BORN IN Russia and brought up in Germany, the physicist Nicholas Kemmer was personally educated by Max Born, Werner Heisenberg and Wolfgang Pauli, becoming a PhD student in Switzerland, a war worker in Canada, and a university lecturer in Cambridge.

From there he was hand-picked in 1952 by the Vice-Chancellor of Edinburgh University, Sir Edward Appleton, and by Max Born (both FRS and Nobel prizewinners), for one of the historic Chairs in Edinburgh University, that of the Tait Professor of Mathematical Physics. For the next quarter of a century Kemmer was to occupy it with distinction and to the great advantage of generations of gifted undergraduates and postgraduates - less than gifted students shy away from the formidable challenges of abstruse mathematical physics.

Professor Sir Martin Rees, the Astronomer Royal, said: "He really was an exceptionally clever mathematician who is remembered by those whom he taught and who read his papers and learned journals on both sides of the Atlantic."

In 1957, as the young secretary of the Edinburgh Fabian Society, I invited Kemmer to speak to us. He chose as his topic "Scotland through a newcomer's eyes." Candid friends can be tiresome. He was compelling and fascinating and the Fabians were entranced by his deployment of insights on the theme "as others see us".

His thoughts modestly offered were crystal sharp, expressed in a soft Germano-English voice which a Sherlock Holmes would immediately have identified as having spent time in English-speaking Canada. I formed a friendship with him over the meal the Fabians gave him - a friendship that lasted 40 years.

Kemmer was born into the intellectual society of pre-First World War St Petersburg. His Lutheran father, from a Germanic family of the Baltic States, was a purchaser of rolling stock from the West for the Tsar's government; he also worked for a British subsidiary of the American firm of Westinghouse. Nicholas Kemmer would say wryly that he was a real mongrel since his mother, albeit born in Moscow, came from a family in the Upper Volga, where his grandfather had a dacha which Kemmer remembered from earliest childhood, before he left Russia in 1916.

He always retained a love for the Russian people and said repeatedly that he wanted to talk to Russians in a happy way, whether or not he came with dollars for them. It was his early mastery of the Russian language which enabled him half a century later to do the translation of Professor Lev Landau and Professor G.B. Rumer's mighty important book What is the Theory Of Relativity? (1959). Of all Western European physicists Kemmer was probably the closest to Landau and the brilliant mathematicians who surrounded him.

His mother was old Russian Orthodox and in his early childhood there was a great discussion as to what religion Nicholas should take on; it was eventually decided by his Lutheran father and Russian Orthodox mother that he should be baptised in a Roman Catholic ceremony. This he said taught him an early lesson in "Encephalitis Lethargica". By which he meant that circumstances sometimes dictated that things should be allowed to work out for themselves and gave him a sympathy later in life with Heisenberg's uncertainty principles.

Having left Russia partly on account of their Germanic background, the Kemmer family made for Hanover where his mother’s family, the Stutzers, had relations. Nicholas had the good fortune to go to Bismarckschule in Hanover to which he said he owed everything to the rigorous teachers.

Sent as a student by his physics master to the University of Gottingen with a letter of introduction, he was taken under the wing of Max Born, whom ironically he was to follow as Stokes Lecturer at
Trinity College Cambridge and later as Tait Professor in Edinburgh. He was also taught by Werner Heisenberg.

Born at that time was publishing his books Mechanics of the Atom (1927), Atomic Physics (1935), and The Restless Universe (1936). When in 1933 Born "got the sack from Hitler" and left for England, Kemmer, who did not have a drop of Jewish blood in him, decided it was time for him to leave since, as an Auslands Deutsche with a Baltic name (Kemmer is a place near Riga), he was under pressure to join the Hitler Youth.

Born gave Kemmer letters of introduction to his friends in Zurich: Wolfgang Pauli and Gregor Wenstel. In Zurich he did his PhD along with Victor Weisskopf, later to be Head of Cern in Geneva. Pauli, on telling him that he had got his PhD with distinction, said: "Nicholas, your English is better than mine. Shall I write more promising or most promising?" In 1936, Pauli's recommendation gained Kemmer a Beit Scientific Fellowship at Imperial College, London.

Kemmer used to joke self-critically that in 1917 he had just missed the Russian Revolution, in the 1930s he had just missed being forced into the Hitler Youth and in 1940 he just missed the Blitz. At the start of the war Kemmer stayed in the house of Orlando Wagner, father of Sir Anthony Wagner, Garter King of Arms 1961-78.

In 1940 he was sent to Canada and Chalk River. Brian (Lord) Flowers FRS, later Rector of Imperial College, London, remembers Kemmer both as a teacher who thought on his feet as he lectured and, as a colleague at Chalk River, enormously hardworking and yet entering into the fun of canoe races organised by Flowers.

As a member of the United Kingdom Government Atomic Energy Research teams based in Cambridge and working from Chalk River, Kemmer contributed to the building of the atomic bomb. This was an exciting period in atomic physics, lightened as he put it by going out on pub crawls in the company of Klaus Fuchs.

After the war Kemmer became a pacifist, a Pugwasher and a member of CND for the rest of his life.

On the recommendation of Sir Rudolph Peierls and Professor Nicholas Kurti he was made a University Lecturer in Mathematics immediately after the war and elected to a Fellowship of Trinity College, Cambridge. Professor Sir John Cadogan, Director General of the Research Councils, said of him: "As his colleague in the same faculty of Edinburgh University and as Professor of Chemistry I had the greatest admiration for Nicholas Kemmer, and we found him a charming man."

He worked on relativity and vector analysis and produced many papers on the theory of nuclear forces.

Tam Dalyell

Nicholas Kemmer, particle physicist: born St Petersburg 7 December 1911; Beit Scientific Research Fellow, Imperial College, London 1936-38, Demonstrator 1938, Fellow 1971; Member of UK Government Atomic Energy Research teams in Cambridge and Montreal 1940-46; University Lecturer in Mathematics, Cambridge 1946-53, Stokes Lecturer 1950-53; Tait Professor of Mathematical Physics, Edinburgh University 1953-79 (Emeritus); FRS 1956; FRSE 1958; married 1947 Margaret Wragg (two sons, one daughter); died Edinburgh 21 October 1998.