



Painful Remembrance: Adventists and Jews in the Third Reich*

Daniel Heinz

*Director of the European Seventh-day Adventists Archives
in Friedensau, Germany*

Why were Adventists silent about the persecutions of Jews at the time of the Nazi regime? Why were they not ready to protest publicly? Until today the Adventist world church leaders have not made a confession of guilt in regard to the persecution and extermination of Jews in the Nazi era. Is there, maybe, no awareness of guilt? Though Christians are certainly not directly responsible for the Shoah, the climate of anti-Semitism, latently present in the churches, induced them not to take a collective stand against the Holocaust. The fatal continuity between Christian anti-Semitism and Nazi anti-Semitism had not at all been prevented.

Although the leaders of the Adventist Church in the Third Reich may not have been aware of the full dimension of the mass murder of millions of Jews, they

did not only keep silent in view of the persecutions of Jews but, in a deliberate pursuit of a strategy of adaptation, even agreed to propagate anti-Semitic thoughts and ideas in their official church publications. Following the usual stereotypes, the Jew was described in an article as “an intruder who with unparalleled ruthlessness and characteristic slyness began to undermine the German soul.” The Jew was considered to be an “alien element in the German blood.” Anti-Semitic statements of Martin Luther, Elector Joachim II., or Frederick the Great, who designated the Jews as “bloodhounds,” “vermin,” or “a bunch of hagglers,” are presented in an exemplary manner as the “dawn” of a new epoch. The article ends: “May this promising light fill us with courage and persistence so that we do not slacken in the fight against the enemy of our race. . . .”¹

Unfortunately, this article with its political tone and extremely bad taste does not represent an isolated case among the Adventist publications in the Nazi era. Of course, one should not conclude that all Adventists in the Third Reich had been taken in by the delusion of Nazi racism. The comments cited above do not reflect the factual behavior of German and Austrian Adventists toward the Jews. And yet, this article was not a “slip,” as other sources sufficiently testify.

Could we have helped more?

How do we deal today with such statements in an Adventist publication? One is tempted to turn away in shock, refusing to take seriously such statements that come from an Adventist like you and me. Does not the danger, however, lie exactly in shutting one’s eyes and avoiding such a black hole, the danger of making

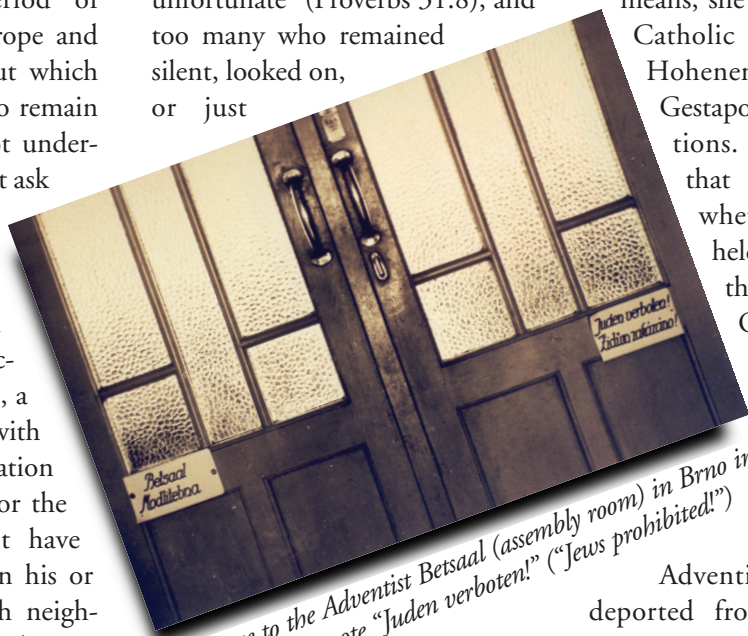
the inconceivable forgotten or at least of repressing it? Remembering, even if it hurts, helps to counteract the repetition of history. In our giddy-paced time these

*Remembering,
even if it hurts, helps to
counteract the repeti-
tion of history.*

memories need to be kept alive, for we all are obligated to the “Never again.” Therefore, we have to face this dark period of Adventist history in Europe and discuss openly that about which we would rather prefer to remain silent. Even if we do not understand everything, we must ask ourselves: What lessons from the Holocaust do we draw personally and as Adventist Church in general? Behind each victim stands a name, a face, a fate, a human being with desires and hopes, a creation of God. Could the one or the other in our ranks not have made different choices in his or her relations with Jewish neighbors and Jewish fellow believers? Should the imposed silence not have been broken here and there? Did we help where help was possible? Should we not have helped more, spoken up more clearly, taken our stand more courageously? Where was the resistance that sprang out of “a merciful heart”?

