

# REVERENCE FOR LIFE

Admired by many in his lifetime as a saintly example of unselfishness and devotion to suffering mankind, Albert Schweitzer preached a simple morality to generations steeped in the cruelty and blood of two world conflicts.

A century after his birth the *grand docteur* of the jungle is seen as a remarkable man who abandoned what might have been a brilliant career in Europe as a theologian and musicologist to bring medicine to natives in Equatorial Africa. His faults are also clearly written: old-fashioned ways of practicing medicine and a colonial attitude toward Africans.

**BEGINNING.** Born on January 14, 1875, in Kayersberg, in Alsace, Schweitzer later jovially recalled that the year of his birth was a great vintage year for Alsatian wines.

He was the son of a Lutheran evangelical minister, Louis Schweitzer and Adele Schillinger who died tragically in 1914, trampled to death on the road by German cavalry horses. She bore her husband six children: two sons and four daughters; one daughter died prematurely.

The infant Schweitzer suffered from unexplained fevers and was sickly and frail. Six months after his birth, his father was transferred to the village of Günsbach in the Münster Valley. By the age of two the child had gained in health and spent a happy childhood, clouded only by his father's frequent illnesses, which did not prevent him from living to the age of 97.

Schweitzer was the descendant of a long line of parsons, musicians, schoolmasters. Both grandfathers were accomplished organists and his maternal grandfather was a pastor. Schweitzer worshiped the memory of his uncle Albert, an obscure pastor who risked his life to journey to Paris for badly needed medical supplies when Strasbourg was under siege during the Franco-Prussian War. The family tree also held its share of renegades, according to the memoirs of Schweitzer's second cousin, the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre.

Until he was nine, Schweitzer attended the village school where he was an indifferent student. But he had a great interest in music and under his father's tutelage he learned to play the piano at the age





*Schweitzer and his wife Hélène in the early 1930s in Europe. Trained as a nurse, she was an invaluable aid to him in establishing his hospital in Africa.*

of five. Three years later he started organ lessons, progressing so rapidly that, although his feet barely touched the pedals, he could substitute for the church organist.

Following a year at the Realschule in Münster, Schweitzer entered the Gymnasium in Mülhausen, in Alsace, where he was principally interested in natural science and history. His education was helped financially by a great-uncle, the director of primary schools, a strict disciplinarian who permitted his nephew no diversion from schoolwork, except for music lessons with Eugene Münch, a Bach enthusiast.

In the summer of 1893, Schweitzer was in Paris where another uncle enabled him to study with the famous French organist Charles-Marie Widor. He was so impressed with Schweitzer's talent that he accepted Schweitzer as a pupil without a fee. Together, they later helped to establish the Paris Bach Society.

Schweitzer entered the Theological College of St. Thomas at the University of Strasbourg to study theology and philosophy. He lived in the lodgings once occupied by Goethe, who with Kant and Bach, exerted a profound influence on Schweitzer's thought.

At Strasbourg, then at the height of its fame as a university, Schweitzer became proficient in Hebrew to further his research on the Synoptic Gospels. Even during his year of compulsory military service

a friendly captain allowed him to attend lectures at the university. On maneuvers he carried a Greek Testament in his knapsack.

Schweitzer completed his doctoral thesis in philosophy with a study of Kant's view on religion; in 1900 he received his licentiate in theology, having done much of his research in Paris. Although timid before a congregation, Schweitzer accepted a post in St. Nicholas church in Strasbourg. He also taught theology, served as acting principal of the theological college at the university in 1901, as principal in 1903, and as *Privat-dozent* from 1902 to 1912.

**TURNING POINT.** In later years Schweitzer wrote that his decision to serve mankind came when he was 21. "In that year, while still a student, I resolved to devote my life till I was thirty to the office of preacher, to science, and to music. If by that time I should have done what I hoped in science and music, I would take a path of immediate service as man to my fellowmen. What this path should be I counted on learning from circumstances during the interval."

