

Lise Meitner and the Nuclear Fission

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The protagonists



Meitner and Hahn, about 1935. (Courtesy Archiv zur Geschichte der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft, Berlin)

The protagonists



Fritz Strassmann in 1936, age 34. (© Hanne Zapp-Berghäuser, Courtesy Irmgard Strassmann)

The protagonists



Otto Robert Frisch, age 29, shortly before emigrating from Germany in 1933. (Courtesy Ulla Frisch)

Scientific publications

1906. Wärmeleitung in inhomogenen Körpern. II. *Phys. Inst. Wien*, Bd. **115**, Abt. IIa, 125. (Dissertation, Dr. phil.)

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Nuclear Fission paper

No. 3615, FEB. 11, 1939

NATURE

239

Letters to the Editor

The Editor does not hold himself responsible for opinions expressed by his correspondents. He cannot undertake to return, or to correspond with the writers of, rejected manuscripts intended for this or any other part of NATURE. No notice is taken of anonymous communications.

NOTES ON POINTS IN SOME OF THIS WEEK'S LETTERS APPEAR ON P. 247.

CORRESPONDENTS ARE INVITED TO ATTACH SIMILAR SUMMARIES TO THEIR COMMUNICATIONS.

Disintegration of Uranium by Neutrons: a New Type of Nuclear Reaction

ON bombarding uranium with neutrons, Fermi and collaborators¹ found that at least four radioactive substances were produced, to two of which atomic numbers larger than 92 were ascribed. Further investigations² demonstrated the existence of at least nine radioactive periods, six of which were assigned to elements beyond uranium, and nuclear isomerism had to be assumed in order to account for their chemical behaviour together with their genetic relations.

that the surface tension of a charged droplet is diminished by its charge, and a rough estimate shows that the surface tension of nuclei, decreasing with increasing nuclear charge, may become zero for atomic numbers of the order of 100.

It seems therefore possible that the uranium nucleus has only small stability of form, and may, after neutron capture, divide itself into two nuclei of roughly equal size (the precise ratio of sizes depending on finer structural features and perhaps partly on chance). These two nuclei will repel each other and should gain a total kinetic energy of c. 200 Mev., as calculated from nuclear radii and charges.

the compound state must have a life-time a million times longer than the time it would take the nucleus to divide itself. Perhaps this state corresponds to some highly symmetrical type of motion of nuclear matter which does not favour 'fission' of the nucleus.

LISE MEITNER.

Physical Institute,
Academy of Sciences,
Stockholm.

O. R. FRISCH.

Institute of Theoretical Physics,
University,
Copenhagen.
Jan. 16.

A resistance thermometer is formed by winding a single layer coil of copper wire around and in good thermal contact with the microscope condenser which forms part of the apparatus the temperature of which is under control. (In the accompanying illustration the condenser tube is on the right.) This coil forms one arm of a Wheatstone bridge, the other arms being of manganin resistances. Any change in temperature of the apparatus deflects the light spot of the galvanometer connected to this bridge, and for one direction of deflection the spot falls on a photo-electric cell, which operates a polarized relay, which in turn puts off two 30-watt lamps placed on opposite sides of the apparatus. The amplification of the galvanometer current by the photo-electric cell is 10^6 , and including the relay about 10^7 .

The bridge is adjusted to be balanced at a temperature a few degrees above the maximum temperature to which the room rises during a day. The lamps flash on and off every few seconds and maintain the temperature of the external surface of the apparatus constant to about 0.002°C . After the thermostat has been in operation for an hour, we have not been able to detect, by means of a thermocouple, any change of temperature inside the apparatus.

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² See Meitner, L., Hahn, O., and Strassmann, F., *Z. Phys.*, **106**, 249 (1937).

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⁶ Bohr, N., *NATURE*, **137**, 344, 351 (1936).

⁷ Bohr, N., and Kalckar, F., *Kgl. Danske Vid. Selskab, Math. Phys. Medd.*, **14**, Nr. 10 (1937).

⁸ See Meitner, L., Strassmann, F., and Hahn, O., *Z. Phys.*, **109**, 538 (1938).

⁹ Bethe, A. H., and Placzek, G., *Phys. Rev.*, **51**, 450 (1937).

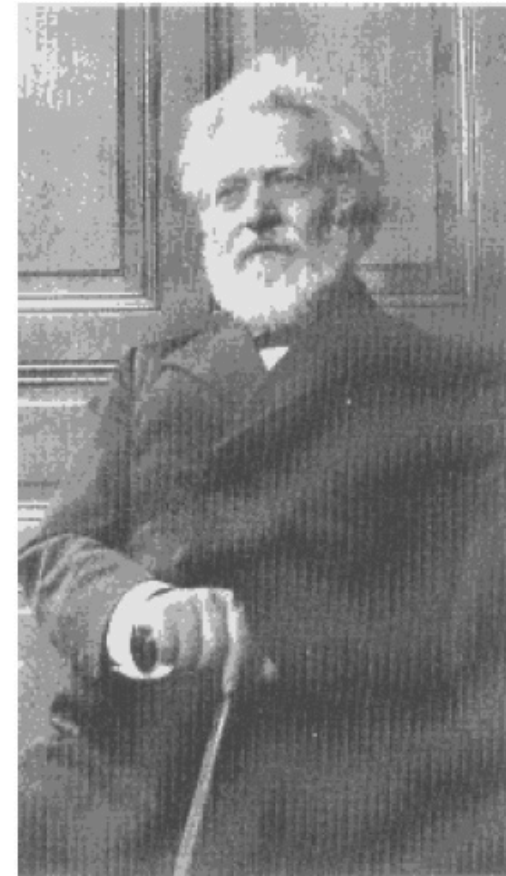
Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner

17.11.1878

Born in Vienna, parents: Hedwig Meitner-Skovran, Dr. Philip Meitner
Third of eight children



Hedwig Skovran Meitner, Lise's mother. (Courtesy Churchill College Archives Centre, Cambridge)



Philipp Meitner, Lise's father. (Courtesy Churchill College Archives Centre, Cambridge)

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner

17.11.1878

Born in Vienna, parents: Hedwig Meitner-Skovran, Dr. Philip Meitner
Third of eight children

Surname: Meietheiner -> Meitheiner -> Meithner -> Meitner

First name: Elise -> Lise

Birth date: 17.11. -> 7.11.

