Albert Schweitzer, Physician and Humanitarian

By Frank Catchpole and Linus Pauling**

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** Linus Pauling was associated with Albert Schweitzer for several years in the effort to stop the testing of nuclear weapons and to prevent war. In 1959 he spent two weeks with Schweitzer in Lambarene. After more than forty years as a member of the staff of the California Institute of Technology he assumed his present
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of the thousands of millions of human beings who have lived during the first half of the Twentieth Century, we may expect that the memory of only a few will be preserved in history - of Einstein, whose new ways of looking at the world brought about a
revolution in scientific thinking; of Bertrand Russell, who by application of his incisive intellect brought clarification to mathematics, philosophy, and politics; and, with little doubt, of Albert Schweitzer, who will be remembered as an outstanding musician and musicologist.
philosopher and moralist, physician and humanitarian, and leader of and active participant in the effort to save civilization from destruction in a nuclear war.
Schweitzer's humanitarian work is symbolized by the hospital in Lambaréné, the product of fifty years of sweat in the torrid waterlogged equatorial West African jungle, fifty years of frustration, fifty years of heartbreak as the unending stream of suffering humanity washed up at the doors of the
hospital like the tides on
the shores. No case was
ever refused; no sufferer
was ever turned away, and
no payments or
thanks were ever sought
except, when feasible, a
token gift or donation of
labor to the chores of
the hospital.
In his book "Out of My Life and Thought" Schweitzer recalls that when he announced his intention to leave for Africa his friends, colleagues, and relatives "expostulated with him on the folly of his enterprise". For one who had so much to give, and who was then at the pinnacle of three careers, this epic gesture must have seemed like an act of renunciation that could only be described as foolhardy and absurd.

By the time that he was thirty years old Schweitzer had earned three separate doctorates. Among his many published works in the fields of theology, philosophy, and musicology were important definitive works, such as "The Mystery of the Kingdom of God" and "The Quest of the Historical Jesus", "The Philosophy of the Religion of Kant", and "J. S. Bach, the Musician-poet", that will remain as literary landmarks in the history of these subjects. As a scholar, lecturer, and organist he was acclaimed and honored throughout Europe, and the world was at his feet. At the height of his career, as writer, concert organist, university lecturer, he took up the study of medicine.

His energy was enormous. Whilst studying medicine at the University at Strassbourg, a grinding six year course, he managed to continue as
"Maitre de conferences" of the theological faculty and as vicar of St. Nicolas cathedral. During this period he also published a six-volume work on Bach and a classic book on the Mysticism of Paul the Apostle. He later said that he sometimes went to his organ studies in the morning without having been to bed at all.

Why did he renounce all this to go to Lambaréné as a doctor, not as an evangelical missionary? He said, because he was tired of talk and wanted action. He chose Africa because of early conversations about Africa with his father and because as a child he had been deeply impressed by a statue by Bartholdi of a Negro in chains that stood in the market place in Colmar. Europe at this time was just beginning to hear of the atrocities being committed by white men in Africa, the baskets of human hands collected by Leopold’s agents in the Congo, the appalling suffering and wastage of life that had been inflicted by the slave traders, who counted themselves lucky if 20% of their catch was brought alive to the coast, who allotted four cubic feet of cargo space in the holds of the slave ships, expected a 40% spoilage rate during the Atlantic crossing, and about the plantation managers who were thought to be not making adequate use of their investment if the
slaves survived more than three years. The European conscience was
stirring, the time for words was past. Medicine had made such progress
that doctors could honestly say they were doing more good than harm. The
hideous tropical afflictions were being catalogued and effective
chemotherapy was being developed.

Schweitzer chose Lambaréné because it was one of the most inaccessible
areas of the world, an area heavily infected with sleeping sickness,
elephantiasis, malaria, schistosomiasis, Framboesia, leprosy, and many
terrible diseases, a large area without a single doctor. Other parasitic infections, an area without any doctor at all.

Schweitzer had to promise the Paris missionary society that in Africa
he would remain as silent as a carp on theological matters. His thinking
was held by many to be dangerously heterodox. His doctoral thesis in
medicine had been a critical evaluation of psychiatric studies of Jesus.
And since childhood he had been in the habit of asking rational questions
such as "if the wise men brought such precious gifts, why were the parents
of Jesus always so poor?".

In 1913, before leaving for Africa, Schweitzer had said to friends
that he credited himself with health, sound nerves, energy, practical
common sense, toughness, and prudence, and that he believed himself to be
quite capable of enduring the eventual failure of his plan. These qualities were soon tested. Arriving at Lambaréne in 1913, he set up his first consulting room in an empty chicken hut in the grounds of the Protestant mission. But in 1914 the war started and Schweitzer was promptly placed under house arrest by the French as an enemy alien and had to watch as all his supplies and equipment so carefully purchased with his life's earnings and the gifts of his skeptical friends were looted by those who he had come to help. Later on as the war became more bitter, he was transported back to France and interned in a concentration camp, where he became sick for the first time in his life.

