

Syracuse University

SURFACE

The Courier

Libraries

Fall 1986

Albert Schweitzer and His Nuclear Concerns Seen Today

Rhena Schweitzer Miller

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/libassoc>



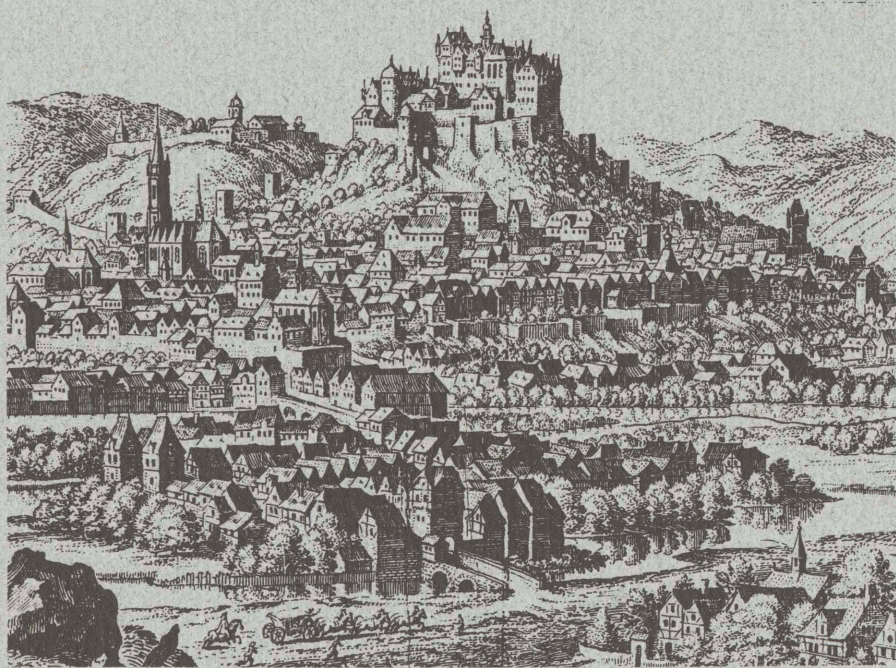
Part of the [Political History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Miller, Rhena Schweitzer. "Albert Schweitzer and His Nuclear Concerns Seen Today." *The Courier* 21.2 (1986): 17-25.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Libraries at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in *The Courier* by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY ASSOCIATES
C O U R I E R



VOLUME XXI, NUMBER 2, FALL 1986

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY ASSOCIATES
COURIER

VOLUME XXI

NUMBER TWO

FALL 1986

- Theology for Freedom and Responsibility:
Rudolf Bultmann's Views on Church and State
By Antje Bultmann Lemke, Syracuse University 3
- Albert Schweitzer and His Nuclear Concerns Seen Today
By Rhena Schweitzer Miller 17
- The Albert Schweitzer Papers at Syracuse University
By Ursula Berkling 27
- Clothing of Wrought Gold, Raiment of Needlework:
Embroidered Chasubles in the Syracuse University
Art Collections
By Susan Kyser, Syracuse University Art Collections 41
- Common Cause: The Antislavery Alliance of Gerrit
Smith and Beriah Green
By Milton C. Sernett, Associate Professor,
Department of Afro-American Studies,
Syracuse University 55
- My First Book—*Treasure Island*
By Robert Louis Stevenson 77
- News of the Syracuse University Libraries and
the Library Associates 89

Albert Schweitzer and His Nuclear Concerns Seen Today

BY RHENA SCHWEITZER MILLER

Mrs. Miller, a trained pharmacologist, became her father's assistant during the late years of his life in Africa. After earlier visits to Lambaréné, she moved there in 1960 and worked at his side as head of the laboratory until his death in 1965. For the following five years, she took on the duties of director of the hospital, in accordance with her father's wishes as expressed in his will. In 1971 she came to the United States and now resides with her husband, Dr. David Miller, in Georgia.

When it became apparent that the time had come to ensure the continued safekeeping of her father's papers, Mrs. Miller turned for advice to Antje Bultmann Lemke, her friend and colleague at the Albert Schweitzer Center in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Professor Lemke, who divides her affections between friends and libraries (particularly the Syracuse University Libraries), began arrangements for the purchase of this collection for the George Arents Research Library. As a result of her acuity and vision, not to mention immense effort, Syracuse University now holds the largest group of Albert Schweitzer papers in North America.