Religion: Jewish -> Protestant

School: Mädchen-Bürgerschule (Girls were not admitted to Gymnasium)
Höhere Töcherschule: -> French teacher

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner



Lise Meitner, about 1900, age twenty-two. (Courtesy Churchill College Archives Centre, Cambridge)

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner

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Höhere Töcherschule: -> French teacher

1901

Private lessons: -> Matura (external) at Akademisches Gymnasium Wien

Begin of the Studies of Physics, Mathematics and Philosophy
at the University of Vienna

Most important teacher: Ludwig Boltzmann

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner



Ludwig Boltzmann, 1898, shortly before he became Lise's teacher.
(Courtesy Bildarchiv der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek)

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner

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Private lessons: -> Matura (external) at Akademisches Gymnasium Wien

Begin of the Studies of Physics, Mathematics and Philosophy
at the University of Vienna

Most important teacher: Ludwig Boltzmann

1906

Ph.D. in Physics (Wärmeleitung in inhomogenen Stoffen)
second woman obtaining a Physics Ph.D. at the University of Vienna

1906/07

Work at the Institut für Theoretische Physik (U. Vienna)

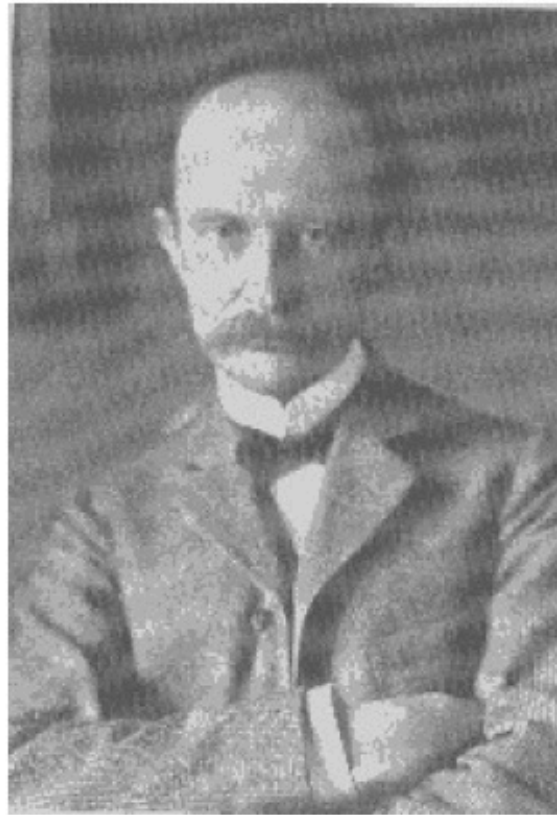
Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner

1907

Berlin

Attended lectures of Max Planck as guest listener

(Females were not yet admitted to Universities in Prussia)



Max Planck, as he appeared around 1900.
(Courtesy Deutsches Museum, Munich)

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner

1907

Berlin

Attended lectures of Max Planck as guest listener

(Females were not yet admitted to Universities in Prussia)

Here she met Otto Hahn (1879 – 1968, Radio-Chemist)

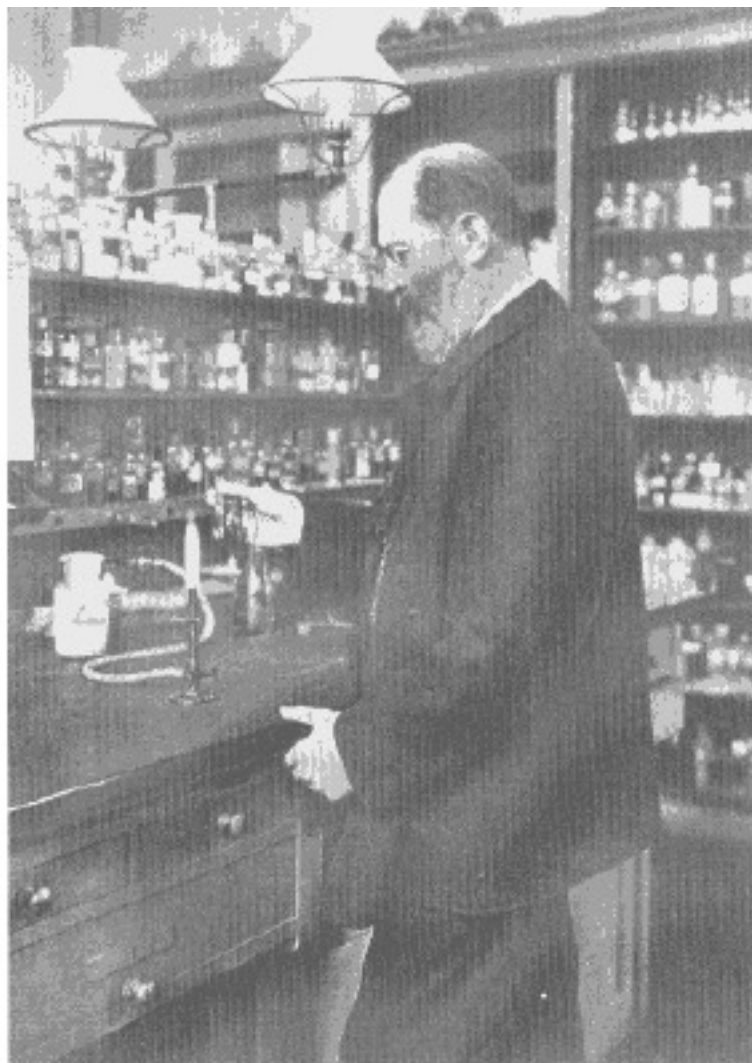
Begin of their joint work on radioactivity

Location: "Holzwerkstatt" of the Chemistry Institute of the Berlin Univ.

Lise Meitner had to use the back entrance and was not allowed to enter the main part of the institute.

This situation ended 1908, after Prussia officially permitted University studies for women.

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner



Emil Fischer, the great organic chemist, about 1900. He reluctantly allowed Meitner to work in his institute in 1907. (Courtesy Deutsches Museum, Munich)

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner



Meitner and Otto Hahn, in their laboratory in Fischer's institute, about 1910. (Courtesy Archiv zur Geschichte der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft, Berlin)

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner

1907

Berlin

Attended lectures of Max Planck as guest listener
(Females were not yet admitted to Universities in Prussia)

Here she met Otto Hahn (1879 – 1968, Radio-Chemist)

Begin of thier joint work on radiactivity

Location: "Holzwerkstatt" of the Chemistry Insitute of the Berlin Univ.
Lise Meitner had to use the back entrance and was not allowed
to enter the main part of the institute.

This situation ended 1908, after Prussia officially permitted
University studies for women.