In 1925 he returned to Africa with supplies to build a new and better hospital, purchased with the royalties of six more books and the honorariums of many lectures and concerts. Working to an undrawn masterplan, he built the hospital that stands today. By the mid-1930s it was probably the most modern bush hospital in all Africa. It stands today, just after Schweitzer's death, still pulsing with activity, a total of 56 galvanized iron-roofed sheds, many already musty with age, a monument to Schweitzer's incredible energy and ingenuity.
Schweitzer, the intellectual, pushed back the forest, planted the fruit trees, dug the well. (He told how after a certain depth had been reached, the walls were in danger of collapsing; he ordered his men out and finished the well himself.) Schweitzer, the intellectual, taught the convalescent patients how to make string from cactus leaves and how to forge nails from old scrap iron, for in the jungle everything in suddenly became precious. It was a prodigious effort to supervise the sawing of lumber from the huge ironwood logs, the mixing of concrete with stones, broken by hand. His vegetable gardens were a source of amusement to the old African hands. Boats incongruously resembling Rhine River punts were built under his supervision; they still ply the Ogowe today.

The trickle of patients soon grew to a steady stream, and Schweitzer, the mason and carpenter, labored as Surgeon and Dentist, as Obstetrician and Pharmacist, compounding his own drugs and teaching the patients how to knit bandages. In "The Edge of the Primeval Forest" Schweitzer recorded how glass containers in which to dispense medicines became infinitely valuable. Readers of the book were still moved to send him crates of old medicine bottles. Schweitzer would solemnly pay duty on the incoming parcels of
bottles, write in long hand a sincere letter of thanks, and then dump the bottles in the river, since medicines already mixed in individual bottles.

In later years as the hospital grew and more doctors and nurses came to assist him, Schweitzer would survey the teeming pharmacy, and say, "Ach wie langer gross meiner Spital geworden!" and turn with renewed energy to build more accommodation for the patients and staff. Schweitzer always managed to keep his eye on the main objective—to treat suffering Africans. The treatment remained the first priority; no one should be turned away. Even if a patient in his normal state of health, several parasitic diseases could be found and treated. No payment was asked other than a "coup de main" from those fit enough to work, and a token gift to the hospital. The tasks were tailored to suit the Africans' ability. The wives of the operated man were requested to help scrub the operating room floor. Other members of the family would haul water for the vegetable garden. Squads of the patient's relatives would be put to the endless task of keeping the jungle at bay. Others would help with the construction of new buildings. The effort required to organize and direct these work teams, often recruited
amongst Africans whose physical and mental powers and will to work had been eroded by years of malnutrition, anaemia, and repeated fevers absorbed a large amount of Schweitzer and his assistants' energy. The exhortations to accomplish the task at hand often led casual observers and transitory visitors to the impression that Schweitzer was autocratic in his manner and dictatorial in his administration of the hospital.

There are many strange customs unique to his hospital, and it is sometimes difficult to understand Schweitzer's fundamental logic behind each custom. For instance, after having been caught short of supplies in two world wars, Schweitzer decided to build and stock many storerooms, in order to be prepared for emergencies. After he had learned that the label on a bottle of medicine might well fall off because of the humidity or become illegible after attack by termites, he ordered that every bottle should be carefully
The criticism has often been voiced that Schweitzer did not move with the times. Visitors to the hospital were astonished in recent years that Schweitzer had no power boat to move supplies and visitors to the hospital.

In the early days of the hospital, there were one or two passenger boats a year reaching the west coast of equatorial Africa; then a dangerous two- or three-day motor-boat trip up the Ogowe river. Now one can reach an airfield near the hospital by airplane. From the dirt runway hewn out of the jungle there is a short ride by truck, if it is running, to the south bank of the southern fork of the river. Visitors to the hospital find the hospital canoe waiting for them at the river's edge. This venerable craft has outlasted a dozen motor boats, and its motor has never failed. It is powered by four or five lepers from the leper village. These men, long-time residents of the hospital, have feet so eroded by repeated injuries and infections resulting from their disease that they are barely able to walk. The paddling of the canoe provides them with the ideal occupation. They are relaxed in the fresh air, the trip downstream is really no effort at all; the trip back gives them three-quarters of an hour of good, solid exercise.
It has been said that Schweitzer denied his patients modern drugs and treatment and that the standards of hygiene were bound to prejudice the patients' recovery. However, it should be remembered that the factor in a surgical operation is the skill of the surgeon rather than the complexity of the instruments. Sterility depends on the care with which the instruments and the linen are sterilized rather than on their color and polish. At Schweitzer's hospital the preparation of patients for operation and the sterilization of linen and instruments are conducted in an elaborate ritual carefully worked out thirty years ago, and modified only as proved innovations are introduced into practice. Africa is no place for experimentation, because the press of routine, life-preserving surgery makes it seem almost criminal to waste time on unproved techniques. New techniques cannot easily be evaluated in Africa because of the multiplicity of diseases and the uncertainty of environmental factors.
be fed with food cooked in the
village manner by their own women folk, with the cooking pots balanced
on three large stones and heated by a handful of burning sticks.

