 1934, the reference is made that the boat was confiscated on August 16, 1933. Politische Angelegenheiten im Regierungsbezirk Potsdam, insbesondere Maßnahmen gegen Parteien und politische Organisationen, Religionsgemeinschaften und Juden (1933-1934). 2A I Pol 1165, Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv.

#### **List of Archives**

## Einstein Archives, Hebrew University Jerusalem

Edmond J. Safra Campus 9190401 Jerusalem http://www.albert-einstein.org/

## National Library of Israel, Jerusalem

Eliezer Kaplan St 1, Jerusalem

ARC. Ms. Var. Yah 38 05 203 Abraham Shalom Yahuda Archive (1933-1951)

[selected digitized images available:

https://www.nli.org.il/en/archives/NNL ARCHIVE AL997012771228605171/NLI#\$FL221599 020]

## Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts

Kurstraße 36, 10117 Berlin

- PA AA RZ 214/99638 "Ausbürgerungen 1. Liste A-Z" (1933-1937) [direct link: <a href="https://politisches-archiv.diplo.de/invenio/direktlink/cca13586-a92d-4d59-a44a-8744fa0d89cc/l">https://politisches-archiv.diplo.de/invenio/direktlink/cca13586-a92d-4d59-a44a-8744fa0d89cc/l</a>
- PA AA RZ 214/98458 "Ausbürgerungen" (27 Mai 1933 15. Febr. 1934) [direct link: <a href="https://politisches-archiv.diplo.de/invenio/direktlink/997da315-a72a-4b2e-a826-44ff809b5777/">https://politisches-archiv.diplo.de/invenio/direktlink/997da315-a72a-4b2e-a826-44ff809b5777/</a>]

#### Brandenburgerisches Landeshauptarchiv

Am Mühlenberg 3, 14476 Potsdam

"Politische Angelegenheiten im Regierungsbezirk Potsdam, insbesondere Maßnahmen gegen Parteien und politische Organisationen, Religionsgemeinschaften und Juden (1933-1934)". 2A I Pol 1165. [direct link: https://dfg-viewer.de/show/?tx\_dlf%5Bid%5D=https%3A%2F%2Fblhadigi.brandenburg.de%2Frest%2Fdfg%2Fxml%2FwNIrIUrzrMAKuIVc]

#### United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

100 Raoul Wallenberg Pl SW, Washington, DC 20024 Helmut Eschwege collection. Accession Number: 1994.A.0057

#### Leo Baeck Institute, Center for Jewish History

15 W 16th St, New York, NY 10011

Albert Einstein Collection 1700s-1998 Bulk: 1879-1998. AR 136/ MF 549 [direct link: https://links.cjh.org/primo/lbi/CJH\_ALEPH000202185]

#### **Library of Congress**

101 Independence Ave SE, Washington, DC 20540

Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Albert Einstein papers, 1916-1953 [finding aid: https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/eadmss.ms009078]

#### **Princeton University**

Department of Special Collections | Firestone Library One Washington Road, Princeton, NJ 08544-2098 Albert Einstein Duplicate Archive (C0701)