1909

Hahn and Meitner discover radioactive recoil
and in later years several radioactive nuclides.
Einstein: "our Marie Curie"

1912 – 1915

Assistant of Max Planck
- as first woman at the University
Continuation of the cooperation with Otto Hahn at the new
Institute for Chemistry of the Kaiser-Wilhelm Society

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner



Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Chemistry, about 1930; view from Thielallee. The smaller building at the left is the institute villa, where Meitner lived in an apartment during this period. (Courtesy Churchill College Archives Centre, Cambridge)

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| 1913 | Scientific member of the Kaiser-Wilhelm Gesellschaft
- as first woman |
| 1915/16 | During the war: X-ray nurse at the east front |
| 1917 | Discovery of Protaktinium (together with Otto Hahn) |
| 1918-1938 | Head of physical/radioactivity section of the Kaiser-Wilhelm Institute |
| 1922 | Habilitation in physics
The subject „cosmic physics“, of her inaugural lecture was reported as „cosmetic physics“ in the press |
| 1926 | Professorship for Physics at the University of Berlin
- as first woman in Germany |
| 1933 | Hitler came to power
Many Jewish scientists were dismissed or forced to resign from their posts.
Lise Meitner lost her <i>venia legendi</i> , but felt safe, since she had the Austrian citizenship and the Kaiser-Wilhelm Institute was not a governmental („staatliches“) institute. |

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner



Lise Meitner, about 1930. (© Atelier Lotte Meitner-Graf, Courtesy Archiv zur Geschichte der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft, Berlin)

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner



In the laboratory, about 1930. (Courtesy Archiv zur Geschichte der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft, Berlin)

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner



Solvay Congress, Brussels, 1933, which was attended by the leading atomic and nuclear physicists of the time.

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner

Seated, from left: Erwin Schrödinger, Irène Joliot-Curie, Niels Bohr, Abram Joffé, Marie Curie, Paul Langevin, Owen Richardson, Ernest Rutherford, Théophile de Donder, Maurice de Broglie, Louis de Broglie, Lise Meitner, James Chadwick. Standing: E. Henriot, Francis Perrin, Frédéric Joliot, Werner Heisenberg, Hendrik A. Kramers, E. Stahel, Enrico Fermi, Ernest Walton, Paul Dirac, Peter Debye, Nevill Mott, B. Cabrera, George Gamow, Walther Bothe, Patrick M. S. Blackett, M. Rosenblum, J. Herrera, E. Bauer, Wolfgang Pauli, M. Cosyns, J. Verschaffelt, E. Herzen, John D. Cockcroft, Charles D. Ellis, Rudolf Peierls, Auguste Piccard, Ernest O. Lawrence, Léon Rosenfeld.
(International Institute of Physics and Chemistry, Courtesy American Institute of Physics, Emilio Segrè Visual Archives)

