

75 YEARS AFTER THE SEELISBERG - REFLECTION

BY

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Even after the cessation of the military engagements of the Second World War, the mass murdering of Jews still continued in several places. This awful postlude to the *Shoah* prompted concerned Christians and Jews to gather in Seelisberg, Switzerland for an “Emergency Conference on Antisemitism” from July 30 to August 5, 1947. The horrors committed during the war could not be allowed to persist. They had to be recognized and seen in all their abhorrent dimensions by the whole of humanity.

The research on the long history of the Christian “teaching of contempt” for Jews presented to the conference by Jules Isaac and others led the conference to issue the influential statement: “A Call to the Churches: The Ten Points of Seelisberg.” It spoke of the urgency for a dramatic change in the centuries and centuries of hostile Christian anti-Jewish preaching. The “Ten Points of Seelisberg” proved to be a seminal document. It set the stage for the composition of later ecclesiastically authoritative statements, most notably the promulgation in 1965 of the declaration *Nostra Aetate* by the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church.

Nazi antisemitism was one of the most horrible eruptions of racist ideology in human history. The National Socialists drew upon the long-lived Christian contempt of Jews to intensify antisemitic hatred among the European population, creating a monster that killed six million European Jews, two-thirds of the European Jewish population. The Seelisberg conferees understood that in order to create a new world of interreligious and interethnic harmony and respect it was essential to uproot all the factors that had led to the demonization of Jews.

Significant historical developments are often driven by individuals who perceive the forces at work in their social contexts and who makes the firm decision to support or counter them. The Seelisberg conference was an assembly of such individuals. They chose to speak out against the inhumanity of racism and to uphold the dignity of all people. All of them sought to renew in Europe and around the world the vision of the human being as made in the image and likeness of God that is at the heart of both Judaism and Christianity.

Jules Isaac's commitment to Jewish moral norms was evident in the dedication found in his book *Jésus et Israël*:¹ "In MEMORIAM. To my wife and my daughter. Martyrs. Killed by Hitler's Nazis. Killed. Simply because their name was ISAAC." It is a volume that is both historically rigorous and at the same time a cry for the reconciliation of Jews and Christians. Isaac believed that their traditions, together with Greek civilization, were the foundations of European culture, a culture that during the Shoah had proved to be bankrupt. Isaac sought to return Europe to its ethical roots and to have Jews and Christians collaborate in healing the world's ills.

Isaac's attitude was similar to that of Martin Buber when he wrote *Zwei Glaubensweisen*,² (translated into English as *Two Types of Faith*)³ in Jerusalem during Israel's war of independence in 1948 and of Leo Baeck, who composed *Dieses Volk: Jüdische Existenz*⁴ (*This People Israel: The Meaning of Jewish Existence*)⁵, during his stay in the concentration camp of Theresienstadt. Although Buber and Baeck were not at Seelisberg, with Isaac they all were challenged to rescue the values that elevate human beings spiritually.

Similar Christian values motivated the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, who in his book *Anti-Semitism*⁶ desperately cried out for the humane resolution of the "Jewish problem" in the months leading up to the *Shoah*. Afterward he boldly sought to eradicate anti-Jewish concepts from the Church.⁷ Likewise, Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, Pope John XXIII, had an attitude of courage and greatness towards the Jewish people during and after the *Shoah*. He saved many hundreds of Jews who were fleeing the Nazis.⁸

The Seelisberg conference had much to do with the efforts of these people, as well as the efforts of countless others who rowed against the current of human degradation that marked the 20th century.

Seelisberg – and Isaac's proposals to it – lay behind his meeting with John XXIII on June 13, 1960. Isaac described in his diary that it was a direct and sincere dialogue. Even though it lasted only a few minutes, it changed forever the history of Jewish-Catholic relations. The Catholic Church has profoundly altered its relationship with Jews. Never in the last two thousand years has there been

¹ Paris: Albin Michael, 1948.

² Zürich: Manesse Verlag, 1950.

³ New York: Collier Books, Macmillan, 1951.

⁴ Frankfurt aM: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1955, 1957.

⁵ New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964

⁶ London: Centenary Press, 1939.

⁷ See Richard Francis Crane, "'Heart-Rending Ambivalence': Jacques Maritain and the Complexity of Postwar Catholic Philosemitism," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 6 (2011):1-16.

<https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/scjr/article/view/1820/1698>

⁸ Baruch Tenenbaum, "Remembering Pope John XXIII, a true friend of the Jews," *The Jerusalem Post*, Nov. 26, 2020.

<https://www.jpost.com/opinion/remembering-pope-john-xxiii-a-true-friend-of-the-jews-opinion-650040>

such a rapprochement between Christians and Jews as in our days. This transformation was the result of the kind of dialogues that occurred in Seelisberg and between Jules Isaac and John XXIII: a dialogue of profound encounter that becomes transcendent, has enormous consequences, and serves as a paradigm for others.

God has granted me the privilege of making a very humble contribution to the continuation and development of this dialogue with members of the Catholic Church in Argentina, including the future Pope Francis. Interreligious dialogue between Francis and me transcended the immediate moment and grew into a sincere and deep friendship. Over the years we have explored our respective spiritualities and have been able to share our deep feelings about the tragic history of our two communities. For instance, in an email dated June 21, 2016, as he was preparing to visit Auschwitz, he wrote to me:

My wish is that there are to be no speeches, and I said so. I want it to be, at least that is how I feel it in my heart, a moment of silence and prayer where, in the presence of the Lord, I can be alone and pray and – and if the grace is given me – to cry.

The ability to weep together is surely part of reconciliation, recalling those tears that flowed from the eyes of Joseph and his brothers when they recognized each other (Genesis 45). Such are the tears of true sisters and brothers.

May the fostering of such relationships of intimacy and friendship continue to define the work of the International Council of Christians and Jews – itself an outgrowth of the Seelisberg Conference.

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