Mrs. Miller addressed the Library Associates at their 1986 Spring Luncheon, choosing a subject which, as she knew and as his notebooks and correspondence emphatically affirm, was very much in her father's thoughts during the last years of his life. Her talk is given in its entirety herewith.

My father, Albert Schweitzer, is known as having been a theologian, a philosopher, a musician, and a medical doctor in the equatorial forests of Gabon, where he founded and directed the Albert Schweitzer Hospital in Lambaréné for more than fifty years. His hospital still exists and today, extensively modernized, continues to give medical care to its African patients in the same spirit of understanding of African customs that existed during my father's lifetime.

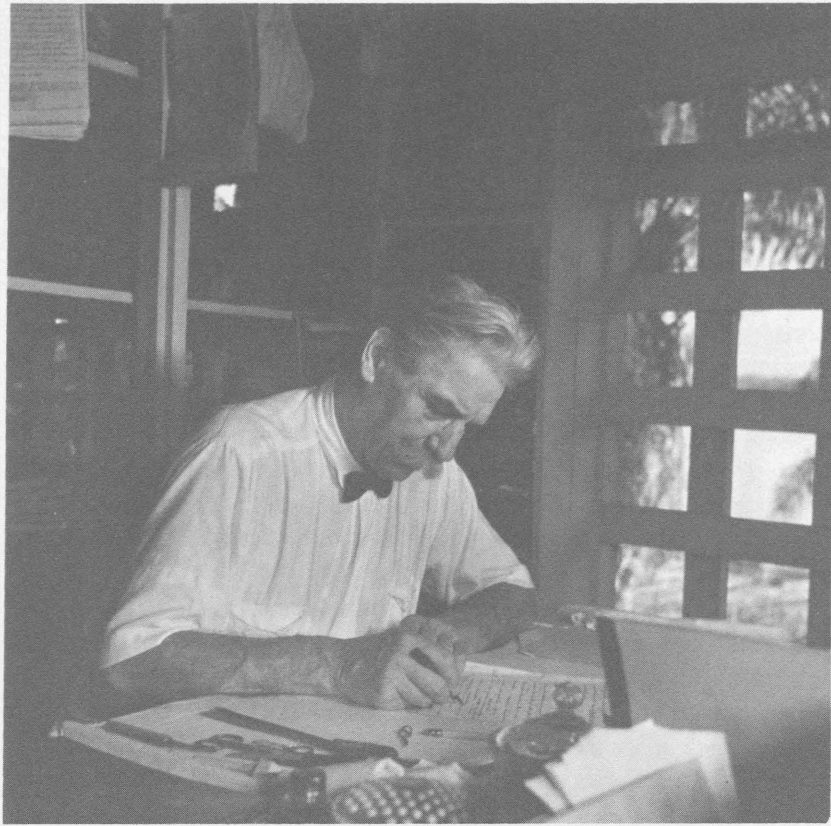
When he was asked what he considered to be his most important contribution, he used to reply that it was his work as a philosopher. The basis of his ethical philosophy was the principle of Reverence for Life, which guided him in all that he did. This principle also compelled him to make his voice heard for the cause of peace, and specifically in warnings of the dangers of the testing and use of nuclear weapons. When the outbreak of World War I in 1914 overtook my parents in their hospital in Lambaréné, it came as a terrible shock to them. Not only was their work interrupted at the hospital, but, as German citizens in a French colony, they became prisoners of war. For my father this catastrophe was a further sign of the decline of Western civilization—a decline which he had already perceived and was fearing by the turn of the century. He had never been able to share the general optimism accompanying the dramatic technical progress of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, nor the assumption that because of that progress mankind had also progressed in the intellectual and ethical spheres. His impression, on the contrary, was that in many ways “we were not only below the level of past generations, but were in many respects only living on their achievements”.

On the second day of his internment my father started work on his most important book, *The Philosophy of Civilization*, trying to find a basis in rational thought upon which a viable and ethical civilization could be built.

For months he lived in continuous mental struggle, until, while making a long trip on the Ogowé River to visit a patient during a brief period of freedom in 1915, there flashed upon his mind at sunset the words: ‘Reverence for Life’. This was the revelation for which he had been looking and of which he later recorded: “Now I had found a way to the idea in which world and life affirmation and ethics are contained side by side. Now I know that the world-view of ethics and life affirmation together with their ideals of civilization is founded in thought.” Although my father thought he had found the principle which could be the basis for a viable and ethical civilization, he knew that reality was very different; indeed, it became more and more threatening.