The "circumstances" came one morning in the autumn of 1904 when he happened to read a magazine of the Paris Missionary Society containing an article on the needs of the Congo mission. The writer expressed the hope that his appeal would bring some of those "on whom the Master's eyes already rested" to a decision to offer themselves for work in the Congo. Schweitzer later wrote: "Having finished the article, I quietly began my work. My search was over." A year later when he was thirty, he wrote to parents and intimate friends that he had decided to become a physician and serve in Equatorial Africa, a decision that was vehemently opposed by almost everyone.

He studied medicine and surgery at Strasbourg, where Oswald Schmiedeberg, then the greatest pharmacologist in Europe and an authority on digitalis, was one of the professors. After a year as an intern in a Strasbourg hospital, Schweitzer received his medical degree in 1913. In his autobiography he explained: "I wanted to be a doctor that I might be able to work without having to talk. For years I had been giving myself out in words, and it was with joy that I had followed the calling of theological teacher and of preacher. But this new form of activity I could not represent to myself as talking about the religion of love, but only as an actual putting it into practice. Medical knowledge made it possible for me to carry out my intention in the best and most complete way, wherever the path of service might lead me."

During his studies, Schweitzer caused consider-

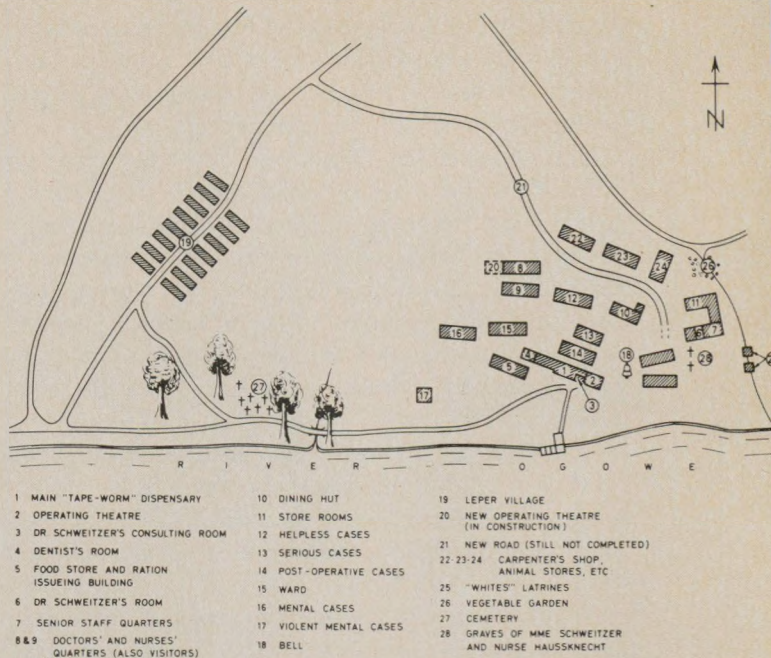
able controversy in theological circles in 1906 with *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* in which he strove to show that the teachings of Jesus were not drawn from the supernatural but had their roots in the religious ambience of the first century, particularly Judaic messianism. He wrote: "Jesus as a concrete historical personality remains a stranger to our time, but His spirit, which lies hidden in His words, is known in simplicity, and its influence is direct. Every saying contains in its own way the whole Jesus."

He also completed his book on the history of the Pauline doctrine, *Paul and His Interpreters* and published a work dealing with the art of organ building and playing. Encouraged by Widor Schweitzer began the modern Bach revival with the publication in 1905 of his classic biography of Bach in French. He later expanded the enormous two-volume work in a German translation.

As an organist and authority on Bach, Schweitzer made frequent trips to Paris where he met the humanist writer Romain Rolland with whom he became friends. In the Bach Society he worked with several famous musicians, such as Paul Dukas, Gabriel Fauré, Vincent D'Indy. He also played in Bach concerts with the Orféo Catalá in Bercelesona. In that city he met the eccentric Catalonian architect Antonio Gaudí i Cornet, then at work on his astonishing *modernismo* Church of the Holy Family.