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner

1932

Discovery of the Neutron by Chadwick

E. Fermi investigates the effect of Neutrons bombardement on Uranium

Search for „Transuranes“

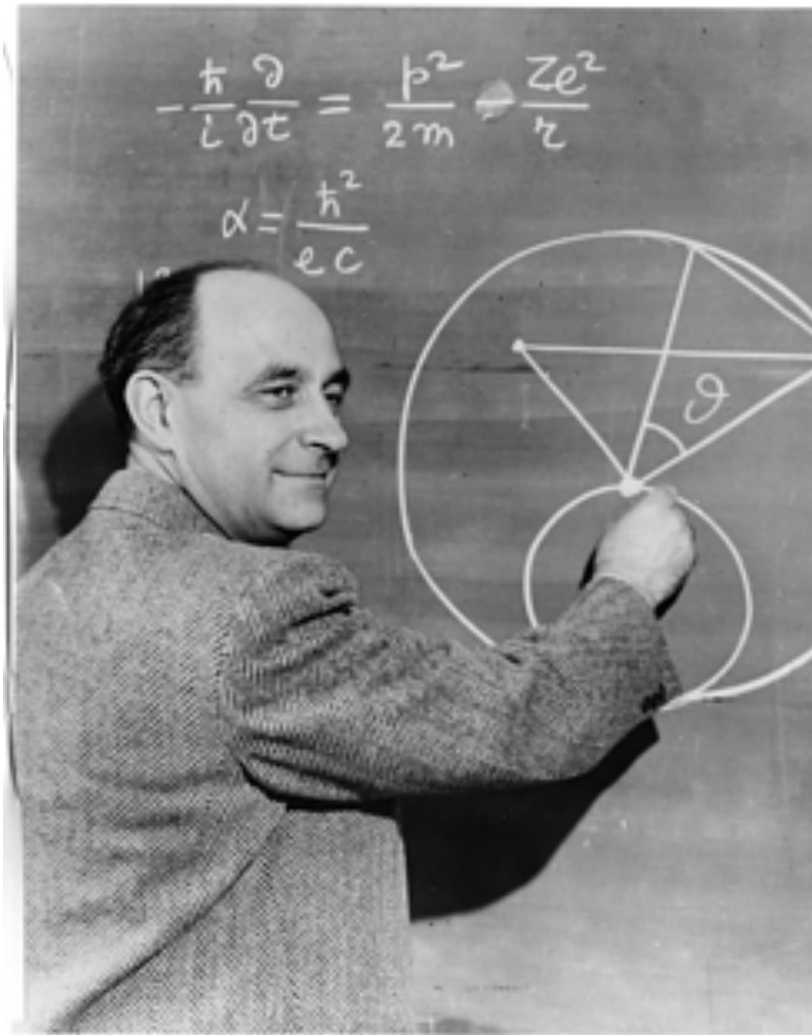
1934

Frederic and Irene Curie work on artificial radioactive nuclids

Nuclear Fission – The Discovery

Hydrogen															Helium												
1 H 1.008															2 He 4.0026												
Lithium	Beryllium													Boron	Carbon	Nitrogen	Oxygen	Fluorine	Neon								
3 Li 6.94	4 Be 9.0122													5 B 10.81	6 C 12.011	7 N 14.007	8 O 15.999	9 F 18.998	10 Ne 20.180								
Sodium	Magnesium													Aluminium	Silicon	Phosphorus	Sulfur	Chlorine	Argon								
11 Na 22.990	12 Mg 24.305													13 Al 26.982	14 Si 28.085	15 P 30.974	16 S 32.06	17 Cl 35.45	18 Ar 39.948								
Potassium	Calcium	Scandium										Titanium	Vanadium	Chromium	Manganese	Iron	Cobalt	Nickel	Copper	Zinc	Gallium	Germanium	Arsenic	Selenium	Bromine	Krypton	
19 K 39.098	20 Ca 40.078	21 Sc 44.956										22 Ti 47.867	23 V 50.942	24 Cr 51.996	25 Mn 54.938	26 Fe 55.845	27 Co 58.933	28 Ni 58.693	29 Cu 63.546	30 Zn 65.38	31 Ga 69.723	32 Ge 72.630	33 As 74.922	34 Se 78.971	35 Br 79.904	36 Kr 83.798	
Rubidium	Strontium	Yttrium										Zirconium	Niobium	Molybdenum	Technetium	Ruthenium	Rhodium	Palladium	Silver	Cadmium	Indium	Tin	Antimony	Tellurium	Iodine	Xenon	
37 Rb 85.468	38 Sr 87.62	39 Y 88.906										40 Zr 91.224	41 Nb 92.906	42 Mo 95.95	43 Tc [98]	44 Ru 101.07	45 Rh 102.91	46 Pd 106.42	47 Ag 107.87	48 Cd 112.41	49 In 114.82	50 Sn 118.71	51 Sb 121.76	52 Te 127.60	53 I 126.90	54 Xe 131.29	
Caesium	Barium	Lanthanum	*										Hafnium	Tantalum	Tungsten	Rhenium	Osmium	Iridium	Platinum	Gold	Mercury	Thallium	Lead	Bismuth	Polonium	Astatine	Radon
55 Cs 132.91	56 Ba 137.33	57 La 138.91											72 Hf 178.49	73 Ta 180.95	74 W 183.84	75 Re 186.21	76 Os 190.23	77 Ir 192.22	78 Pt 195.08	79 Au 196.97	80 Hg 200.59	81 Tl 204.38	82 Pb 207.2	83 Bi 208.98	84 Po [209]	85 At [210]	86 Rn [222]
Francium	Radium	Actinium	**										Rutherfordium	Dubnium	Seaborgium	Bohrium	Hassium	Meitnerium	Darmstadtium	Roentgenium	Copernicium	Nihonium	Flerovium	Moscovium	Livermorium	Tennesine	Oganesson
87 Fr [223]	88 Ra [226]	89 Ac [227]											104 Rf [267]	105 Db [268]	106 Sg [269]	107 Bh [270]	108 Hs [270]	109 Mt [278]	110 Ds [281]	111 Rg [282]	112 Cn [285]	113 Nh [286]	114 Fl [289]	115 Mc [290]	116 Lv [293]	117 Ts [294]	118 Og [294]
			*										Cerium	Praseodymium	Neodymium	Promethium	Samarium	Europium	Gadolinium	Terbium	Dysprosium	Holmium	Erbium	Thulium	Ytterbium	Lutetium	
													58 Ce 140.12	59 Pr 140.91	60 Nd 144.24	61 Pm [145]	62 Sm 150.36	63 Eu 151.96	64 Gd 157.25	65 Tb 158.93	66 Dy 162.50	67 Ho 164.93	68 Er 167.26	69 Tm 168.93	70 Yb 173.05	71 Lu 174.97	
			**										Thorium	Protactinium	Uranium	Neptunium	Plutonium	Americium	Curium	Berkelium	Californium	Einsteinium	Fermium	Mendelevium	Nobelium	Lawrencium	
													90 Th 232.04	91 Pa 231.04	92 U 238.03	93 Np [237]	94 Pu [244]	95 Am [243]	96 Cm [247]	97 Bk [247]	98 Cf [251]	99 Es [252]	100 Fm [257]	101 Md [258]	102 No [259]	103 Lr [266]	

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner



Enrico Fermi (1901-1954)

Credits: Smithsonian Institute Archives

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner



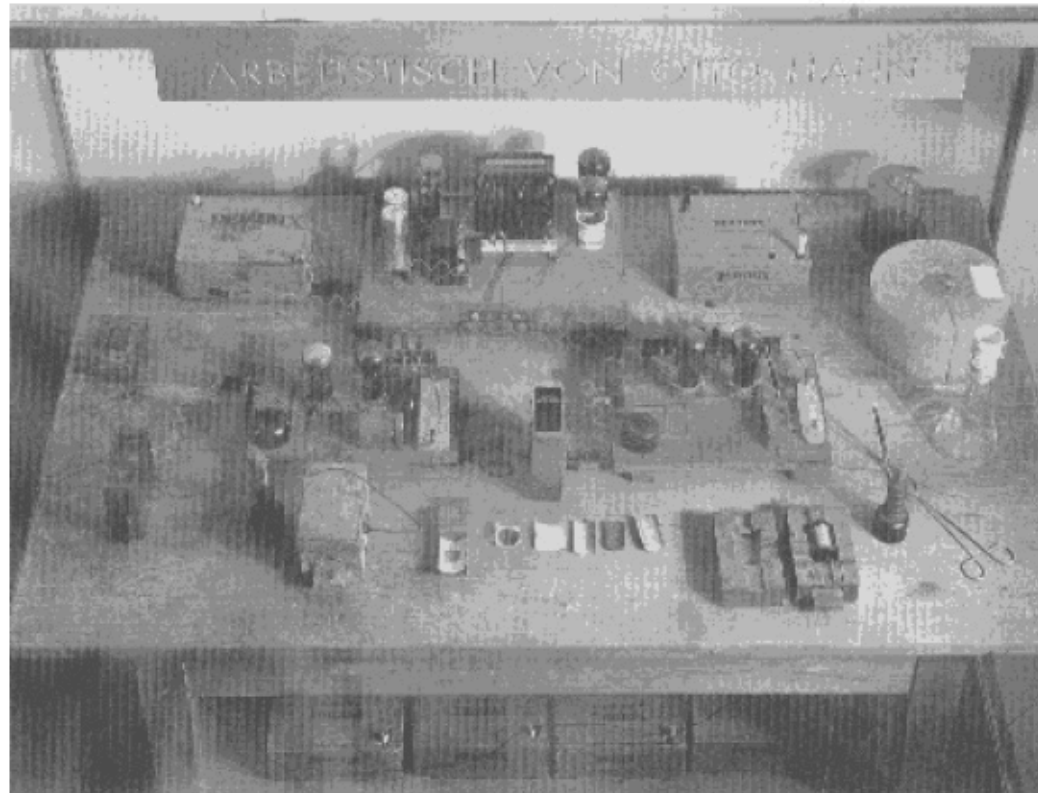
Irène (1897-1956) und [Frédéric Joliot-Curie](#) (1900 -1958) um 1935

Bettmann/Corbis; britannica.com

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner

1935-1938

Repetition of the radioactivity experiments of E. Fermi together with O. Hahn and F. Straßmann



Meitner's physical apparatus, used by the Berlin team from 1934 to 1938 for the work that led to the discovery of nuclear fission. Erroneously displayed in the Deutsches Museum, Munich, as the "Worktable of Otto Hahn." (Courtesy Deutsches Museum, Munich)

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner

1935-1938

Repetition of the radioactivity experiments of E. Fermi together with O. Hahn and F. Straßmann

1938

Annexion of Austria („Anschluss“)

Lise Meitner thus lost her special status and got in great danger due to her Jewish ancestry.

She had to leave in a rush, first to the Netherlands, then to Denmark and finally to Sweden

Her property was 10 marks, a suitcase and a diamond ring Otto Hahn gave her in order to pass the border (was not used).

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner



Miep and Dirk Coster in Groningen on their silver wedding anniversary, 1944. (Courtesy Ada Klokke-Coster, Epse)

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner

1935-1938

Repetition of the radioactivity experiments of E. Fermi together with O. Hahn and F. Straßmann

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She got a position at the institute of Anne Sigbahn (Physics Department of the Nobel Institute).