In 1932 in his Goethe address in Frankfurt my father warned of the dark clouds of an impending dictatorship.

All of World War II my father spent in his hospital in Lambaréné,



Albert Schweitzer writing at his desk in Lambaréné.

which also became a refuge for the wives and children of Frenchmen who were fighting each other, as Gaullists and as followers of Maréchal Pétain, in the vicinity of the hospital.

To be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for 1952 came for him as a big surprise. When one of his nurses, having heard the announcement on the radio, burst into his room, saying that she had important news for him, he asked: "Which cat has had kittens?" Though realizing what a great honor he was being awarded, he felt he could not leave his work at the hospital to attend the ceremony. It was not until 1954 that he went to Oslo and said in his acceptance speech: "Man has become a superman. His super-humanity arises from the fact that through his acquisition of knowledge and power he not only

disposes of his own body, but also can command and utilize the powers that reside in nature itself. This superman suffers, however, from a fatal, spiritual imperfection. He does not possess the superhuman reason, which should accompany his superhuman might. Knowledge and power have produced results that have become more fatal than helpful to him.”

This brief statement was his only mention on that occasion of the dangers of nuclear war. He ended his speech with an eloquent appeal to all responsible men and to all nations for peace: “May those who have in their hands the fate of the nations take care to avoid whatever may worsen our situation and make it more dangerous. And may they take to heart the words of the Apostle Paul: ‘If it be possible as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men’. Paul’s words are valid not only for individuals but for whole nations as well. May the nations, in their efforts to keep peace, go to the farthest limits of possibility so that the spirit of man shall be given time to develop and grow strong—and time to act.”

Even at that time, my father—though now universally known and respected for pleading the cause of peace in Oslo—shied away from getting involved in matters of a possible political nature. Efforts to persuade him to lend his voice and moral stature to the campaign against nuclear weapons during the first decade after Hiroshima and Nagasaki were unsuccessful. Nevertheless, he had already begun to inform himself as best as he could on the technical details and health consequences of nuclear radiation.

For my father the Nobel Peace Prize carried with it an obligation. He felt very strongly that it was his duty to do something to become worthy of the honor. Communicating with Albert Einstein, meeting Bertrand Russell in London, attending a conference of concerned Nobel laureates in Lindau—all these activities put a kind of moral pressure on him.

In 1957 Norman Cousins, who had already been corresponding with my father, came to visit him in Lambaréné. One of the purposes of Cousins’s trip was to urge my father to make some statement on world peace. He considered him to be one of the very few individuals in the world whose voice would be widely heard and carry authority. Still my father resisted: “All my life I have carefully stayed away from making pronouncements on public matters. . . . It was



Rhena Schweitzer with her father in Lambaréné (Photo: Erica Anderson).

not because I had no interest in world affairs or politics. . . . It was just that I felt that my connection with the outside world should grow out of my work or thought in the field of theology or philosophy or music. I have tried to relate myself to the problems of all humankind rather than to become involved in political disputes. I wanted to be one man speaking to another man.”

Cousins’s persistence began to wear down my father’s resolve, though he still had qualms about speaking publicly of matters that he considered to be problems for scientists, about which it would be too easy to discredit him as a non-scientist. But with the information on nuclear weapons and their biological effects that began to pour in upon him from all over the world and with the interest of people like Jawaharlal Nehru, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Martin Buber, Père Dominique Pire, Pablo Casals, and others, he finally decided to speak out with the objective of addressing himself mainly to the dangers of

nuclear testing. He felt that “the scientific aspects of testing may be complicated, but the issues involved in testing are not”. Next came the choice of the manner in which he would be willing to make a statement. He had no great faith in the press and considered a proposed meeting of world leaders as much too complicated. Finally, he settled on the idea of writing a message to be broadcast by radio from Oslo, the city of the Nobel Peace Prize. This statement, titled “A Declaration of Conscience”, was released on 23 April 1957, three months after Cousins’s departure from Lambaréné. It was the beginning of an intense period of activity—of alerting individual citizens and world leaders to the frightful dangers inherent in the nuclear arms race.

By then my father was eighty-two years old, still adding buildings to his hospital and supervising its medical activities. Nevertheless, despite the complex array of daily burdens, he acquired an impressive knowledge of scientific matters and stayed abreast of the developments in the nuclear field.

