

WHEN DID HERMANN WEYL PASS AWAY?

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In writing a short scientific biography of Hermann Weyl (1885–1955) for a general audience [1], the first and third authors of this note came across a number of difficulties regarding Weyl’s biographical details. Upon suggestion of the second author, a mathematical supervisor of [1], we chose to investigate further when did Weyl pass away. Equally authoritative sources give contradictory data: *Nature* [4] and the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* [3] report that Weyl died on December 8, 1955, whereas the *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the Royal Society* [7] as well as the *Biographical Memoirs of the National Academy of Sciences* [2] state that Weyl died on December 9, 1955. Things don’t get better if one browses the internet: the websites of the Institute for Advanced Study and the ETH Zürich support December 8, while the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy and the MacTutor History of Mathematics provide December 9.

From April 1950 on until his death (the retirement from the IAS took place in 1951) Weyl and his second wife Ellen Bär (née Lohnstein) split their time between Princeton and Zurich [5]. Weyl died of a heart attack during one of those stays in Zurich, where he and Ellen were living in the house of the Bär family at Bergstraße 27. John Archibald Wheeler, professor at Princeton University in 1955, wrote: “Day after day in Zurich in late 1955 he [Weyl] had been answering letters of congratulation and good wishes received on his seventieth birthday, walking to the mailbox, posting them, and returning home. December eighth, thus making his way homeward, he collapsed on the sidewalk and, murmuring “Ellen,” died. News of his unexpected death reached Princeton by the morning *New York Times*.” [11]

What we have found regarding Weyl’s decease in US newspapers¹ do not establish categorically his date of death. Headlines of *The New York Times* on Saturday, December 10, 1955: “DR. H. WEYL DIES; MATHEMATICIAN. A Founder of the Institute for Advanced Science Taught at Princeton and Abroad. Special to The New York Times.” First paragraph: “PRINCETON, N. J., Dec. 9 – Dr. Hermann Weyl, one of the great mathematicians of the century, died yesterday of a heart attack at his home in Zurich, Switzerland. He was 70 years old.” Second paragraph: “Word of Dr. Weyl’s death reached the Institute for Advanced Study here today. He was one of the original faculty members when the institute was founded in 1933. He became a professor emeritus after his retirement in 1951.” There is some ambiguity as to the temporal reference for “yesterday” in the first paragraph since it might refer to December 9, if the context is New York on December 10, but also to December 8, if the context is “PRINCETON, N. J., Dec. 9.” Given the second paragraph, December 8 is the plausible choice. Other newspapers added “(AP)” and fell into the same ambiguity. As a particular case, on December 10, *The Des Moines Register* (Des Moines, Iowa) announced: “ZURICH, SWITZERLAND (AP)

¹Website: <https://www.newspapers.com/>

— Prof. Hermann Weyl, 70, a collaborator of the late Albert Einstein, collapsed and died on a Zurich street Friday.” thus giving December 9 as date of his death.

Since journalists in Zurich had first-hand knowledge of Weyl’s death, we have also consulted the archives of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*,² the most widely read newspaper in Zurich at the time. On December 9, 1955, is to be found a short “Kleine Chronik” of unknown author whereby Weyl’s decease is announced. The date is not given, but it can be assumed to have occurred the day before. On December 20, quite a long article by Beno Eckmann, entitled “Zum Gedenken an Hermann Weyl,” asserts clearly that Weyl died on December 8, 1955.

The ETH Zürich University Archives have emailed us scanned copies of two necrological notes, which are presumably those described in their catalogue [6]. The first note is a shortened version of the obituary published in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, December 10, 1955. At the bottom it is handwritten: “Geboren den 9. Nov. 1885 in Elmshorn. Gestorben den 8. Dez. 1955 in Zürich. Original: Hs 911: 57.” The second note is a short essay written by Hans Paul Künzi, then professor at ETH Zürich and politician at Canton Zurich. It says: “[Weyl] died in the evening hours of December 8 because of heart-failure.”³ We do not know where, or even if, that note has been published yet it is overall very well-informed.

Wolfgang Pauli was also in Zurich in 1955. He sent letters to Markus Fierz [8] on December 10 and to Max Born [9] on December 11 reporting that Weyl died on December 8 on the street short after falling to the floor. An old lady, says Pauli, spoke briefly to Weyl. Maybe she is the person who heard his last word, which according to Wheeler was “Ellen.”

From the Shelby White and Leon Levy Archives Center of the IAS we received a great deal of documents. The telegram in Figure 1 is the definitive evidence: “HERMANN DIED TODAY COMPLETELY UNEXPECTEDLY OF A HEART ATTACK REGARDS.” It was sent from Ellen Weyl (in Zurich) to Robert Oppenheimer (in Princeton), director of the IAS at the time, on December 8, 1955.⁴

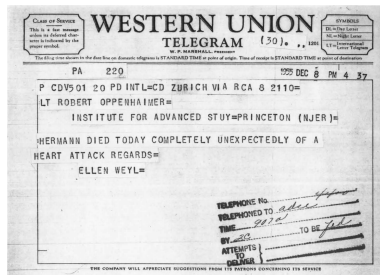


FIGURE 1. December 8, 1955, telegram from Ellen Weyl to Robert Oppenheimer (folder: Herman Weyl, 1946–1993), Director’s Office: Faculty files: Box 37. From the Shelby White and Leon Levy Archives Center of the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, NJ, USA

²Website: <https://zeitungsarchiv.nzz.ch/>

³In German: “der in den Abendstunden des 8. Dezember an einem Herzschlag starb.”

⁴The reader should not be surprised that the telegram in Figure 1 arrived at 16:37 even if Weyl died during the *Abendstunden* (18:00 to 24:00), as reported by Künzi, since there is a time lag of six hours between Princeton and Zurich.

Weyl had recently lost his US citizenship (obtained in 1939) because he was living abroad longer than permitted. Members of the Mathematical Society and the National Academy of Sciences commissioned Stanisław Ulam to convince Senator Anderson that Weyl should regain his US citizenship [10, p. 72]. But he died in the meantime as a German citizen.

The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, December 10, 1955, announced that he was going to be cremated in the Krematorium of Zurich (one of the biggest in Europe) on December 12, 1955, Monday, at 17:00. Later on, the mortal remains were buried in 1999 in a columbarium at the Princeton Cemetery of Nassau Presbyterian Church. The exact location⁵ is Section 3, Block 04, Lot C1, Grave B15 at 29 Greenview Avenue, Princeton (Mercer County), New Jersey, USA.

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