Nuclear Fission



de.wikipedia.org - Kernspaltung



Mass defect: 0.183 amu

$$E = \Delta m c^2 \approx 170 \text{ MeV}$$

Isotop	Masse des Isotops (amu)
Neutron	1,008664
^{235}U	235,043922
^{139}Ba	138,908835
^{140}Ba	139,910599
^{93}Kr	92,931265
^{94}Kr	93,934362
^{95}Kr	94,939840

Nuclear Fission – The Discovery

Hahn to Meitner, 19 December 1938

19.12.38 Monday eve. in the lab. Dear Lise! ... It is now just 11 P.M. ; at 11:45 Strassmann is coming back so that I can eventually go home. Actually there is something about the "radium isotopes" that is so remarkable that for now we are telling only you. The half-lives of the three isotopes have been determined quite exactly, they can be separated from *all* elements except barium, all reactions are consistent [with radium]. Only one is not—unless there are very unusual coincidences: the fractionation doesn't work. Our Ra isotopes act like *Ba*.^[13]

Nuclear Fission – The Discovery

Hydrogen															Helium												
1 H 1.008															2 He 4.0026												
Lithium	Beryllium													Boron	Carbon	Nitrogen	Oxygen	Fluorine	Neon								
3 Li 6.94	4 Be 9.0122													5 B 10.81	6 C 12.011	7 N 14.007	8 O 15.999	9 F 18.998	10 Ne 20.180								
Sodium	Magnesium													Aluminium	Silicon	Phosphorus	Sulfur	Chlorine	Argon								
11 Na 22.990	12 Mg 24.305													13 Al 26.982	14 Si 28.085	15 P 30.974	16 S 32.06	17 Cl 35.45	18 Ar 39.948								
Potassium	Calcium	Scandium										Titanium	Vanadium	Chromium	Manganese	Iron	Cobalt	Nickel	Copper	Zinc	Gallium	Germanium	Arsenic	Selenium	Bromine	Krypton	
19 K 39.098	20 Ca 40.078	21 Sc 44.956										22 Ti 47.867	23 V 50.942	24 Cr 51.996	25 Mn 54.938	26 Fe 55.845	27 Co 58.933	28 Ni 58.693	29 Cu 63.546	30 Zn 65.38	31 Ga 69.723	32 Ge 72.630	33 As 74.922	34 Se 78.971	35 Br 79.904	36 Kr 83.798	
Rubidium	Strontium	Yttrium										Zirconium	Niobium	Molybdenum	Technetium	Ruthenium	Rhodium	Palladium	Silver	Cadmium	Indium	Tin	Antimony	Tellurium	Iodine	Xenon	
37 Rb 85.468	38 Sr 87.62	39 Y 88.906										40 Zr 91.224	41 Nb 92.906	42 Mo 95.95	43 Tc [98]	44 Ru 101.07	45 Rh 102.91	46 Pd 106.42	47 Ag 107.87	48 Cd 112.41	49 In 114.82	50 Sn 118.71	51 Sb 121.76	52 Te 127.60	53 I 126.90	54 Xe 131.29	
Caesium	Barium	Lanthanum	*										Hafnium	Tantalum	Tungsten	Rhenium	Osmium	Iridium	Platinum	Gold	Mercury	Thallium	Lead	Bismuth	Polonium	Astatine	Radon
55 Cs 132.91	56 Ba 137.33	57 La 138.91											72 Hf 178.49	73 Ta 180.95	74 W 183.84	75 Re 186.21	76 Os 190.23	77 Ir 192.22	78 Pt 195.08	79 Au 196.97	80 Hg 200.59	81 Tl 204.38	82 Pb 207.2	83 Bi 208.98	84 Po [209]	85 At [210]	86 Rn [222]
Francium	Radium	Actinium	**										Rutherfordium	Dubnium	Seaborgium	Bohrium	Hassium	Meitnerium	Darmstadtium	Roentgenium	Copernicium	Nihonium	Flerovium	Moscovium	Livermorium	Tennesine	Oganesson
87 Fr [223]	88 Ra [226]	89 Ac [227]											104 Rf [267]	105 Db [268]	106 Sg [269]	107 Bh [270]	108 Hs [270]	109 Mt [278]	110 Ds [281]	111 Rg [282]	112 Cn [285]	113 Nh [286]	114 Fl [289]	115 Mc [290]	116 Lv [293]	117 Ts [294]	118 Og [294]
			*										Cerium	Praseodymium	Neodymium	Promethium	Samarium	Europium	Gadolinium	Terbium	Dysprosium	Holmium	Erbium	Thulium	Ytterbium	Lutetium	
													58 Ce 140.12	59 Pr 140.91	60 Nd 144.24	61 Pm [145]	62 Sm 150.36	63 Eu 151.96	64 Gd 157.25	65 Tb 158.93	66 Dy 162.50	67 Ho 164.93	68 Er 167.26	69 Tm 168.93	70 Yb 173.05	71 Lu 174.97	
			**										Thorium	Protactinium	Uranium	Neptunium	Plutonium	Americium	Curium	Berkelium	Californium	Einsteinium	Fermium	Mendelevium	Nobelium	Lawrencium	
													90 Th 232.04	91 Pa 231.04	92 U 238.03	93 Np [237]	94 Pu [244]	95 Am [243]	96 Cm [247]	97 Bk [247]	98 Cf [251]	99 Es [252]	100 Fm [257]	101 Md [258]	102 No [259]	103 Lr [266]	

Nuclear Fission – The Discovery

Hahn to Meitner, 19 December 1938

Now last week I fractionated ThX [^{224}Ra] on the first floor; it went exactly as it should. Then on Saturday Strassmann and I fractionated our "Ra" isotopes with MsTh, [^{228}Ra] as indicator. The mesothorium became enriched [in the barium bromide fractionation], our Ra did not. It could still be an extremely strange coincidence. But we are coming steadily closer to the frightful conclusion: our Ra isotopes do not act like Ra but like Ba. ... All other elements, transuranes, U, Th, Ac, Pa, Pb, Bi, Po are out of the question. I have agreed with Strassmann that for now we shall tell only *you*. Perhaps you can come up with some sort of fantastic explanation. We know ourselves that it *can't* actually burst apart into Ba. Now we want to test whether the Ac-isotopes derived from the "Ra" behave not like Ac but La. All very complicated experiments! But we must clear it up.

Now Christmas vacation begins, and tomorrow is the usual Christmas party. You can imagine how much I'm looking forward to it, after such a long time without you. Before the institute closes we do want to write something

for *Naturwissenschaften* about the so-called Ra-isotopes, because we have very nice [decay] curves.

