

## **Albert Schweitzer – the centenary of the hospital in Lambarene, Gabon**

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### **ABSTRACT**

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The authors discuss the activities and achievements of Albert Schweitzer in their principal fields—music and musicology, philosophy and theology, and medicine and

hospital management. They also describe Schweitzer's successive hospitals in Lambarene (Gabon) during the years of 1913-2013.

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Albert Schweitzer was born on January 14<sup>th</sup>, 1875 in Kaysersberg in Alsace. After six months, the entire family moved to Gunsbach. Schweitzer spent his childhood in Alsace, which is place where different religious, political, social, national, cultural, and language factors interact. Schweitzer had a fluent command of German, French, and the Alsace dialect.

Schweitzer's interests and social influences, which guided his further education and activity, were already visible during his childhood and younger years. Music, musicology, theology, philosophy, priesthood, medicine, and wider socio-political activity are all relevant fields to mention when discussing his extraordinary personality. His interventions in the aforementioned fields were also supported by his talents in literature and oratory.

Schweitzer started playing the organ when he was five, and soon went on to give public performances in churches. Further studies established his contacts with famous musicians such as Eugen and Ernst Munch, and C.M Widor. His first piano lessons were conducted in Paris, under the supervision of Isadora Philips and Maria Jeall-Trutmann, who used to be a student of Franz Liszt. It was Jeall-Trutmann who convinced Schweitzer to take up the problem of piano playing technique and the transmission of impulses between the brain and hand. Schweitzer continued the research in Berlin with Karl Stumpf and in Paris with Charles Fere.

Schweitzer's favorite composers were Wagner, Franck, and Johann Sebastian Bach. After a series of brief elaborations, Schweitzer published his monumental work about Bach in French, German, and English. The English version was the basis for the creation of further editions, including two Polish editions published by the Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne in Krakow. He became a recognized organ expert, saving one from destruction and helping to renovate others, and published an international set of rules concerning both the construction and playing of the instrument.

He began performing as an artist and organ virtuoso at 8 years old. He used to play music composed by Bach, Mendelssohn, Franck, Reger, and Widor. He collaborated with and befriended great artists such as Arthur Honegger, Pablo Callas, and Wagner's family, later writing about these relationships. Among Schweitzer's close friends were Paul Vallaton, Romain Rolland, and famous Polish harpsichordist Wanda Landowska,. Some of these friends visited him in Africa and performed with him in Lambarene. Performing and giving lectures in various places, Schweitzer raised funds to fulfill ambitious aims such as financing the national doctor's exam and partially building and running the hospital in Lambarene.

After passing his exams, 18 year old Schweitzer began studying theology and philosophy in Strasbourg. After one year, he took up Hebrew studies and passed the national theological exam after five years of study. He used to take part in lectures at the Sorbonne and in Berlin. He obtained his philosophy PhD degree when he was 24, and after passing a second exam, he gained the degree in theology as well. He started working as a curate and then as a director of St. Thomas Foundation in Strasbourg. As a 27-year-old man, he habilitated for an associate Theology professor.

Schweitzer's major theological works mainly concerned the history of early Christianity. He adopted a scientific point of view to elaborate on the history of Jesus Christ, the torment, and the Last Supper. A paper performing a psychiatric evaluation of Christ became the basis of Schweitzer's PhD thesis in medicine. Further scientific works as well as shorter works pertained to the history and the mysticism of St. Paul and the differences between Paul's and Christ's teaching. Schweitzer is also the author of works discussing faith, ethics, Christianity, other religions, and Immanuel Kant's philosophy. His theological activity was widely appreciated. Adolph von Harnack, a theologian and the preacher of the German Imperial House, said, "Schweitzer's works are a very strong mark to finish an entire epoch of theology, and to start a new one". The University of Zurich awarded Schweitzer with a *honoris causa* and offered him a professorship post at the Theology Faculty, which he rejected. Nevertheless, Schweitzer's works were heavily criticized. Some of his opinions pertaining to teaching and activities of the Church led to a temporary limitation in his priesthood, which he was devoted to throughout his whole life, even in the difficult period in Lambarene. Schweitzer received many awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize. Such prizes helped him to raise funds in order to support the hospital and the leper's village in Lambarene. A unique tribute paid to Schweitzer was naming one of the planets between Mars and Jupiter after him (Freimut Boergen, Jena 1997).