**AFRICA.** In the summer of 1912 Schweitzer married Hélène Bresslau, the daughter of a Strasbourg historian. She had helped him with his manuscripts and also trained as a nurse.

Before their first trip to Africa, Schweitzer spent months giving concerts to collect money. He also obtained funds from friends and colleagues. He was particularly moved when German professors gave



money for what was in effect a French enterprise.

Money in hand, he offered to build and operate a hospital at his own expense under the auspices of the Paris Missionary Society. They were delighted with his offer but had strong scruples about his unorthodox theological views. He promised that he would practice only as a physician and remain *muet comme une carpe* (mute as a carp).

On Good Friday in 1913 Schweitzer and his wife sailed from Bordeaux with 70 packing cases. The country that was to be Schweitzer's home was Gabon, a colony in French Equatorial Africa. Lying astride the equator, the region was considered the unhealthiest part of the world, with a humid tropical climate, dense forest jungles, mangrove swamps. The people included several tribes and

*View of Schweitzer's hospital from the Ogoowe River. Diagram of the compound, above, made during his lifetime shows the complex of hospital buildings (right) separated from the cemetery (center) and the leper village (left).*



pygmies in the jungle interior. For generations Gabon ports were notorious for the slave trade. The region was also the home of the bloodthirsty "leopard men" who clawed victims to death.

The missionaries welcomed the Schweitzers warmly but they had no buildings to offer for the hospital at Lambaréné. Schweitzer's first consulting room was an old hen house close to his living quarters. After a few months he moved to a corrugated iron building with a roof of palm leaves, comprising a small consulting room, an operating room, and tiny dispensary. Bamboo huts were built for the patients.

Schweitzer's wife nursed, superintended supplies, worked in the dispensary, kept instruments clean, administered anesthetics for surgery. In addition she supervised all the household and hospital administrative tasks.

Schweitzer's first medical inventory: "The chief diseases I had to deal with were malaria, leprosy, sleeping sickness, dysentery, frambesia, and phagedenic ulcers, but I was surprised at the number of cases of pneumonia and heart disease which I discovered." Surgery was needed mostly for hernias and tumors of elephantiasis.

He learned that with Africans a physician must never hold out a false hope of recovery. "If after all the patient unexpectedly recovers, so much the better for the doctor's reputation. He ranks thereafter as one who can cure even fatal diseases." Payment for treatment was in money, bananas, poultry, eggs.

On August 5, 1914, Schweitzer and his wife, both

German citizens, became prisoners of war under house arrest. One of the Alsatian missionaries and his wife were also interned in the mission station. When Schweitzer was forbidden to work in the hospital, he played Bach on the zinc-lined piano with pedal attachments given to him by the Bach Society, and he began work on his *Philosophy of Civilization*, which was to occupy him for many years. In September, 1917, shortly after he had been allowed to resume his medical work, he and his wife were sent to a prisoner of war camp in Europe.

In the first internment camp Schweitzer suffered a severe attack of dysentery, which he treated with emetine. In the next camp he was allowed to doctor his fellow prisoners, and conditions were relatively comfortable. During the summer of 1918 the Schweitzers were finally released, and in the following year, on Schweitzer's birthday, their only child Rhena was born.

Schweitzer spent some time in Strasbourg as preacher at St. Nicholas and as a physician in the municipal hospital. He also took advanced courses in obstetrics, tropical hygiene, dentistry. In his seven-year absence from Lambaréné, Schweitzer supported himself and raised funds for his return to



*From left to far right, opposite: a street at Lambaréné with orderlies moving a patient from one building to another; Dr. Schweitzer and a surgical team in the operating room at his hospital; observed by a native woman and a curious duck he chides Parsifal, his pet pelican and the watchdog at the hospital; he works with a rake, one of the countless small chores in which he finds time to help the volunteers at the compound.*

Africa with organ recitals and lectures in Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Denmark, England.

