Charles Proteus Steinmetz was born Karl August Rudolph Steinmetz in Breslau, Germany on April 9, 1865 - five days before Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. He was born to Jewish parents, with his father Carl Heinrich being employed as a lithographer for the railroad.

Charles was born with a hunchback and a deformed left leg, and would grow to only four feet three inches tall as an adult. As a young boy he struggled with his school work in the beginning, but he didn’t let his physical deformities hold him back. By the time Charles was ten he had improved his academic performance considerably, and was considered one of the school's brightest students. He was also beginning to show a great aptitude for mathematics, physics and classical literature.

In 1889, Steinmetz traveled with a friend to America, arriving first at Ellis Island. He was nearly turned away because he was a dwarf. His friend, however, was able to convince the immigration officials that Charles was a genius who would someday benefit all of America. Steinmetz would soon prove his friend right.

Soon after his arrival in America, Steinmetz went to work for Eickemeyer and Osterheld, a company based in Yonkers, New York. The work he did for them through mathematical equations would lead to the Law of Hysterisis (Steinmetz's Law), which improved the designs of magnetic devices, and breakthroughs for both alternating-current and direct-current electrical systems.

In 1893, Thomas Edison asked Steinmetz to come and work for him. Out of loyalty to his current employer, he turned Edison down. Edison responded by purchasing Eickemeyer and Osterheld, thus having all of the employees come to work for him. When he transferred to Schenectady, New York in 1894, Steinmetz built a campsite on the Mohawk River, and enjoyed traveling up and down the river in a canoe as he worked on his mathematical calculations.
In 1902, Steinmetz became the head of the School of Electrical Engineering at Union College in Schenectady. Under his leadership Union College became one of the best schools to study Electrical Engineering in the country.

On October 26, 1923, Steinmetz and his family traveled by train together for the last time, stopping to see the Grand Canyon, Yosemite and to Hollywood to see the actor Douglas Fairbanks. Exhausted by the trip, the 58-year-old scientist laid down to rest. In his sleep his heart failed, and The Wizard of Schenectady, with 200 patents to his name, was gone.