It has often been asked why Schweitzer did not train Africans to
staff his hospital and other hospitals. One answer may be that he came
to wash their feet and to bind up their wounds himself, and not to train
others to do the task that he had taken up in the name of all white men;
but there is also the suggestion in some of his writings that he
decided that the Africans had reached the stage in their development when
this training would be successful.

As one scrolls through the hospital one is buffeted by conflicting
influences—repelled by the hideous afflictions of some of the patients,
but charmed by the sound of laughter, since the hospital is surely one
of the happiest of hospitals; appalled by the squalor and filth, then
inspired by the thought that the hospital dormitories closely approximate
an average African's village; shocked by the meager rations, but chastened
by remembering that few "civilized" hospitals provide free food.

Schweitzer wrote that "A single doctor in Africa, even with the
most modest equipment, can mean very much for very many. The good which
he can accomplish surpasses a hundredfold what he gives of his own life and
the cost of the material support that he must have. With a few simple
drugs, and sufficient skill and apparatus for the most necessary operations,
he can, in a single year, free hundreds of men from the grip of suffering and
death." If this be true, can a doctor justify taking time out from the
struggle with suffering and death to labor with an air-conditioning plant for his operating room? Can he divert funds from the purchase of life-saving drugs to purchase the comforts of civilization for himself or his patients? Today in other parts of Africa there can be found several white-elephant hospitals, beautiful to look at, but understaffed and underprovided with drugs because the cost of building has been so great that there was nothing left over.

On one notable occasion, in April 1957, Schweitzer did take time off from his medical and administrative duties in the hospital. For many years he had become increasingly concerned about the nuclear arms race and concerned about the havoc being wrought on the genetic material of all Life. He was concerned that this beautiful world, with all its myriad forms of life, was being slowly and permanently altered. Mutations of genes were taking place at a rate considerably higher than before the advent of man-made ionizing radiations. Recognizing that there was a real risk that the unrestrained arms race would degenerate into a cataclysmic holocaust that could terminate all life on earth, he determined to use the venue given him by the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to speak loudly and clearly to all who would listen.

In order that he could not be accused of speaking like a dotard, he set himself to understanding the mechanism of creation of radioactive elements in a nuclear explosion, the injection of the radioactive dust created in atomic explosions into the upper atmosphere, the patterns of fallout of this radioactive dust, the routes of assimilation of radioactive isotopes into living tissue, the modes of genetic and somatic damage by high-energy radiation, and the half-lives of the radioactive
elements. He also set himself to studying the available information about the probable effects of the explosion of megaton bombs in heavily populated areas in a nuclear war, studies which only a few military men had bothered to make.

On 24 April 1957 Schweitzer dramatically added his name to the growing list of those world leaders who had publicly taken a position against the continued testing of nuclear weapons. From Radio Oslo in Norway there was issued, and rebroadcast by all countries except the United States of America and Great Britain, his now famous statement "Peace or Atomic War." This statement, reviewing the discovery of radioactivity and X-rays at the end of the 19th century and the realization that these rays can damage living tissue, echoed President Eisenhower's call for a "gigantic leap into peace rather than a leap into space," and called for an end to atomic testing on the grounds that "we of this generation cannot take responsibility for the consequences of a raised background level of radioactivity on the generations to come." "We must muster the insight, the seriousness, and the courage to leave folly and face reality," he said; "The end of further experiments with atomic bombs would be like the early sun rays of hope which suffering humanity is longing for!"

Two years ago, after six years of uncertainty and after a period of renewed nuclear testing and further contamination of the atmosphere with radioactive fission products and carbon 14, the bomb-test treaty advocated by Schweitzer was formulated and then subscribed to by most of the nations of the world. This act has led to reduction of tensions and to an increased
hope for the abolition of war and its replacement by world law. The
award of the Nobel Peace Prize for 1952 to Albert Schweitzer was presumably
made on the basis of the reference of Nobel's will to work for fraternity
among nations; Schweitzer's labors since 1952 provide the additional
justification of effective work toward the abolition of standing armies.

One of Schweitzer's last acts

During his last year before his
one month before his death,
One of his last acts was to join
seven other recipients of the
Nobel Peace Prize in issuing an
appeal to all the governments and
parties concerned in the war in
Vietnam to take immediate action
to achieve a cease-fire and a
negotiated settlement of the
tragic conflict. Albert Schweitzer's
work for world peace may well be considered by *coming*
by future generations to have been *his* greatest
contribution to *humanity*.