Schweitzer's humanitarian and medical activities rise above his other achievements. As a young man, he started helping orphans, children, and social outcasts. At 21 years old, he decided that before he turned 30 his main occupation would be science and music; after that, however, he would like to devote himself to helping people. At 26, he read a call for help in Africa, including Gabon. He realized the dramatic situation in Africa, and decided to help people there. In 1905, having already gained three doctorate degrees and working as an associate professor, he took up medical studies, not forgetting about his former duties. In

1913, he passed the national medical exam, and after one year he went through his training period in the Tropical Medicine Institute in Paris. He married Helena Breslau, who decided to start nursing studies. Schweitzer raised funds for the hospital in Gabon and bought the hospital its first items. On 26 March 1913, having packed 70 cases with medicine, he left for Africa. He took mainly medicine and some basic equipment, and started his journey.



At the end of March 1913, Schweitzer and his wife went to Bordeaux, from where they started their sea journey to Port-Gentil, and then further 280 km up to the Ogowe river, and they finally arrived in Lambarene. In the city, which is located 40km from the equator, there used to be an American mission which was set up in 1876, by Nassau. The place, Andende, was later taken over by a protestant mission from Paris. The first hospital was created from an old henhouse, which was quickly repaired, cleaned and covered with lime. It was the first modern hospital built in order to care for people's health. Gabon, which is an extremely oppressive place for the Europeans, due to its climate and the fact that there are 40 different languages used throughout the country, welcomed Schweitzer in its own, special way. The arrival of a White Doctor was announced by drums, which could be heard from the evergreen jungle. First patients did not allow Schweitzer to rest for a long time after his arrival. After a couple of months a first barrack made of corrugated steel was put up as a place for three outpatients clinics, surgery, and pharmacy. Later, another barracks were built, including some made of bamboo for local patients and their families. At the time there were 50 beds in the hospital, and it was capable of treating 40 patients per day. Albert Schweitzer's wife helped her husband with operations, treating patients, and also with the anesthetic. She was also responsible for the pharmacy, bandages, equipment, and medical clothes. A cook named Joseph became a nurse and an interpreter. The first operation performed in the hospital was hernia surgery, but the most common issues were various tropical illnesses. There were, however, problems caused by patients and their families who often belonged to hostile social groups.

Due to the start of the First World War, the conditions of work changed. For the first three years of the war (1914-1916), Schweitzer's work was supervised by local soldiers, due to the fact that they were German citizens. An invaluable worker - Joseph, left the hospital at the time. The Prime Minister Clemenceau ordered the interment of foreign citizens living within the borders of French colonies. Due to this decision the Schweitzers were interned first to Bordeaux, then to Garaison, after that to the detainee's camp in Saint Remy, and

finally to Saint Paul monastery. Van Gogh used to be in that place as well. Finally, on 31 June 1918 the war ended. The Schweitzers were released and came back to Alsace. After a hard surgery, Albert Schweitzer became an assistant in dermatology clinic, and a pastor of St. Nicolas church in Strasbourg. His only child, daughter Rhena, was born exactly on the same day as Schweitzer, on 14th January 1919.



In the next five years, to 1923, Schweitzer travelled throughout Europe with a series of lectures and concerts devoted to Bach's music in order to raise fund for his comeback to Africa, and reopening the hospital in Lambarene. After resigning from his posts in Strasbourg he came back to Lambarene in April 1924 for his second stay, which would last three and a half years. He came upon a small barrack, and the frame of another one. Together with a group of local people he started to rebuild the hospital, where the number of patients raised from 50 to 150. The famine and epidemic diarrhoea forced Schweitzer to build a third hospital in Adolinanongo, which would occupy the area of 70ha. He personally took part in reclaiming the jungle, and putting up buildings of the hospital. In the time, two 60-people barracks (each for a different tribe), 40-bed recovery department, and the building named "a huge pharmacy" were built. A house for Schweitzer, his coworkers and their families was built on the nearby hill together with kitchen, warehouse and refectory. What is more, there was also an active theatre. In the neighborhood there were houses for local workers and their families. Some innovative technologies were used such as constructing houses on spiles and stones, roofs and walls made of carefully chosen elements, and taking into consideration factors such as the insolation, air circulation, and the necessity of protection against insects. The rain water was collected in a special tank in order to water vegetables and fruit trees grown there.

