



Clinics in Dermatology

Misericordia and leprosy in the 20th century



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Abstract Leprosy, which in particular affects poor people of developing countries, was also a challenge for social and charitable activities. This was possible due to the engagement of “great community workers,” people who devoted their professional and family life, passions, and their own material goods to conduct socio-medical activities among leprosy affected persons. This contribution discusses the work of the lepro-activists of international fame, Albert Schweitzer and Mother Teresa of Calcutta, as well as those who are less well known, Wanda Maria Błęńska and Marian Żelazek.

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Introduction

Leprosy, which in particular affects poor people of developing countries, was not only a challenge for medicine, but also for social and charitable activities. Achieving aims in prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of this disease in the 20th century would not have been possible without the development of a system of charity work and the engagement of “great community workers,” people who devoted their professional and family life, passions, and their own material goods to conduct socio-medical activities among leprosy patients. The dynamic advancement of the 20th century Western Civilization, together with innovations in diagnosis and treatment of leprosy, created opportunities for aiding leprosy patients living mostly in developing countries. From this perspective, it is essential to mention the contribution of the contemporary lepro-activists, especially those of unquestionable international fame: Albert Schweitzer and Mother Teresa of Calcutta, as well as those who are less well known,

doctors and clergy members, working on behalf of leprosy-affected persons: Wanda Maria Błęńska and Marian Żelazek.

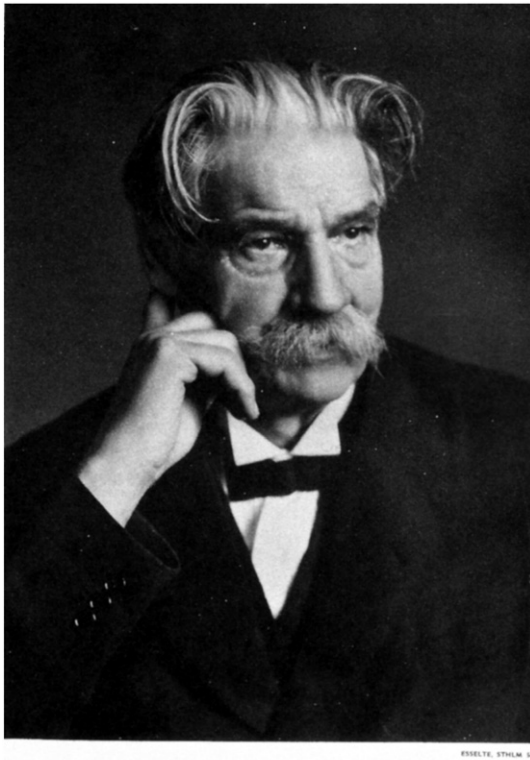
Music, philosophy, and leprosy

A prominent social activist working on behalf of leprosy-affected persons was an Alsatian theologian, a Lutheran minister, musicologist, philosopher, and doctor—Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) (Figure 1).¹

He had great scientific and artistic potential, backed by outstanding achievements, such as a doctorate in philosophy (1899) and evangelical theology (1900), the title of assistant professor of theological sciences (1902), and medical studies, receiving the degree of Doctor of Medicine in Strasbourg in February 1913 based on his dissertation titled “The Psychiatric Study of Jesus.”² His versatile education also included piano and organ studies in Paris.³ He was one of the most important researchers of the life and works of Johann Sebastian Bach. His fundamental work titled “John Sebastian Bach”⁴ was the starting point for further studies and interpretations of the achievements of this German composer. Despite excellent prospects for a scientific and

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Albert Schweitzer -

Fig. 1 Albert Schweitzer in 1953. Official Nobel portrait of Albert Schweitzer, with his signature, Nobel Foundation. (From: Wikimedia Commons http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Albert_Schweitzer_Nobel.jpg).

artistic career, he decided to renounce these for social and charitable activities carried out among the leprosy patients of Africa. At the age of 21, Schweitzer decided that by the age of 30 he would devote his life to scientific work, music, and the ministry, and afterwards to the service of humanity, in accordance with his conviction that everybody should fulfill humanitarian tasks on behalf of mankind only as a man, not as a member of a particular nation or religion.

In 1913, together with his wife Helen, he founded a leprosy hospital in Lambaréné in the French Congo (present-day Gabon). In 1924, the hospital expanded with a leprosarium. The world of classical music, which could provide for him and his family, became a financial source for the conducted social activities. Traveling through Europe and the United States, he gave concerts and made records with organ music to acquire funds for the maintenance of the hospital. Arthur Honegger (1892-1955), appreciating the artistic merits of Schweitzer's organ concerts, stated that "those hands which build the hospital in Lambaréné, showed the greatness of Bach's chorales to many people so far indifferent to the beauty of music."⁵

His work among leprosy patients inspired Schweitzer to develop a unique philosophic concept on the respect for life.⁶ In September 1915, while sailing on the Gabonese river,

Albert Schweitzer became intellectually overwhelmed by the idea of "Reverence for Life," the consequence of which was the obligation to save lives and to alleviate suffering. He stated that reverence for the human life requires respect, not only towards humans but also towards animals, and even plants, forbidding their thoughtless destruction: "I am life that wants to live, in the midst of life that wants to live."⁷ He created the concept of "ethics of reverence for life" by thoroughly analyzing Western culture and civilization and emphasized that the human of the Western civilization is not the ruler but a part of nature. What is more, he stated: "The trial to establish generally applicable differences of values between living creatures, derives from the fact that they are evaluated according to whether they appear to us humans, as closer or more remote, which is a completely subjective measure." He repeatedly quoted the words "Ta twam asi" ("This is you") in reference to plants, animals, and other people.

He evidenced great appreciation for the beliefs and deeds of St. Francis of Assisi. Being engaged in pacifist activities after the World War II, he frequently emphasized that men, to save themselves from annihilation, should experience a sense of unity with all the creatures united by a common destiny in the world of incomprehensible cruelty. In April 1962, Schweitzer wrote a letter to President Kennedy as "someone who has occupied himself for a long time with the problem of atomic weapons and with the problem of peace."⁸ Thirteen years before that, *Time* magazine wrote that he was "one of the most extraordinary men of modern times."⁹ In 1952, Albert Schweitzer received the Nobel Peace Prize and, according to the words of his friend Albert Einstein, Schweitzer "did not preach and did not warn and did not dream that his example would be an ideal and comfort to innumerable people. He simply acted out of inner necessity."¹⁰

Mother Teresa's ideas of ministry to the lepers

A person who had a significant contribution to the creation of a system of care for poor people afflicted with leprosy was Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910-1997)—an Albanian nun and founder of the Missionaries of Charity—recognized in a survey conducted in the United States by Gallup, Inc. as the most admired person of the twentieth century.¹¹ Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu (monastic name Maria Theresa of Child Jesus) served the poor, sick, and orphaned children and those dying in India for over 45 years. Already in the 1970s, she was known as a community activist, sacrificing her life for the poor and sick. According to Joan Graff Clucas, Agnes was fascinated with the lives of missionaries and their ministry, and she decided to devote her life to God at the age of 12.¹²

At the age of 18, she joined the Congregation of Jesus and became a missionary. She left her home country, Albania, never to return again due to political reasons. She started her

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