ARMENIAN SCHOLAR BRINGS NOTICE TO EINSTEIN

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Category: Opinions

By Tom Vartabedian, 29 August 2011
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San Francisco, Calif. --- When people hear of the work being done by Alice (Abeghian) Calaprice, they flitter their eyebrows and may keel over with disbelief.

The question they may pose might sound redundant. What's a non-physicist doing with such a keen interest in Albert Einstein --- enough to write seven books on the noted scholar, address audiences throughout the world, and spend the past 33 years of her life researching the man?

Call it serendipity! Or to put it mathematically: $E=mc^2$=a fascinating world waiting to be discovered by Calaprice, formerly Abeghian to those who knew her during her AYF days in California before moving to New Jersey and back.

"People are always --- needlessly --- impressed when I tell them I write books about Einstein," she points out. "He was so very human. In everyone's mind, he was this icon, but in his archives you find him joking with his friends and talking about all sorts of things. I got to like him."

When Calaprice conjures up an impression of the famous physicist, it's not merely the stereotypical, bushy-haired genius that gushes forth. Instead, we find a real, multi-dimensional persona who makes an intimate impression: that he liked sailing, extra-marital affairs and was often insensitive to others.

The Einstein she was quick to discover was often sarcastic, tired of fame quickly, but that he was quite human after all. As for his hair, she told CBS News that, "He must have been a cartoonist's dream."

It all goes back to the late 1970s when Calaprice began working at the Einstein Archives Princeton, NJ, where Einstein lived from 1933 until his death in 1955. At her disposal were 42,000 documents, academic papers, speeches, notes, travel diaries and letters.

Calaprice has read most of them and familiarized herself with the entire lot. Her husband Frank was a physics professor at Princeton and life appeared good with two active children and a challenging job.

"I was hired to do a computerized index," she recalled. "About 90 percent of the documents were in

German --- a language I knew from childhood. I also knew computers and some physics jargon. It seemed a perfect fit."

Two years later, the job was complete and Calaprice went to work for Princeton University Press. By 1984, she was senior editor and was soon assigned to oversee the editing and production of "The Collected Papers of Albert Einstein."

Working with Helen Dukas, Einstein's secretary since 1928, Calaprice began reading what was then thought to be a collection of 10,000 documents, 90 percent of them in German, with a 2-year deadline to complete the index. It turned out to be more like 42,000 documents.

"Sometimes we worked day and night," she said. "I didn't understand it all. Much of it was learned by osmosis. One thing I learned was that Einstein was extremely quotable."

As the years trickled on, so did the books and publications, four of the seven being quotation compilations containing approximately 1,600 quotes, organized by subject matter.

Another of her books is letters to and from children, wishing Einstein a happy birthday or comparing him to an uncle of sorts. Youngsters would report to him their difficulty with math, looking for solutions.

Suddenly, the spotlight began growing brighter. Much to Calaprice's chagrin, she was suddenly in demand for talks, documentaries, TV and radio shows throughout the world.

"I tend to be a pretty shy person," she admits. "But my life has been immeasurably enriched because of these books so I have an obligation to comply. Publishers expect you to push their books. By now, I feel I've earned the right to avoid that kind of personal stress and limit myself to printed interviews."

Not that visiting 45 countries is a chip shot on the international tour circuit. Anything but that. As one of only a handful of women who have specialized in Einstein, Calaprice has been invited to places beyond her wildest dreams.

In 2005, she published three books during the centennial year of the special theory of relativity. That got her lunch at the German Embassy in Washington, DC; an appearance in Canada, and she spoke at the dedication of an Einstein statue in Princeton.

Though there is no valid connection to Armenians, Calaprice recalls reading about an exchange of letters Einstein had with Boghos Nubar Pasha, son of a 3-time president of Egypt (Nubar Nubarian) and Armenia's delegate to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 which tried to determine Armenia's boundaries.