The new hospital for 250 patients and their families, as well as for 20 European patients was opened on 21 January 1927. At the time there were some European coworkers helping Schweitzer - a couple of doctors and nurses. In 1927, French colonizers decided to open a relatively unnecessary regional hospital in Lambarene. Between 1927 and 1929 Schweitzer repeated his series of concerts and lectures in various European countries. From December 1929, he put up further buildings of the hospital. In August 1939, with the view of another war, he quickly came back to Lambarene, and stayed there until 1948. During the Second World War the fight between Vichy and de Gaulle's armies made it impossible for the hospital to have any contact with the world. It was only in the early 1940s, when first deliveries of medicine, bandages

and food got to Lambarene. Schweitzer's visit to the USA helped him to raise funds in order to build a lepers' village next to the hospital. Thanks to his regular travels to Europe, Schweitzer was able to gather money for the functioning of the hospital, and to claim numerous awards such as the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952. A part of the Nobel Prize was used to cover the roofs of *Village Lumiere*, a village for lepers, with corrugated steel. There were also new buildings put up on the hill such as doctors' house, kitchen and dining room. Several new departments of the hospital were built - mental illness department, tuberculosis department, obstetrical department, a second house for the Europeans, several wells, and a big tank for rain water. Wooden spills were replaced by concrete ones. In 1954 there are 50 building on the hospital's premises.

Schweitzer was still an active doctor and a surgeon until the 1950s, after that he supervised the work of his assistants. As 87-year-old man, he actively participated in construction of the bridge over the Adouma swap, which allowed trucks to get to the hospital in Liberville. There were new buildings in the hospital every year. In summer of 1964 there were 450 patients in the hospital, as well as 200 lepers. Between 1924 and 1965, until Schweitzer's death, approximately 50 different doctors, mainly from Europe, used to work in the hospital for a period of time varying from several months to a couple of years. After his death, Schweitzer was buried in Lambarene, next to graves of his wife, and two close coworkers.

In the year of Schweitzer's death, there were 478 beds in the hospital, 150 places for lepers. Throughout its existence, the hospital treated 6000 Africans, and almost 80 Europeans. Apart from the period during the Second World War, the numbers of patients, and childbirths were constantly increasing. Between 1924 and 1966, the entire number of patients reached 140000. Within such as the impressive number, bearing in mind the conditions, there were over 14000 operations, and 3000 childbirths. From 861 lepers, who were taken into the statistics from 1950, as much as 610 came back home in a relatively good condition. Students from European universities started to come to the hospital for their periods. What is more, the infrastructure of the hospital was constantly developing as well.



In 1968, plans to build a new hotel started to be discussed, among them, there was a project prepared by the Polish Poray-Biernacki studio. However, a difficult financial situation forced the management of the hospital to limit the investment plans. What is more, the hospital was included in the national healthcare system, and was facing troubles with the number of medical staff. The situation improved due to the support of two

subsequent presidents of Gabon, Leon Mba, and Albert Bernard Bongo, who after turning to Islam in 1974 changed his name to El Hadj Omar Bongo. The latter one saved the hospital, endangered by the crisis, in 1975. The government of Gabon repaid all the debts, and declared its willingness to support the construction of a new hospital, assigning 500 million francs, which at the time was an equivalent of 3 million marcs. Further funds were raised by the director of the hospital Max Caulet, and his international foundation FISL. Utility buildings, child dentistry unit for the Biafra children were all built in the 1970s. Some of the old buildings were renovated as well.

In 1974, thanks to a 1 million \$ donation from the American government, and further funding from the Gabonese government, a new hospital was built on the ground bought by Schweitzer and his daughter Rena. The hospital, after such a purchase, occupied the area of 120ha. To celebrate Schweitzer's birthday, on 14 January 1977 a new polyclinic was opened, and after one year, a new "huge pharmacy" was created. It was a very big barrack with examination, treatment, and preventive activities rooms, two surgeries (septic and aseptic), pharmacy, laboratory, and x-ray. There was a room for 180 patients and their families in the hospital. Schweitzer's guidelines were used during the whole process. The inauguration of the hospital took place on 17 January 1981. In 1984, first Polish doctors, Tamara and Sławomir Kołakowski started their work in the hospital, and they were later replaced by Zbigniew and Halina Petrykowski. Each of the couples worked in the hospital for six years.

Halina Petrykowska was also the managers of the hospital, which was rather shocking, due to the fact that the manager of the hospital was a woman. Later, other doctors from Bydgoszcz started coming to Lambarene. The unstable situation in Gabon, riots, and strikes of the medical personnel, and lower governmental donations cause temporary problems in the functioning of the hospital. In 2000, the process of renovation started, as there was not much left after the initial buildings due to the humid climate and termites. On the Adende hills, a former place of the Paris mission, a junior high school is being built. There are remains of the mission house, and Schweitzer's house on the hill. In the preserved 'historical area', there is the 'huge pharmacy' building, which after the renovation in 2005, is a house in the museum which shows the hospital as it used to look like in 1965, in the year of Schweitzer's death. In the area there are also recovery buildings, doctors' houses as well as Schweitzer's house. The part of the hospital is often visited by tourists from all over the world.