In World War II the supporters of General de Gaulle and of Marshal Pétain fought over possession of Lambaréné, and when the Gaullists won, the Lambaréné hospital was cut off from further supplies from France. A ship carrying the last consignment of drugs from Europe was torpedoed. Later, a shipment from America saved the hospital.

In 1949, Schweitzer made his first and only visit to the United States to deliver an address at the Goethe Festival in Aspen, Colorado, before a convocation of scholars marking the 200th anniversary of Goethe's birth. Schweitzer was an authority on Goethe, and in 1928 he had been awarded the Goethe Prize by the city of Frankfurt. He used the prize money to build a house at Günsbach, which was expanded for use by his staff as a rest home.

**HOSPITAL.** When Schweitzer returned to Lambaréné in 1924, he found his first rudimentary hospital mostly in decay. A new hospital compound was built with difficulty because the timber trade had revived and drawn off skilled laborers. Schweitzer took his share of clearing the jungle, felling and stripping trees, carpentering and roofing.

The compound consisted of huts built along a "hospital street," including isolation huts for infectious diseases, mostly dysentery, and mental cases. The only sanitation was an outhouse toilet for the foreign staff. Lighting was by oil lamps except for electricity in the main building, which included the tiny operating room, supplied by a diesel generator.

In an atmosphere typical of a colorful village, patients carrying paper tags with names, villages, and tribes, squatted for hours waiting their turn or were bedded down on straw-mattress cots; women relatives cooked over open fires, while numerous chickens, dogs, and goats, roamed at will and added to the sanitary problems.

The dedicated staff lived austerely in single rooms equipped with iron bed, enamel washstand, a kerosene lamp. Schweitzer stubbornly refused to modernize arrangements. He declared: "Circumstances command that the hospital be primitive in keeping with the primitive state of the people." In spite of this the hospital had a good medical record and many of the town's Europeans preferred it to the city hospital.

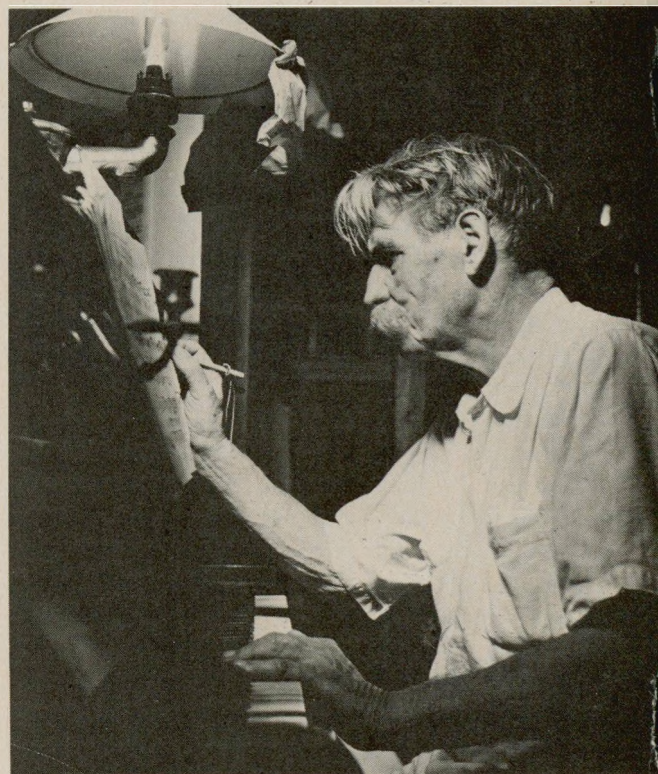
In Schweitzer's lifetime the hospital grew to more than 70 buildings, 350 beds and a leper village of 200, staffed by five unpaid physicians, seven nurses, and 13 volunteers. Many people offered their services: in the late 1920s when Schweitzer was in Europe, an Englishwoman named Mrs. Russell supervised the task of clearing the jungle; a nurse bicycled 2000 miles to work with Schweitzer. When air service from Brazzaville to Lambaréné was opened, it brought thrill seekers, idealists, mystics, cranks. Schweitzer greeted them all courteously and put them to work in the laundry.

