

Bethe's response to Sommerfeld, who had invited Bethe to take up his chair in Munich when he retired shortly after the end of WWII:

20 May 1947

Dear Sommerfeld,

I am very gratified and very honored that you have thought of me as your successor. If everything since 1933 could be undone, I would be very happy to accept this offer. It would be lovely to return to the place where I learned physics from you, and learned to solve problems carefully. And where subsequently as your Assistent and as Privatdozent I had perhaps the most fruitful period of my life as a scientist. It would be lovely to try to continue your work and to teach the Munich students in the same sense as you have always done: With you one was certain to always hear of the latest developments in physics, and simultaneously learn mathematical exactness, which so many theoretical physicists neglect today.

Unfortunately it is not possible to extinguish the last 14 years. For us who were expelled from our positions in Germany, it is not possible to forget.

Perhaps still more important than my negative memories of Germany, is my positive attitude toward America. It occurs to me (already since many years ago) that I am much more at home in America than I ever was in Germany. As if I was born in Germany only by mistake, and only came to my true homeland at 28. Americans (nearly all of them) are friendly, not stiff or reserved, nor have a brusque attitude as most Germans do. It is natural here to approach all other people in a friendly way. Professors and students relate in a comradely way without any artificially erected barrier. Scientific research is mostly cooperative, and one does not see competitive envy between researchers anywhere. Politically most professors and students are liberal and reflect about the world outside: that was a revelation to me, because in Germany it was customary to be reactionary (long before the Nazis) and to parrot the slogans of the German National ["Deutschnationaler"] party. In brief, I find it far more congenial to live with Americans than with my German "Volksgenossen."

On top of that America has treated me very well. I came here under circumstances which did not permit me to be very choosy. In a very short time I had a full professorship, probably more quickly than I would have

gotten it in Germany if Hitler had not come. Although a fairly recent immigrant, I was allowed to work and have a prominent position in military laboratories. Now, after the war, Cornell has built a large new nuclear physics laboratory essentially "around me." And two or three of the best American universities have made me tempting offers.

I hardly need mention the material side, insofar as my own salary is concerned and also the equipment for the Institute. And I hope, dear Mr. Sommerfeld, that you will understand: Understand what I love in America and that I owe America much gratitude (disregarding the fact that I like it here). Understand, what shadows lie between myself and Germany. And most of all understand, that in spite of my "no" I am very grateful to you for thinking of me.

Yours,  
Hans