The centre of the current hospital is the "huge pharmacy," and the management building. Others, such as surgery, pediatrics, gynecology,

internal medicine are located nearby. Further, there are buildings of dentistry, laboratory, one for people admitted due to social reasons. The remaining buildings perform service functions (garage, carpentry shop, laundry, pump station, etc.), and social functions (primary school, nursery with a playground), as well as housing functions for workers and their families. The hospital also conducts medical research on malaria. Reports concerning the research have been published in medical journals for approximately 20 years. Another important field of research is immunology and molecular biology. The issues are taken up together with international organizations from Germany, the University of Tübingen, Medical Centre in Leiden, and St. George Medical School from Great Britain or the Medical University from Vienna. The focal point of the research is the search for genetic and immunological risk factors concerning malaria among children.

The Hospital in Lambarene has been, in the cooperation with Vienna School of Clinical Research (VSCR), engaged in educational activities among doctors. The aim of the program is to develop efficient tools allowing for an effective treatment, and understanding the mechanism of development of tropical diseases such as AIDS, malaria or tuberculosis. It is a unique program on the Central African scale, as it ensures a high educational standard, fulfilling the international standards.

Albert Schweitzer's creation is still alive. Every year, the hospital advises over 30000 people, there are 1000 childbirths as well as 2000 consultations, the hospital takes care of 5000 children living in the neighborhood, and of 1500 children living in Lambarene. The Village of Light, a located couples of hundred meters from the hospital may treat 300 people, including 40 suffering from leprosy. The hospital employs 40 people, including 70 people of medical staff and educates approximately 200 students. The financial part is secured mainly by governments of Gabon and Switzerland, but also by international Schweitzer's organizations FISL and AISL, and national ones (European, American and Japanese).



Albert Schweitzer's life, thought and creation have left a lot of traces in various areas of his activity. The real and tangible fulfillment of his life is the hospital in Lambarene. Its existence has given a boost to the creation of similar hospitals in places such as Haiti or Mexico.

According to Schweitzer the hospital was a **great improvisation**. The most important part of his spiritual legacy is the philosophical thought. Schweitzer said 'When you portray me, you do not portray a doctor helping people. What you do portray is my tribute to life, which is the natural contribution in the world'. Schweitzer's philosophy

is present not only in his words, but also in his activities, as it was the basis of his entire medical activity.

The coherence of thoughts and actions was the basis of his life. He wrote "The harmony and strength are within us only when our thoughts and actions create a unity" The Great Doctor did also notice the fact that a lack of internal integrity is a threat to every individual: 'Each unfaithfulness towards our internal being profanes our soul; unfaithfulness rips our soul, and we slowly bleed to death. Harmony and strength are present in our lives only when the external elements are similar to the internal ones'. A lot of Schweitzer's ideas were spread all around the world in the form of ecological and ethical organizations; there is also a hospital in Haiti named after him. Nevertheless, the world which is now facing the hard reality of global politics, and the unprecedented exploitation of natural resources, may more than ever need simple words which would be a guideline for those, who want to protect its beauty and diversity. It is worth mentioning, in order to avoid the unjustified pathos, that when the USA used nuclear bombs against Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Schweitzer believed that the new kind of weapon is in opposition to the respect towards the life on Earth. In the next few years he watched carefully the development of the global political situation, and especially the nuclear technology. He exchanged letters with experts such as Albert Einstein and Robert Oppenheimer, who was one of the creators of the first nuclear bomb, and he stayed in touch with Bertrand Russell as well. Some of Schweitzer's actions were disapproved by the American government, and CIA started collecting data which would undermine his reputation as a humanist, thinker and a Nobel Peace Prize winner. Albert Schweitzer's attitude was, however, that it is his duty to always tell the truth.

Let us remind once again - in 1915, two years after his arrival in Gabon, Schweitzer was traveling up the river Ogowe, when he experienced, as we would call it today, a revelation. He was observing a group of hippopotamues running along the river. He discovered, and described the "reverence for life" rule, which is a basic and universal ethical rule, which he was constantly looking for. A rule which has a huge importance for the world's existence in its entire beauty and diversity, was created in such a forgotten and isolated place. The legacy of Albert Schweitzer is also understanding the fact that world is a value within its entire multidimensionality and interdependency. Until we appreciate Schweitzer's legacy there a hope.

#### **Conflicts of interest**

The authors have declared no conflicts of interest.

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