Schweitzer made his own rules for the hospital based on his deep-rooted dislike for the modern world. He had declared: "In a thousand different ways mankind has been persuaded to give up its





In moments of relaxation Dr. Schweitzer and members of his staff, left, enjoy a Christmas play performed by children at Lambaréné and, alone in the evening, his energies are concentrated at his zinc-lined piano probing the endless pleasures of Bach's music.



natural relations with reality and to seek its welfare in the magic formulas of some kind of economic and social witchcraft." His patients were transported in dugout canoes or by man-borne litters. He reluctantly accepted the use of a truck. Hospital clocks were set not by Greenwich Mean Time but by the sun.

After his death modernization came slowly, beginning with the staff's living quarters where electricity and running water were installed. Work is now under way on a \$6 million diversified hospital complex, for which the U.S. Senate has promised \$1 million and the Gabon government half that sum. Facilities will include a modern rehabilitation center.

The hospital now costs about \$40,000 a month, mostly for salaries of more than 100 black nurses, technicians, and laborers. Physicians earn the equivalent of \$250 a month and nurses earn \$150 a month. The hospital is run by a mixed black-white board of directors. One member of the board is a black male nurse who came to the hospital 25 years ago suffering from leprosy.

**THE MAN.** Schweitzer was a six-foot, broad-shouldered man with powerful hands that could wield an axe, a scalpel, or organ keys with equal skill. His brown hair and walrus moustache grew white with age and his craggy face became deeply lined. His deep-set eyes could blaze with short-lived fury or twinkle with humor, and his language could be blistering in French or German.

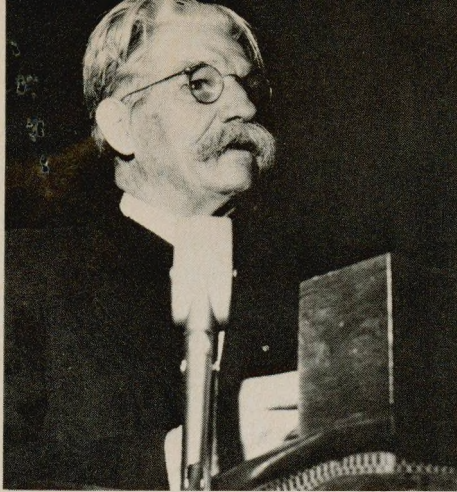
Each day after shaving with a straight razor without using soap and water, he breakfasted with his staff at 7:30 a.m. He also held his *appel*, or morning roll-call of workers, to assign them their tasks. In his hip pocket he carried a small blue notebook of activities, daily events, and plans: the birth of a

baby, human or animal; the death of a patient, a sketch for a new building. In the afternoon, he took a brief siesta. He followed dinner with a hymn and a reading from the Bible, before he retired to his room to play on his piano, write books or letters far into the night.

His diet was largely vegetarian, served by produce from the gardens and orchards he had helped to lay out himself. His favorite snack was *quiche Lorraine*, and he liked such delicacies as walnuts from his garden at Günsbach, blue plums, chocolate from Alsace. Fish and crocodile meat were also served but Schweitzer who was unable to "eat anything that was alive" gave up liver dumplings, which he liked, in later years. He drank wine sparingly and no longer smoked.

He once described himself as being basically lazy and said he regretted not knowing the luxury of arising without feeling tired or retiring without disquieting thoughts of projects still incomplete. Gifted with strong willpower, he overcame his laziness by being industrious and methodical.

