Traveller's Tales

I've always remembered the day...

I Posed With Einstein

BY YASHODA DILWALI

AS TOLD TO JAYANT V. NARLIKAR

It was a sunny day in the 1940s when Charat drove 75 kilometres with me from New York to Princeton. I had just moved from Delhi to New York, where I still live, after marrying Charat, a statistical analyst with the United Nations. Charat liked going places, meeting people and making new friends. And, now that he was married, he also liked taking his young bride along.

Our marriage was relatively brief, because Charat passed away suddenly in 1966 while we were still young. Among the many mementoes he left behind is a framed black-and-white photograph in our sitting room. It's a photo of Albert Einstein and me.

That sunny day, Charat had to deliver a lecture at Princeton University. He'd been there before and was keen on visiting again, because, as a mathematics student, Princeton was special to him. It was also where his idol Albert Einstein lived and worked. Charat had walked past Einstein's 112, Mercer Street home several times. But, overawed by the great man, he would never have dared to go and see him uninvited.

Now, after spending the whole morning at the lecture, Charat took

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me around. "I'll show you Einstein's house," he told me excitedly. We soon spotted the house, strolled past and returned to look at it again. It was very quiet and peaceful with nobody in sight.

Suddenly, Charat got an idea. *Why not go in and ring the bell?* Perhaps he mustered the courage to do it this time because he had a young sari-clad lady with him.

"Oh, no!" I exclaimed. "It's Einstein's house. How can we?" But, brushing my protests aside, Charat walked firmly up to the porch and rang the bell. As we waited with some trepidation, a woman finally opened the door. It was Einstein's younger sister Maja, who'd immigrated to the US from Italy in 1939, following the introduction of anti-Semitic laws there. She'd stayed with Einstein ever since.

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"Come in," said Maja. We walked into their simple home and Einstein too was there. He smiled and looked benign in his tweed coat all buttoned up. After the handshakes, he politely asked us the purpose of our visit. Charat apologized for intruding and explained that as a mathematics scholar, who'd also studied relativity, he could not resist the temptation of visiting the man who had always inspired him.

Einstein looked happy on hearing that. He told us that neighbourhood children also sometimes dropped by to chat and to learn maths from him. That must have put Charat at ease, and they soon went on to discuss mathematics. As we sat there chatting, Maja, came in again with steaming cups of coffee.

Soon we took our leave and were saying goodbye in the lane outside. "If you need any help," Einstein told Charat, "come back anytime."

Just then, Einstein spotted our Rolleiflex camera hanging from Charat's shoulder. "Well, now that you are here," said Einstein, "would you like to photograph your charming lady with me?"

This was more than anything we could have hoped for! Charat lined up Einstein and me. He then removed the leather case from the Rolleiflex, a camera that used 120-size film and gave 12 shots per roll. Charat must have loaded a new roll that day, but we'd been shooting pictures off and on all morning.

Charat looked at the camera's counter. To his horror he noticed that the roll was over. What bad luck—on such a precious occasion! But when he saw Einstein, pipe in hand, looking up like a child, expectantly for him to click, Charat decided not to let us down—typical

of my husband, who'd never upset a friend. So he took a split-second decision. He'd go through the motions of shooting, even though there would be no photograph.

He pushed the Rollei's film-advance lever, as if there was nothing wrong, for the "next" exposure. Never mind if it broke, or if the film got ripped apart inside. But to his immense relief—I don't know what force in the Universe had come to his aid—the lever turned. Even Charat couldn't explain that. He then pressed the button. The shutter clicked too! But Charat wasn't sure there'd be any photo.

When the film was developed, we got the unexpected thirteenth photo—a real reward for Charat's audacity that day. Or, more so, his courage.

As Charat always believed: Nothing ventured, nothing gained.