It is of course easy to ask such questions nowadays. But should we therefore remain silent? In his book *The Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn insightfully says: “In keeping silent about evil, in burying it so deep within us that no sign of it appears on the

surface, we are *implanting* it, and it will rise up a thousandfold in the future.”²² One’s own failure and the failure of the Church appear distinctly in the light of these questions. We also discover Adventist members, more than it was, at first, thought, who found the courage to help persecuted Jews, who did not remain silent or look away. Yet, in retrospect again and again comes the shocking realization: There were too few “righteous,” too few who “opened their mouths for the mute” and stood up “for the rights of all the unfortunate” (Proverbs 31:8), and too many who remained silent, looked on, or just



Entrance to the Adventist Betsaal (assembly room) in Brno in 1941 with the note “Juden verboten!” (“Jews prohibited!”)

looked away. It is astonishing to observe that the phenomenon of persecution and extermination of Jews

*There were too few
“righteous” among
Adventists.*

largely remained unnoticed among Adventists in the Third Reich, even when they showed resistant behavior (e.g., general ideological resistance, refusal to give the *Hitler-Gruss*, refusal to

work on the Sabbath, preference of medical service, rejection of killing in times of war, and, in rare cases, refusal of military service).

Shocking Examples

The Jew and Adventist Sarah Frieda Nagelberg came from Galicia and immigrated in 1898 to Austria. In 1930, Frau Nagelberg, who worked as an embroiderer and draper, joined the Adventist church in Dornbirn. In 1935, she became very sick and incapable of earning her living. Entirely without means, she was received into a Catholic shelter in Hohenems. In 1940, the Gestapo began its investigations. Nagelberg stated that she did not know whether she was still held as a member of the Adventist church. Obviously Adventist members had ceased contact with her. In 1942, the sick, helpless and isolated Jewish-Adventist woman was deported from Hohenems via Vienna to an extermination camp and apparently died there.

The Jewish-Adventist Wilhelm Jokel from Vienna confessed in 1938: “Like frightened deer we seek a hiding place.” Jokel, who at that time had belonged to the Adventist church for 33 years, asked the church leaders in Vienna for help. He was turned away with the argument that he fell under the responsibility of the Viennese Jewish community (*Kultusgemeinde*). Nothing is known about his later fate.

The Adventist pastor and theologian Hermann Kobs, who

worked in Leipzig, was suspended for making it possible for a Jewish fellow believer to attend worship services. This fellow believer had been expelled from the Adventist congregation because of his ethnic origin. The suspension of Kobs was ordered at the suggestion of the church leaders and was declared to be a “precautionary measure,” the official reason. In fact, in 1942 Kobs was impris-

The phenomenon of persecution and extermination of Jews largely remained unnoticed among Adventists in the Third Reich, even when they showed resistant behavior.

oned because of his friendly attitude toward Jews. After more than a year of forced labor he was set free. It happened quite often that Adventist leaders distanced themselves from Jewish-friendly church members or activities. Sometimes they directly rejected Adventists of Jewish origin because they were afraid of being denounced as “public enemies” by Nazi authorities if they showed sympathy or provided assistance. Such an appraisal on the part of the authorities without doubt would have had negative consequences for the entire Church. In the view of the authorities, the observance of the Sabbath and the abstinence from unclean food placed Adventists dangerously close to Judaism anyway.

Another shocking example: In 1939, the Gestapo interrogated the Adventist publishing director in Brno, Franz A. Ludwig, whose wife, Frieda, was a Jew. The church leaders in Prague, under the influence of the German Adventist leadership in Berlin, then dissociated themselves from their trusted coworker. Two years

later came the instructions to expel all Jewish and “Jewish related” (*jüdisch versippt*) members from the Adventist Church. The church board in Brno did not want to carry out such instructions. So the expulsion of nine members was carried out from Prague, without the knowledge of the members and without the consent of the church board in Brno. A sign with a note written in two

languages was posted at the doors of the Adventist assembly rooms in Brno, Prague and Olomouc, reading “Jews prohibited!”