Schweitzer was a 19th century European. He never typed or dictated a letter; never journeyed anywhere in Africa outside of Lambaréné and nev-



*After winning the 1952 Nobel Peace Prize, Schweitzer in Oslo delivers his acceptance speech "The Problems of Peace." In Africa, right, he returns by boat to Lambaréné after visiting a nearby village.*



er learned to drive a car. He loathed technology. When two cars were wrecked in a head-on collision, he cheered. He also scorned modern industrial society. When an Ethiopian complained that his country lacked oil, Schweitzer replied: "Wonderful . . . you might be left in peace for a while yet."

He had a droll sense of humor. Asked by a London correspondent how he wished to be introduced in a broadcast, he replied: "Just say, this fellow who looks like a Scottish collie is Albert Schweitzer." Another time, in Aspen, when a group of admirers drew him away from the dinner table to ask for a statement on his ethics, he responded with courtesy for 20 minutes, but when one questioner pressed him more insistently Schweitzer said: "Reverence for life means my answering your kind inquiries. It also means your reverence for my dinner hour."

He had a gruff manner but with visitors he was always courtly, dignified, hospitable. He went to the river landing to meet the boats bringing in medical supplies, guests, or new staff members, whose arrival was welcomed by the ringing of a bronze bell. In relaxed moments he talked about interesting friends: Jawaharlal Nehru of India, Pablo Casals, Winston Churchill, Albert Einstein.

Schweitzer's reverence for life extended to animals, and neither he nor his followers deliberately hurt or killed an animal, however lowly. He was idolized by anti-vivisection societies, although he occasionally baffled them with ambiguous statements like: "Those who test operations or drugs on animals, or who inoculate them with diseases so that they may be able to help human beings by means of the results thus obtained, ought never to rest satisfied with the general idea that their dreadful doings are performed in pursuit of a worthy aim."

His wife spent many years at Lambaréné but she was unable to support the tropical climate for more than a few years at a time and was obliged to recuperate in Europe. During these absences she worked untiringly for the hospital, as in 1937 when she undertook a lecture tour in the United States to raise funds. She was in Paris with the Eckerts, her daughter's family, when France collapsed in 1940, and they joined the refugees fleeing to the south. The Eckerts found a haven in Switzerland, and Héléne Schweitzer in 1941 rejoined her husband in Africa.

After World War II Schweitzer and his wife established a routine of alternating between Europe and the jungle. In 1948 they were together at Günsbach where Schweitzer met his four grandchildren for the first time. Héléne died in Zürich in 1957 at the age of 75.

After the death of his wife, Schweitzer spent most of his time in Africa. On his 90th birthday, the French and Gabonese radio networks arranged a special hook-up to carry Bach music played on the organ in Kaysersberg, his birthplace, to Lambaréné. Ceremonies were attended by Africans, Europeans, and Americans.

During his last month Schweitzer was confined to bed, received visitors, listened to Bach. Cerebral insufficiency brought on a semi-comatose condition and in the morning of September 4, 1965, Albert Schweitzer died. He was buried in a grave next to his wife, marked by a cross that he had made himself.

**FAME.** Few men in their lifetime could match Schweitzer's record in honors bestowed: degrees, medals, citations, and postage stamps issued in his honor by Gabon and the principality of Monaco. He was elected to the French Academy, awarded the Gold Medal in Paris, and the medal *Pour le Me-*

rité. Great Britain awarded him the Order of Merit, the Greek Academy at Athens made him a member. He received honorary degrees from Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh, the University of Chicago.

In 1951 he accepted the Peace Prize of the German Association of Publishers and used the award of 10,000 marks to help fulfill his dream for the construction of a leprosarium. The next year when he was awarded the \$33,200 Nobel Peace Prize work was started on the buildings.