So please think about whether there is any possibility—perhaps a Ba isotope with much higher atomic weight than 137? If there is anything you could propose that you could publish, then it would still in a way be work by the three of us!^[15]

Nuclear Fission – The Discovery

24. Meitner to Hahn, 21 December 1938 (MC). Reproduced in Jost Lemmerich, ed., Die Geschichte der Entdeckung der Kernspaltung: Ausstellungskatalog (Berlin: Technische Universität Berlin, Universitätsbibliothek, 1988), 176

Your radium results are very startling. A reaction with slow neutrons that supposedly leads to barium! By the way, are you quite sure that the radium isotopes come before actinium? ... And what about the resulting thorium isotopes? From lanthanum one must get cerium. At the moment the assumption of such a thoroughgoing breakup [*weitgehenden Zerplatzens*] seems very difficult to me, but in nuclear physics we have experienced so many surprises, that one cannot unconditionally say: it is impossible.^[24]

Nuclear Fission – The Discovery

Publication by O. Hahn and F. Strassmann
Die Naturwissenschaften 1, 11 (1939)

Über den Nachweis und das Verhalten der bei der Bestrahlung des Urans mittels Neutronen entstehenden Erdalkalimetalle¹.

Von O. HAHN und F. STRASSMANN, Berlin-Dahlem.

In einer vor kurzem an dieser Stelle erschienenen vorläufigen Mitteilung² wurde angegeben, daß bei der Bestrahlung des Urans mittels Neutronen außer den von MEITNER, HAHN und STRASSMANN im einzelnen beschriebenen Trans-Uranen — den Elementen 93 bis 96 — auch eine ganze Anzahl anderer Umwandlungs-

Glieder beschrieben werden. Aus dem Aktivitätsverlauf der einzelnen Isotope ergibt sich ihre Halbwertszeit und lassen sich die daraus entstehenden Folgeprodukte ermitteln. Die letzteren werden in dieser Mitteilung aber im einzelnen noch nicht beschrieben, weil wegen der sehr komplexen Vorgänge — es handelt

Im folgenden soll kurz die Abscheidung des Isotopengemisches und die Gewinnung der einzelnen

menten der vierten Gruppe des Periodischen Systems (Trägersubstanz Zr) gefunden. Eingehender untersucht wurden zunächst die Bariumfällungen, die offensichtlich die Anfangsglieder der beobachteten isomeren Reihen enthielten. Es soll gezeigt werden, daß Transurane, Uran, Protactinium, Thorium und Actinium

¹ Aus dem Kaiser Wilhelm-Institut für Chemie in Berlin-Dahlem. Eingegangen 22. Dezember 1938.

² O. HAHN u. F. STRASSMANN, Naturwiss. 26, 756 (1938).

Nuclear Fission – The Discovery

Later statement by F. Strassmann:

|What difference does it make that Lise Meitner did not *directly* participate in the "discovery"?? Her initiative was the beginning of the joint work with Hahn—*4 years later she belonged to our team*—and she was bound to us intellectually from Sweden [through] the correspondence Hahn-Meitner. ... [She] was the intellectual leader of our team, and therefore she belonged to us—even if she was not present for the "discovery of fission."^[40]

40. Strassmann, *Kernspaltung* , 23, and Krafft, *Im Schatten der Sensation* , 221.

Nuclear Fission – The Discovery

Meeting of L. Meiter with O.R. Frisch (Christmas/New Year 1938/1939)

Memoirs of O.R. Frisch

When I came out of my hotel room after my first night in Kungälv, I found Lise Meitner studying a letter from Hahn and obviously very puzzled by it. I wanted to discuss with her a new experiment that I was planning, but she wouldn't listen; I had to read that letter. Its content was indeed so startling that I was at first inclined to be skeptical. Hahn and Strassmann had found that those three substances were not radium ... [but] barium.

The suggestion that they might after all have made a mistake was waved aside by Lise Meitner; Hahn was too good a chemist for that, she assured me. ... We walked up and down in the snow, I on skis and she on foot (she said and proved that she could get along just as fast that way), and gradually the idea took shape that this was no chipping or cracking of the nucleus but rather a process to be explained by Bohr's idea that the nucleus is like a liquid drop; such a drop might elongate and divide itself. ... We knew that there were strong forces that would resist such a process, just as the surface tension of an ordinary liquid drop resists its division into two smaller ones. But nuclei differed from ordinary drops in one important way: they were electrically charged, and this was known to diminish the effect of the surface tension.

29. Frisch, "Interest Is Focussing," 143-148, and *What Little I Remember*, 115-116; the part between ... and ... is taken from Frisch, "Discovery of Fission."

Nuclear Fission – The Discovery

Meeting of L. Meiter with O.R. Frisch (Christmas/New Year 1938/1939)

Memoirs of O.R. Frisch

At this point we both sat down on a tree trunk, and started to calculate on scraps of paper. The charge of a uranium nucleus, we found, was indeed

large enough to destroy the effect of surface tension almost completely; so the uranium nucleus might indeed be a very wobbly, unstable drop, ready to divide itself at the slightest provocation (such as the impact of a neutron).

But there was another problem. When the two drops separated they would be driven apart by their mutual electric repulsion and would acquire a very large energy, about 200 MeV in all; where could that energy come from? Fortunately Lise Meitner remembered how to compute the masses of nuclei from the so-called packing fraction formula, and in that way she worked out that the two nuclei formed by the division of a uranium nucleus would be lighter than the original uranium nucleus by about one-fifth the mass of a proton. Now whenever mass disappears energy is created, according to Einstein's formula $E = mc^2$, and one-fifth of a proton mass was just equivalent to 200 MeV. So here was the source for that energy; it all fitted!^[29]

29. Frisch, "Interest Is Focussing," 143-148, and *What Little I Remember*, 115-116; the part between ... and ... is taken from Frisch, "Discovery of Fission."

Nuclear Fission paper

No. 3615, FEB. 11, 1939

NATURE

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Letters to the Editor

The Editor does not hold himself responsible for opinions expressed by his correspondents. He cannot undertake to return, or to correspond with the writers of, rejected manuscripts intended for this or any other part of NATURE. No notice is taken of anonymous communications.

NOTES ON POINTS IN SOME OF THIS WEEK'S LETTERS APPEAR ON P. 247.

CORRESPONDENTS ARE INVITED TO ATTACH SIMILAR SUMMARIES TO THEIR COMMUNICATIONS.

Disintegration of Uranium by Neutrons: a New Type of Nuclear Reaction

ON bombarding uranium with neutrons, Fermi and collaborators¹ found that at least four radioactive substances were produced, to two of which atomic numbers larger than 92 were ascribed. Further investigations² demonstrated the existence of at least nine radioactive periods, six of which were assigned to elements beyond uranium, and nuclear isomerism had to be assumed in order to account for their chemical behaviour together with their genetic relations.

that the surface tension of a charged droplet is diminished by its charge, and a rough estimate shows that the surface tension of nuclei, decreasing with increasing nuclear charge, may become zero for atomic numbers of the order of 100.

It seems therefore possible that the uranium nucleus has only small stability of form, and may, after neutron capture, divide itself into two nuclei of roughly equal size (the precise ratio of sizes depending on finer structural features and perhaps partly on chance). These two nuclei will repel each other and should gain a total kinetic energy of c. 200 Mev., as calculated from nuclear radii and charges.

the compound state must have a life-time a million times longer than the time it would take the nucleus to divide itself. Perhaps this state corresponds to some highly symmetrical type of motion of nuclear matter which does not favour 'fission' of the nucleus.