Shortly after the expulsion of those nine church members a Jewish sister in the Adventist faith, Frieda Redlich, was deported to a concentration camp in Poland. None of the Adventist pastors or church elders visited her after her arrest to comfort her. Obviously, the church leadership intentionally avoided contact with church members of Jewish origin. As a consequence, in 1942, the Adventist Church paper

We do not only want to remember but at the same time to confess.

Hlasatel Pravdy carried the announcement that the mailing of this paper and the Adventist Sabbath School Quarterly to Jews or Jewish *Mischlinge* had been discontinued.

Frieda Ludwig and her husband survived the Holocaust in spite of forced labor and a con-

centration camp. What was most painful for them was the behavior of their fellow believers. Shunning as far as expulsion from the church, failed assistance, and indifference apparently caused the death of a number of church members of Jewish origin.

Riga 1943

A different scene: Riga 1943. The capital of Latvia was one of the most important Jewish centers in Europe. Of approximately 43,000 Jews in Riga only about 175 survived the “final solution” (*Endlösung*) of the Nazis. To our knowledge, in no other city occupied by German troops had there been more Adventists willing to help Jews. Among the courageous helpers were a number of church members of German origin. The Adventists even established a rescue network for Jews. They hid them for months in their homes, risking their own lives and their own security. The following are known for their rescuing efforts: the two Adventist sisters Eugenie and Katrin Apoga, Schiba, Schenk, Margaret and Alexandra Klebais, the Adventist police officer Janis Stebbers, and the families Willumson and Iwanenko. The Jews who received help from these persons did not belong to the Adventist church. The Talmud student Izaks Kleimanis owed his life solely to the effort of the two sisters Eugenie and Katrin Apoga, who were hiding him, together with a three-year old Jewish boy, for fourteen months in their one-room apartment. Under the deep impression of such self-sacrificing, Kleimanis became an Adventist in 1949 and later worked as an Adventist pastor in Latvia.

One of the most courageous

Adventists who fought against the mass murder of Jews was the Hungarian pastor and union president László Michnay (1893-1965). A tree planted in his honor in 1981 on the *Avenue of the Righteous Among the Nations* of the Yad Vashem in Jerusalem reminds of his uncompromising resistance. In the well-known political magazine *Függetlenség* ("Independence") in 1942, Michnay strictly condemned the Jew-baiting in his land: "Neither God nor the Hungarian homeland could ever forgive such a sin." In 1943, he preached publicly against racial hate in the Adventist church on Székely Bertalan Street in Budapest: "You only follow Jesus faithfully if you protect the Jews!" Michnay himself hid more than fifty Jews. All of them survived the Holocaust. The well-known Hungarian poet Andor Peterdi, whose life had also been saved by Michnay, perpetuated the mercy and courage of this pastor and his wife in a poem: "Like hunted deer I did not know where I should flee . . . (but) your hand caressed me, your kind word comforted me." Michnay was interrogated several times by the police, but was miraculously set free time and again.

Similarly courageous and determined was the Hungarian Adventist Zoltán Kubinyi. As officer of a Jewish work battalion he freed ca. 140 Jewish prisoners, while he himself later found death in a Siberian labor camp. Only in the early 1990s have Kubinyi's efforts been made known to the public.

Probably the most famous Adventist rescuer of Jews was the legendary Jean H. Weidner (1912-1994), son of a pastor in Brussels. Weidner set up a rescue organization under the name "Dutch-Paris." Until the end of the war Weidner and his group saved the lives of more than 800 Jews and of another 200 to 300 endangered persons by regularly organizing escapes to Switzerland and Spain. More than 150 collaborators of the organization were gradually arrested by the Gestapo; 40 of them died from the consequences of the interrogations or were killed. Among those victims were Weidner's sister, Gabrielle, and the Adventist pastor



John Weidner decorated for his heroic actions during World War II: He helped hundreds of Jewish fugitives to escape the Holocaust

Paul Meyer. In 1944, Meyer was arrested in Lyon by the myrmidons of SS-chief Klaus Barbie and brought to the concentration camp Dachau, where he died.