"My family seems to be a bit befuddled about my continuing Einstein work, but they're used to it," Abeghian brought out. "I generally get a -- 'That's nice, mom' -- from my kids when a new book is out, but I don't make a big deal out of it. My friends seem to get more excited, maybe because they understand the process better. I've really enjoyed getting fan letters from all over the world and I've

answered them all."

Calaprice admits Einstein was not a very nice guy, at least to his family.

"He had pleasures and faults like any other guy," she said. "He liked women, smoked a pipe, sailed, traveled, but most of all, he loved art, literature and music. He was very international-minded and a pacifist until Hitler came along. Einstein spoke out courageously for his people while in Germany and a price was put on his head by the Nazis so he left in 1933."

No question in her mind that Einstein changed the way society sees the universe. Few would ever suspect he was an independent loner, largely self-taught --- a high school dropout who failed his technical college entrance exam, entered that technical college by the skin of his teeth and had a hard time bowing to authority.

No other man in history had such a shaded past and became the world's most celebrated physicist. Einstein is said to have hired assistants to help him with the advanced math components of his work.

"The fact he was chosen 'Person of the Century' by Time Magazine in 2000 says it all," Calaprice noted. "To many, Einstein is more of a mystery than he should be. Any literate person in the world has heard of him. His discoveries still impact the world today, along with his political, social and religious ideals --- even though not everyone will agree with them."

Einstein had left Berlin by the time Calaprice was born there and he died before she moved to Princeton. It was as if the two had eluded one another, but only in person. Not in spirit.

"He was much more than a physicist," she felt. "He was a true humanitarian and concerned about all peoples of the world, not just Jews. He spoke out on many subjects, making my quotation books possible. I want to finish the Einstein Encyclopedia and another book a friend wants me to co-author."

Calaprice bills herself as an adventurist. Aside from visiting 45 countries, she's taken flying lessons and experienced many cultures, including Siberia, Mongolia, Turkey, India and Africa. She's also hiked the Southwest and Death Valley.

You'll also find her working in a botanical garden, separating seeds from the chaff and checking them for viability under the microscope. Much like Einstein, she enjoys working inside a scientific environment. An interest in photography has given her yet another outlet.

"I've been privileged to meet a lot of eccentric characters through my interest in Einstein," she confirms. "It's always important to have role models who are older than you. I've gotten to the age where I'm running out of goals."

About Alice (Abeghian) Calaprice

--- Born in Berlin in 1941 to a German father and Armenian mother. Grandfather Artasches Abeghian

published a German-Armenian grammar book and dictionary, along with a map of ancient and modern Armenia; works of the German poet Goethe into Armenian, and was idolized with an Armenian postage stamp in mid-1960s. Father was a German POW in France. Mother worked for the United Nations International Refugee Organization and Armenian National Committee to Aid Homeless Armenians (ANCHA).

--- Graduated in 1963 from the University of California at Berkeley with a degree in Sociology and minor in Near Eastern Studies.

--- Nuclear family: Daughter Denise with doctorate in evolutionary biology and ecology from Princeton, now a clinical researcher; son David went to Carnegie-Mellon and is a software engineer and vice-president of engineering; former husband Frank, physics professor at Princeton; four grandchildren.

--- Armenian connection: National AYF Convention delegate for three years and counselor for two years at Camp Haiastan; secretary and president of West Coast AYF Council; translated into English the German transcript of Soghomon Tehlerian's trial for an advisor at Berkeley; translated Armenian folktales into English as a teenager, many of which were published.

---Einstein books written: The Quotable Einstein (Princeton University Press 1996); The Expanded Quotable Einstein (PUP 2000); The New Quotable Einstein (PUP 2005); The Ultimate Quotable Einstein (PUP 2011); Dear Professor Einstein (Prometheus 2002); The Einstein Almanac (John Hopkins University Press 2005); Albert Einstein: A Biography (with Trevor Lipscombe) (Greenwood Biographies 2005)

--- Works in Progress: The Einstein Encyclopedia (under contract with Princeton University Press with two co-authors)