At the end of 1957 my father received a request from Linus Pauling to add his signature to an appeal by scientists of many countries, urging an international agreement to stop nuclear weapon tests. He signed the petition, along with thirty-six other Nobel laureates and over nine thousand other scientists. More importantly, he worked on three successive appeals for which he had had an invitation from Radio Oslo. I was with him on his eighty-third birthday on 14 January 1958 in Lambaréné and was frightened by his state of near-exhaustion. Work on these appeals, which were broadcast on 28, 29, and 30 April and later published under the title “Peace or Atomic War”, had taken a heavy toll on his eyesight and on his health in general. He confided to me: “This work nearly killed me”.

From then on, a world-wide correspondence and cooperation with the leaders of the movement against atomic weapons and testings took a great deal of his time. About the manner in which this fight should be conducted, my father differed from many of the other leaders. Rather than relying upon the press or other communication media, or upon large international organizations or conferences, he considered as most effective the stirring up of public opinion. He wanted to address his fellow men and make them aware that their human rights and international law were being violated. He said: “Public

opinion must realize that atomic weapons contradict international law”.

By the end of 1958 a trilateral moratorium was concluded between the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain on nuclear weapon tests. It lasted until 1960, when, on 13 February, France detonated its first nuclear explosion in the Sahara. Test ban negotiations continued, but with no agreement. And testing was resumed by all great powers.

Norman Cousins urged my father to send his objections to the resumption of testing to President Kennedy. But my father felt that to criticize the President would jeopardize the influence he might have in the United States. Nevertheless, he felt that the present situation was deplorable. “We are sinking ever more deeply into inhumanity by the resumption of tests.” All this was happening because “public opinion the world over has treated lightly the dangers of nuclear radiation”. As a tormented man, he wrote to Cousins:

I have been working for months on the wording of a new appeal. But it is impossible to finish it and publish it. The situation of nuclear politics never ceases to change. It is never stabilized. Therefore one cannot judge or advise. The text that I made a month ago no longer corresponds to reality. It is outdated by events. I am watching and when I think I am able to criticize and to propose, I shall speak.

This concern about a new appeal never left him during the final four years of his life. Shortly before his death in 1965, he said to me: “I am desperate about the world situation and know that I should launch a new appeal, if only I could have the time and would not be so tired”.

Despite his former refusal and after much hesitation, in April 1962 my father nevertheless sent a letter to President Kennedy, in which he pleaded for disarmament and a test ban treaty, saying that “only when the states agree not to carry out nuclear tests any more can promising negotiations about disarmament and peace take place”. In his answer President Kennedy wrote: “No decision I have taken in my administration has given me more concern and sorrow than the decision to resume nuclear testing”.

A positive development did emerge, however, when a test ban treaty was concluded between the United States and the Soviet Union and signed in Moscow in August 1963. My father then wrote to President Kennedy calling the treaty “one of the greatest events in the history of the world” and thanked him for his foresight and courage.

Speaking out for sanity in nuclear arms policy in the 1950s and 1960s required great courage. These were the years of McCarthyism and backyard bomb shelters in the United States, when many moderate and responsible voices were automatically labelled as communist if they dared question the buildup and testing of nuclear arms. There was a somewhat similar hysteria within the borders of the other great powers. My father suffered from this pervasive atmosphere, and much of the mounting criticism of his hospital during his last year seemed designed to discredit him as a critic of nuclear arms testing. But he persisted undeterred, even after his ninetieth birthday. Until his last days he spared no time or effort in this fight, feeling that despite all his endeavors he had not done enough.

However, when he died on 4 September 1965, the world was united in mourning the man who, as Erich Fromm had written:

spoke the word, the keyword for man’s survival, the word ‘life’. He could have spoken of love, of truth, of justice, values which formed the basis of his existence. By speaking of Reverence for Life as the principle which ought to govern all human action, as the cornerstone of ethics, he challenged, criticized, denounced a society which has ceased to respect life and for which things rank higher than life. When he first made his call for Reverence for Life, Schweitzer did not even know that this disrespect for life would later manifest itself in the creation of nuclear weapons, a threat to all life on earth. But he did know the danger inherent in a life-hostile dominance of unbridled technique. *

Knowing this danger, the man who had made his life his argument spared no efforts to arouse world opinion and to make it aware of the

* Unpublished letter from Erich Fromm to Rondo Cameron at the occasion of the Albert Schweitzer Centennial Symposium in Atlanta, Georgia, April 1975.

world-threatening danger of nuclear arms. His realization that his endeavors had met limits and that he had been inadequate to meet the demands made of him was probably the greatest tragedy in his life.