

COLLOQUIUM

How Fermi Became Fermi

David N. Schwartz

DN Schwartz & Company

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Enrico Fermi was one of the most significant figures of 20th century physics, with major contributions across a wide range of sub-disciplines. How did Fermi become Fermi? Drawing on research undertaken in preparation for his forthcoming biography of Fermi, “The Last Man Who Knew Everything: The Life and Times of Enrico Fermi, Father of the Nuclear Age” (Basic Books, December 5, 2017) David N. Schwartz will discuss the development of Fermi as a physicist; the role of nature, nurture, and historical circumstance in his career; and the characteristics behind both his strengths and his weaknesses. Are great physicists born, do they make themselves, or do others make them? How does the accident of one’s birth influence a career like Fermi’s? What was it that enabled Fermi to continue to contribute to the field well beyond the age when many great physicists are content to rest on their previous achievements?