LISE MEITNER.

Physical Institute,
Academy of Sciences,
Stockholm.

O. R. FRISCH.

Institute of Theoretical Physics,
University,
Copenhagen.
Jan. 16.

A resistance thermometer is formed by winding a single layer coil of copper wire around and in good thermal contact with the microscope condenser which forms part of the apparatus the temperature of which is under control. (In the accompanying illustration the condenser tube is on the right.) This coil forms one arm of a Wheatstone bridge, the other arms being of manganin resistances. Any change in temperature of the apparatus deflects the light spot of the galvanometer connected to this bridge, and for one direction of deflection the spot falls on a photo-electric cell, which operates a polarized relay, which in turn puts off two 30-watt lamps placed on opposite sides of the apparatus. The amplification of the galvanometer current by the photo-electric cell is 10^6 , and including the relay about 10^7 .

The bridge is adjusted to be balanced at a temperature a few degrees above the maximum temperature to which the room rises during a day. The lamps flash on and off every few seconds and maintain the temperature of the external surface of the apparatus constant to about 0.002°C . After the thermostat has been in operation for an hour, we have not been able to detect, by means of a thermocouple, any change of temperature inside the apparatus.

¹ Fermi, E., Amaldi, F., d'Agostino, O., Rasetti, F., and Segrè, E. *Proc. Roy. Soc., A*, **146**, 483 (1934).

² See Meitner, L., Hahn, O., and Strassmann, F., *Z. Phys.*, **106**, 249 (1937).

³ Curie, I., and Savitch, P., *C.R.*, **208**, 906, 1643 (1938).

⁴ Hahn, O., and Strassmann, F., *Naturwiss.*, **26**, 756 (1938).

⁵ Hahn, O., and Strassmann, F., *Naturwiss.*, **27**, 11 (1939).

⁶ Bohr, N., *NATURE*, **137**, 344, 351 (1936).

⁷ Bohr, N., and Kalckar, F., *Kgl. Danske Vid. Selskab, Math. Phys. Medd.*, **14**, Nr. 10 (1937).

⁸ See Meitner, L., Strassmann, F., and Hahn, O., *Z. Phys.*, **109**, 538 (1938).

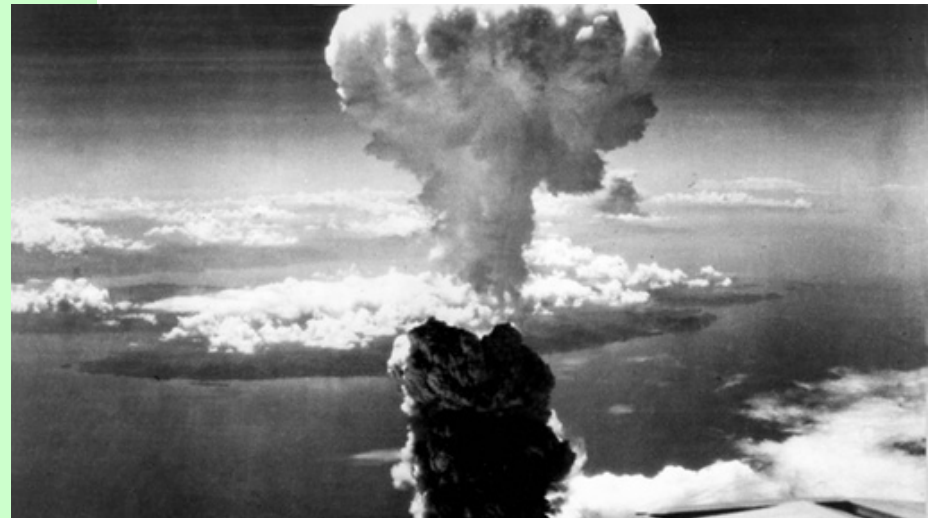
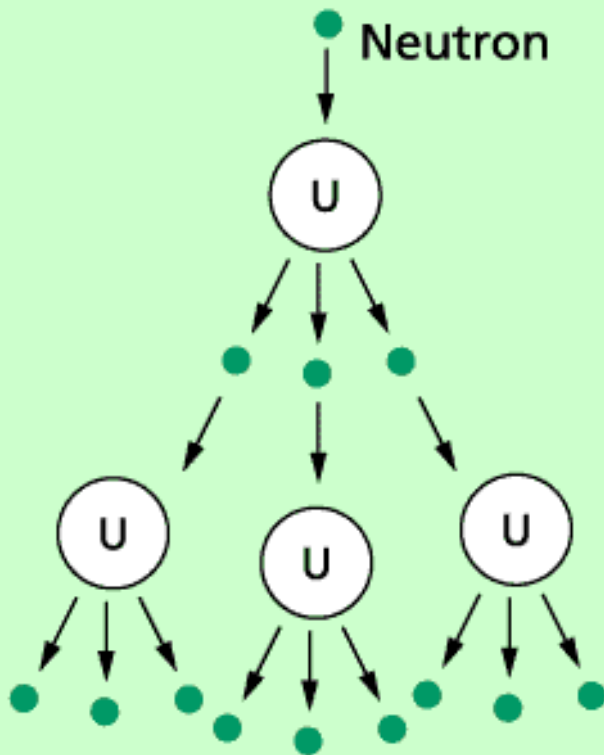
⁹ Bethe, A. H., and Placzek, G., *Phys. Rev.*, **51**, 450 (1937).

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| 1935-1938 | Repetition of the radioactivity experiments of E. Fermi together with O. Hahn and F. Straßmann |
| 1938 | <p>Annexion of Austria („Anschluss“)</p> <p>Lise Meitner thus lost her special status and got in great danger due to her Jewish ancestry.</p> <p>She had to leave in a rush, first to the Netherlands, then to Denmark and finally to Sweden</p> <p>Her property was 10 marks, a suitcase and a diamond ring Otto Hahn gave her in order to pass the border (was not used).</p> <p>She got a post at the institute of Anne Sigbahn (Physics Department of the Nobel Institute).</p> |
| 1939 | <p>Publication of Otto Hahn and Fritz Strassmann and by Lise Meitner and Otto R. Frisch („fission“).</p> <p>First theoretical explanation of fission in the work of Meitner and Frisch.</p> |
| 1939-1945 | She rejected an offer to work at the atomic bomb project for the Allies. |
| 1945 | Three atomic bomb explosions. |

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner

uncontrolled chain reaction:



lernhelfer.de

ard.de / gemeinfrei

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| 1945 | Otto Hahn receives the Nobel prize for Chemistry 1944

The press calls her „mother of the bomb“. |
| 1947-1960 | Research Professor and head of the nuclear physics department at the Technical University Stockholm |
| 1948 | Swedish and Austrian citizenship |

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner



Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Chemistry and the institute villa (right) after air raids,

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner



Meitner and President Harry S. Truman, 9 February 1946, Washington, D.C.

