

## YOUR NEWS WANTED

The news section gives updates on what has been happening in physics education worldwide. Items included show how events in one country could be relevant to good practice elsewhere in the world. Contributions are welcome from all of our readers. They should be about 200–300 words long and can include pictures. Please send your news items for the XXXX issue of Physics Education to [ped@iop.org](mailto:ped@iop.org) before Xx XXXXX 2006.

## EINSTEIN YEAR

# Argentina remembers Einstein's visit

Eighty years ago Albert Einstein visited Argentina. He arrived on 25 March 1925 and stayed for a month. He delivered 12 conferences, most of them on the theory of relativity, and took part in many receptions and social meetings. After the corroboration in 1919 of the deflection of light rays due to the curvature of space around the eclipsed Sun, and having been awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics for 1921, Einstein was a consummated scientific celebrity. His visit to Argentina was the subject of eager anticipation.

Once there, he collaborated with one of the main newspapers of the time, *La Prensa*, which published summaries of all of the lectures that Einstein delivered in Buenos Aires. *La Prensa* also printed 'Pan-Europa', an article written by Einstein himself, in which he criticized the growing nationalism and defended the renaissance of the European community and its cultural unification.

Last year, World Year of Physics (also called Einstein Year), commemorated worldwide the 100th anniversary of Einstein's legendary works of 1905, a year deservedly dubbed the *annus mirabilis*. Last year was also an opportunity for the public to encounter physics in a new and rewarding way.

At the University of Buenos Aires we wanted to work with Einstein Year, first by recognizing



*Lady Wassermann (right) and journalist and writer Elsa Jerusalem pose with Einstein in the garden of the Wasserman's villa, where he stayed when he visited Buenos Aires. Lady Wassermann accompanied Einstein on his first aerial tour on 1 April 1925, when they flew around Buenos Aires in a Junkers aeroplane that was visiting from the German Navy. (Courtesy Archivo General de la Nación Argentina.)*

that the influence of this great mind was not limited to science, and that his legacy can be seen in many aspects of daily life. Any event to honour Einstein's achievements and his attitude to life ought to be complemented by a range of topics covering more than just physics.

In Buenos Aires, selected experts from various fields delivered lectures to the general public. They covered the scientific aspects of

Einstein's achievements, but also – and most importantly – many topics where his thinking and actions greatly influenced the 20th century: arts and humanities, literature and history, politics, disarmament and religion. These and other interesting subjects were discussed every Thursday evening from 10 March to 24 November, surrounded by the art exhibits independently organized by the Jorge Luis Borges Cultural Center (see [www.ccborges.org.ar](http://www.ccborges.org.ar)), where the conferences took place.

## The conferences

The public response was overwhelming. The meetings were held in different halls depending on the exhibits, and the seats began to fill nearly an hour before each conference. The first meeting, 'Einstein and Borges', filled up 20 minutes before it was due to begin, with 150 people seated and 100 more sitting on the floor or standing. There were no complaints, though, as people were happy to listen to the interesting topics and to question the experts.

It may seem unusual for a psychologist to lecture about Einstein, but not if one remembers the important correspondence in 1932 between Sigmund Freud and Einstein on violence and war. Likewise, one might wonder why an expert on molecular biology was among the speakers celebrating



*The Wassermann residence in Buenos Aires, where Einstein stayed for a whole month in 1925. (Courtesy Archivo General de la Nación Argentina.)*



*Australian Ambassador Peter Hussin (left) and Eduardo Charreau, president of the National Council for Scientific and Technological Research (CONICET), at the Australian embassy (formerly the Wassermann residence). At the ceremony on 1 September 2005 they unveiled a plaque to commemorate Einstein's stay in 1925.*

Einstein's *annus mirabilis*. Well, biology gained an important and fresh input when physicists, such as Erwin Schrödinger in 1944, began wondering *What is Life?*

Now, imagine you are a physics professor at the University of Bern in 1905. Having taught Newtonian physics, classical statistical mechanics and Maxwell's electromagnetism for years, you receive a set of papers from a completely unknown author – a third-class employee of the local patent office – claiming that the physics in your lectures is wrong. Moreover, his reasoning is completely unfamiliar. How would you react? Well, on the conference agenda we included an astrophysicist and expert in debunking pseudo-scientific claims, who explained to us why we should not dismiss this strange character as a crank.

An expert in neurobiology also told us everything we always wanted to know – but were afraid to ask – about the near 50-year search for special features in Einstein's brain – the myth and the reality. He also presented the results of the most recent brain

studies carried out worldwide.

To celebrate this unique year, we wanted to include a local element. Three renowned speakers discussed Einstein's visit to Argentina. A journalist spoke about the relationship between Einstein and the local press. A historian, born in 1925, lectured about the political and social life in the 1920s when Einstein came to visit. A third expert reminded us about Enrique Gaviola, an outstanding Argentinian scientist who was one of Einstein's students in Berlin from 1924 to 1925, and was included in Emily J McMurray's *Notable Twentieth Century Scientists* in 1998, nine years after his death.

### **A wider view**

With a long and interesting list of interdisciplinary subjects (see [www.universoeinstein.com.ar](http://www.universoeinstein.com.ar)), the general public – and especially teachers and students – were shown that physics is not isolated from the rest of the world – that science is part of the culture that we all enjoy and to which we all contribute.

We also spent a couple of months researching where Einstein

stayed while visiting Buenos Aires. By mid-2005 we had found Einstein's residence, an old-style villa – in those days owned by the Wassermann family, one of the most prominent Jewish families of the city.

On 1 September, after another couple of months of negotiations with the city government, a group of scientific and political authorities unveiled a plaque to commemorate that Einstein spent a whole month in that house. The *Buenos Aires Herald* reported the event with an article entitled 'Einstein's relativity: OZ = BA' (3 September 2005 p5). The Australian government now owns the villa, which explains the OZ of the title; and BA stands for Buenos Aires.

In the meantime, the conferences continued. A group of teachers and advanced high-school students requested a special course on relativity so that they could study, discuss and air their doubts with a professional relativist. One of the invited speakers, a member of our physics department, whose subject was Einstein and the twin par-

adox, agreed to deliver the course. By October we had organized four ‘Wednesdays of Relativity’ – a series of lectures with 50 attendees on average, composed not only of teachers and students.

Finally there was a theatrical performance on 6 December to close this busy but interesting year. The one-man play *Einstein*, by Canadian playwright Gabriel Emanuel, was performed twice and attracted an audience of more than 400, half of them teachers and young people.

In total we organized 38 con-

ferences, four “Wednesdays of Relativity” and a theatre performance, all in one of the main cultural centres of Buenos Aires. The website has been running throughout the year, receiving lots of questions and comments. This site already includes many articles that can be freely downloaded, as well as audio files of three of the most attended conferences, which can be listened to online. The site will be updated regularly and we plan to include links to more audio files and written contributions from the speak-

ers of the different conferences.

Schools and universities, teachers and students, and the general public have certainly benefited from these conferences and other cultural and educational activities. Organizing an event like this took a lot of time (organization began in mid-2004), but the results have been more than rewarding.

**Alejandro Gangui** *IAFE (CONICET) and CEFIEC-FCEyN, University of Buenos Aires, Argentina (e-mail: gangui@df.uba.ar).*