Weidner was also arrested several times and tortured, but could always escape. In May 1944 in Toulouse, the evening before his execution he jumped out of the window of the police prison's third story and escaped. Weidner received for his efforts the highest state-honors. In 1963, the government of Israel honored him by entering his name into the Golden Book of the Heroes of Jerusalem. At the opening of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., in 1993, he was one of the seven honored guests who remembered the rescue of the Jews by lighting a candle. A year later the Adventist Atlantic Union College in the area of Boston established a memorial and a museum with attached archive in his honor: *The John Henry Weidner*



*Center for Cultivation of the Altruistic Spirit.*³

The Sorrowful Silence of Insight

In spite of such outstanding examples of active solidarity, there remains a sorrowful silence of insight over failed assistance and the “resistance of the heart.” These encouraging examples should on no account be considered as “neutralizing” or even as palliation of the Adventist past. We feel pain, repentance, and shame for the neglect; respect and admiration for the individual deeds; helplessness and sorrow in regard to that which even in retrospect surpasses our power of com-

prehension. The dramatic work of remembrance and the search for historical details should above all assure that this tragedy will never again be repeated. Moreover, both activities could help to secure the remembrance of the humiliated, persecuted, and killed, and thus may give them back a small part of their God-given dignity.

During the Nazi era the Adventist Church became guilty in regard to the Jews. The knowledge of this makes us humble. Therefore, we do not only want to remember but at the same time to confess: “We have sinned and committed iniquity . . . we do not present our supplications before

You because of our righteous deeds, but because of Your great mercies” (Daniel 9:5, 18).

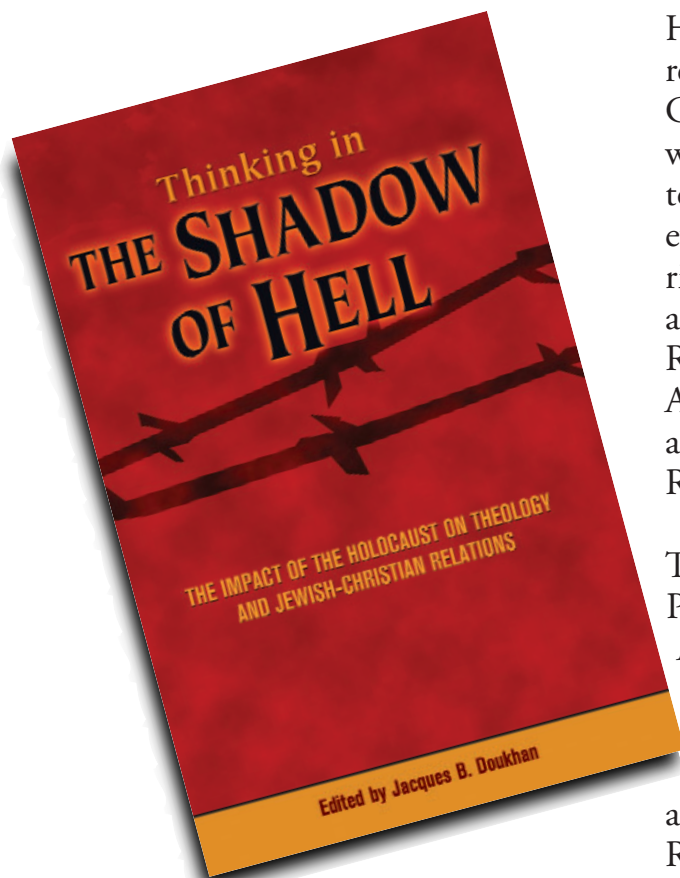
*This article appeared originally in German in *Adventecho*, May 2001, pp. 12-14. Translation by Martin Pröbstle.

¹*Gegenwarts-Fragen*, no. 718 (1943), pp. 35, 36.

²Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, Parts I-II (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 178 (emphasis his).

³For the story of John Weidner and the Dutch-Paris underground see Herbert Ford, *Flee the Captor*, 2nd ed. (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1994).

Now Available!



Holocaust scholars, church leaders, and religious liberty experts face a chapter of Christian and Jewish history that many would like to forget, yet urging readers not to distance themselves from the traumatic event of the Holocaust. Disturbing stories, frank dialogue, and formal research are together presented to examine “The Roots of the Holocaust,” “Theology after Auschwitz,” “To Be a Religious Person after Auschwitz,” and “Jewish-Christian Relations after Auschwitz.”

This important work is derived from the Proceedings of a symposium, held at Andrews University under the coordination of the Institute of Jewish-Christian Studies of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary and with the active participation of the International Religious Liberty Association.