At the height of his fame in the wake of the two world wars, half a million copies of his autobiography were in print; his film biography, made by Erica Anderson, won the 1958 Oscar award as the best documentary.

Many medical missionaries were inspired by his work including William Larimer Mellon, Jr., founder of the Hôpital Albert Schweitzer in Haiti; Theodor Binder, founder of the Hospital Amazónico Albert Schweitzer in Peru; Dr. E. Gaine Cannon in North Carolina; Dr. Gordon Seagrave in Burma; Dr. Thomas Dooley in Indo-China.

**PHILOSOPHY.** Schweitzer's plan for his *Philosophy of Civilization* was divided into well-defined parts. He first examined the breakdown of civilization in his time, and its causes. After reviewing earlier attempts to find a universal ethic for the world, he proposed his idea of "reverence for life" and its application to civilization.

The western civilization that Schweitzer analyzed was that of a *fin de siècle* generation suffering from intellectual and spiritual fatigue, and nations wedded to the ruthless *Realpolitik* that had led to a world war. Man had progressed materially but his mental and spiritual life was not equal to that of earlier generations, largely because it lacked an over-all ethical principle. He wrote: "European humanity is being guided by a will-to-progress that has become merely external and has lost its bearings."

In September, 1915, while steaming upstream to treat the wife of a missionary, he had this experience: "Late on the third day, at the very moment when, at sunset, we were making our way through a herd of hippopotamuses, there flashed upon my mind unforeseen and unsought, the phrase, 'Reverence for Life.'"

He found that the fault of all earlier ethics was to deal only with relations between man and man. But he declared: "A man is ethical only when life, as such, is sacred to him, that of plants and animals as that of his fellowmen, and when he devotes himself helpfully to all life that is in need of help."

The ethic of reverence for life comprehended within itself all that could be described as love, devotion, and sympathy in suffering, joy, or effort.

"Reverence for life affords me my fundamental principle of morality, namely, that good consists in maintaining, assisting and enhancing life, and that to destroy, to harm or to hinder life is evil."

Schweitzer acknowledged that his idea of reverence for life was "ethical mysticism," because it allowed union with the infinite to be realized through ethical action. In that sense it had a religious character, and a man who believed in it showed an elemental piety. The essential element in Christianity, as preached by Jesus, was that only through love could man reach communion with God.

Humanitarianism, which Schweitzer called "an uncomfortable doctrine" taught that anyone who received a larger share than others of health, talent, ability, a harmonious life, should be prepared to pay a price for these advantages by helping his less fortunate fellow human beings. "The ethic of reverence for life constrains all, in whatever walk of life they may find themselves, to busy themselves intimately with all the human and vital processes which are being played out around them, and to give themselves as men to the man who needs human help and sympathy."

His philosophical and theological works covered a wide range. In addition to two works on St. Paul, he wrote *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God* and a study of comparative religions in *Christianity and the Religions of the World*. The parts of his major work on the philosophy of civilization were titled *The Decay and Restoration of Civilization, Civilization and Ethics*, and *Reverence for Life*.

Autobiographical works included *Memoirs of Childhood and Youth*, *On the Edge of the Primeval Forest*, and *Out of My Life and Thought*, plus two books on the hospital. Biographical works included two studies of Goethe. As a musicologist he wrote the two-volume study of Bach and an authoritative work on organs.

In the twenty years between the two world wars that embraced the worship of crass materialism, militaristic nationalism, civil wars, concentration camps, Albert Schweitzer shone as a beacon of humanitarianism and altruism. He inspired countless thousands of men and women of all nationalities and religions to devote themselves to selfless work among the poor and the ailing, offering their own dedication to the doctrine of reverence for life preached by a grizzled jungle doctor.

**SUMMING UP:** By Dr. Schweitzer: "People say that I understand something about music, but the sweetest sound I have ever heard came from a room one night when from the change in a baby's crying I knew that the crisis had passed, and that he would be well again."