Meitner

was honored as "Woman of the Year" by the National Women's Press Club.

(Courtesy

Churchill College Archives Centre, Cambridge)

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner



Meitner lecturing in Bonn after receiving the Max Planck Medal of the German Physics Society, 23 September 1949. (Courtesy Theodore Von Laue)

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner



Hahn, Werner Heisenberg, Meitner, and Max Born at the Lindau conference of Nobel Laureates, 1962. (© Franz Thorbeck, Courtesy Archiv zur Geschichte der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft, Berlin)

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner



The 1966 Enrico Fermi Prize, presented to Lise Meitner in October 1966 in Cambridge by Glenn T. Seaborg, chairman of the United States Atomic Energy Commission. Otto Frisch is at Meitner's right. (Courtesy Max Perutz)

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner

Videos (Max Planck – Ein Portrait / youtube) at:

08:40

10:32

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. mult. Lise Meitner

1945	Otto Hahn receives the Nobel prize for Chemistry 1944 The press calls her „mother of the bomb“. She insists on a peaceful usage of nuclear energz.
1947-1960	Research Professor and head of the nuclear physics department at the Technical University Stockholm
1948	Swedish and Austrian citizenship
1960	Emerititierung and move to Cambridge
27.10.1968	Death in Cambridge Tomb stone inscription <i>Lise Meitner : A Physicist Who Never Lost Her Humanity.</i>

Nobel price nominations: (48)

- Physics 1937 by Werner Heisenberg
- Physics 1937 by Max von Laue
- Physics 1940 by Arthur Compton
- Physics 1940 by James Franck
- Physics 1940 by Dirk Coster
- Physics 1941 by James Franck
- Physics 1943 by James Franck
- Physics 1945 by Oskar Klein
- Physics 1946 by Max von Laue
- Physics 1946 by Niels Bohr
- Physics 1946 by Oskar Klein
- Physics 1946 by Egil Hylleraas
- Physics 1946 by James Franck
- Physics 1947 by Arthur Compton
- Physics 1947 by Max Planck
- Physics 1947 by Maurice de Broglie
- Physics 1947 by Oskar Klein
- Physics 1947 by Egil Hylleraas
- Physics 1947 by Prince Louis-Victor de Broglie
- Physics 1948 by Harald Wergeland
- Physics 1948 by Otto Hahn
- Physics 1949 by Georg Hettner
- Physics 1954 by Max Born
- Physics 1955 by Georg Hettner
- Physics 1956 by James Franck
- Physics 1959 by J Rotblat
- Physics 1961 by J Rotblat
- Physics 1964 by Max Born
- Physics 1965 by Max Born
- Chemistry 1924 by Heinrich Goldschmidt
- Chemistry 1925 by Kasimir Fajans
- Chemistry 1925 by Heinrich Goldschmidt
- Chemistry 1929 by Max Planck
- Chemistry 1930 by Max Planck
- Chemistry 1933 by Max Planck
- Chemistry 1934 by Max Planck
- Chemistry 1936 by Adolf Deissmann
- Chemistry 1936 by Max Planck
- Chemistry 1937 by Adolf Deissmann
- Chemistry 1937 by Max Planck
- Chemistry 1939 by Theodor Svedberg
- Chemistry 1941 by Frans Jaeger
- Chemistry 1942 by Wilhelm Palmaer
- Chemistry 1946 by Kasimir Fajans
- Chemistry 1947 by Niels Bohr
- Chemistry 1947 by Nil Dhar
- Chemistry 1948 by Oskar Klein
- Chemistry 1948 by Niels Bohr

Honorary Doctorates:

University of Rochester, USA

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, USA

Smith College, USA

Adelphi University, USA

Stockholms Universitet, Sweden

Freie Universität Berlin, Deutschland

Awards:

Leibniz-Medaille der Berliner Akademie der Wissenschaften (1924)

Ignaz L. Lieben Preis der Akademie der Wissenschaften Wien (1925)

Ellen-Richards-Preis (1928)

Frau des Jahres (Woman of the Year) in den USA (1946)

Max Planck Medaille der Deutschen Physikalischen Gesellschaft (1949)

Otto-Hahn-Preis für Chemie (1955)

Orden „Pour le Merite“ der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (1957)

Dorothea-Schlözer-Medaille (1962)

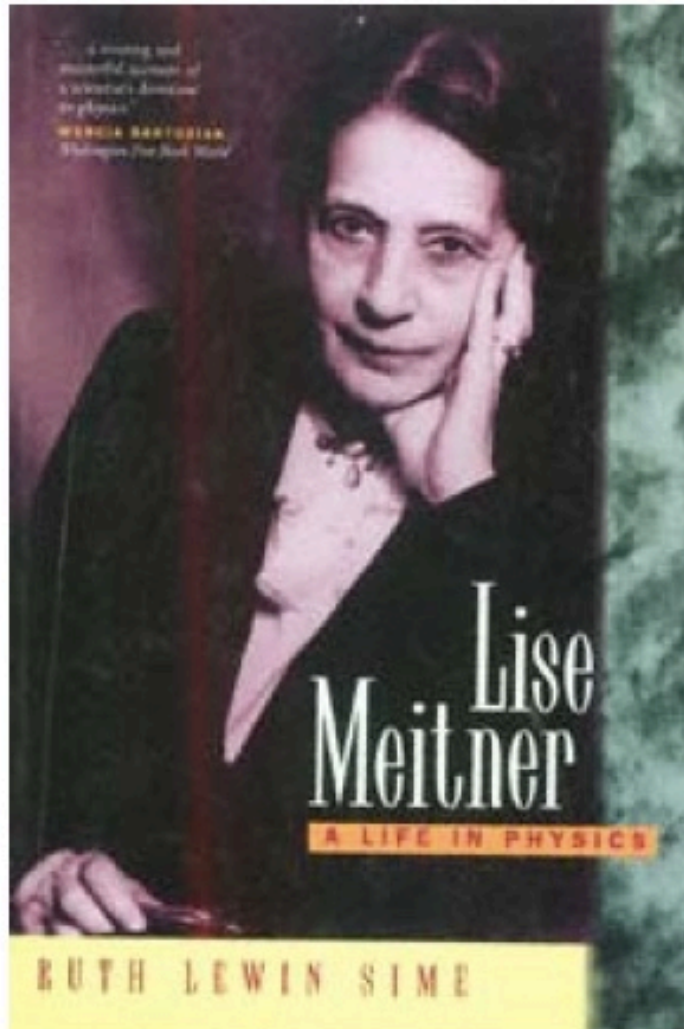
Enrico-Fermi-Preis der Atomenergiekommission der USA (1966)

Österreichische Auszeichnung für Wissenschaft und Kunst (1967)

Element 109 was named meitnerium after her (1997)

Hahn-Meitner insitute for nuclear research (1959)

Further Reading



Lise Meitner

A Life in Physics

Ruth Lewin Sime

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