



Prof. Kurt Schubert



Kurt Schubert is Professor Emeritus of Jewish Studies. From 1966 to 1993 he was Professor at the University of Vienna, Austria, where he still lectures even now. His professional interest is research into Jewish history and culture from biblical times until the present.

Born in Vienna, Prof. Schubert is one of the most influential figures in furthering the dialogue between Christians and Jews in post-World War Austria and Europe. In 1966, Prof. Schubert founded the Institute for Judaic Studies at the University of Vienna, the first of its kind in Europe, and in 1972 the Austrian Jewish Museum in Eisenstadt. As Catholic, he was also actively involved in the realization of Vatican Council II and the development of dialogical thinking in the Catholic Church.

Prof. Schubert has written more than a hundred scholarly articles and has authored or edited many books, among them *Die Religion des nachbiblischen Judentums* (1955), *The Dead Sea Community* (1959), *Die jüdischen Religionsparteien in neutestamentlicher Zeit* (1970), *Jesus im Lichte der Religionsgeschichte des Judentums* (1973), *Die Kultur der Juden* (1977-1979), *Die Religion des Judentums* (1992), and *Jüdische Geschichte* (1995). He is currently working on a forthcoming book on *Christentum und Judentum im Wandel der Zeiten* (Christianity and Judaism through the ages).

S *habbat Shalom:* Prof. Schubert, without hesitation one can say that in Austria you are the foremost expert on Judaism. Your name is inextricably linked with the Christian-Jewish dialogue. To mention just two of your many outstanding achievements: You founded at the University of Vienna in 1966 the first Institute for Judaic Studies ever in Europe. And in 1972 you founded the Austrian Jewish Museum in Eisenstadt. And now you are in active retirement and still you are lecturing in the Institute for Judaic Studies, already in your 116th semester! So, could you briefly sketch your life?

Kurt Schubert: My interest in Judaism arose from the viewpoint of the Austrian Catholic opposition against Nazism. Already in the winter semester 1941-1942 I began to study Biblical Hebrew.

Because of bronchial asthma I did not have to go to the *Wehrmacht*, the German Armed Forces, merely to the air-raid protection, a task during which I was still able to pursue my studies. Because of my work for the air-raid protection I seized the opportunity to save several thousand copies of Hebrew books which are now in Israel.

My major study area was “Old Semitic Philology and Ancient Near Eastern Studies.” This of course included Hebrew. The dissertation, however, needed to be on an Assyriological topic. I graduated with a Dr. Phil. in March 1945, just before the liberation by the Red Army. Starting from May 1945 I taught as assistant (*wissenschaftliche Hilfskraft*) Hebrew, Syriac, and Akkadian, from 1949 Judaic Studies at the Oriental Institute of the University of Vienna as assistant professor (*Dozent*), and from 1955 as associate professor (*außerordentlicher Professor*). In 1966, I became full professor (*ordentlicher Professor*) and director of the newly-founded Institute for Judaic Studies at the University of Vienna, from which several other institutes in the German-speaking countries have been founded, e.g., in Cologne, Germany, and Luzern, Switzerland.

Shabbat Shalom: How did you get involved in studying Jewish history and culture? And what were the reasons that you exerted yourself actively for establishing Jewish-Christian relations and continuously taking care of them?

Schubert: Calling ourselves in the liturgy “Zion,” “Jerusalem,” and “Israel” demands our solidarity with Judaism, particularly under the circumstances of Nazi persecution. Therefore, among friends I stood up for such a soli-

arity already during the war, and after the liberation of Austria I continued doing this on an official basis. It always occurred to me that the scientific realm was more efficient than any possible organi-

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zation on the club level. Thus, my small department on Judaism at the Oriental Institute was from the beginning the basis from which all further steps followed. In the years after World War Two, I also worked together closely with Zionist organizations that assisted Jewish DPs (Displaced Persons), refugees under the care of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). This is the reason why already in April-May 1949 I was for my first time in Israel, where I delivered in regard to the saved books the deed of gift by the

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Israelitische Kultusgemeinde Vienna, the Jewish Community of Vienna.

Shabbat Shalom: You have been, and still are, very actively involved in the dialogues between Christian and Jews. What do you regard as the major high points of your efforts? What do you perceive as the main effects and results of your (life)work? For the Roman Catholic Church (in Austria and beyond), for Christians in general, and for the Jews?

Schubert: I was certainly one of the first who worked in this regard, especially in the Church.

In the war, my friends affectionately called me “Moses.” One of the major successes was the unambiguous demand for solidarity with Judaism at the Diocese synod of Vienna in 1971. I presented the text in front of the synod. Definitely as high points of success I regard the founding of the Institute for Judaism at the University of Vienna in 1966 and of the Austrian Jewish Museum in Eisenstadt, Burgenland, which was the first Jewish museum in Austria since 1945. My theses and my viewpoint have been fully accepted in the Church. Thus I serve since 1966 as President of the *Österreichisches Katholisches Bibelwerk*, the Austrian Catholic Bible Association.

Shabbat Shalom: Let me ask you now more directly about the Shoah. How was your life touched by the Holocaust?

Schubert: I had no direct contact with the Holocaust. From the beginning, that is from March 1938, I was decidedly opposed to

Nazism. As a fifteen-year-old—yes, I was born in 1923—I wanted to do my part to free Austria from the Nazi rule. I soon realized the fundamentally anti-Christian diabolism of the Nazi ideology.

I met my wife, Dr. Dr. h.c. Ursula Schubert, born Just, in December 1944. She was already baptized as an infant into the Catholic Church. Her mother was a Jew, her father an Aryan. According to Nazi laws this marriage was a so-called *Privilegierte Mischehe*, a term that designated that Jews cohabiting in mixed marriages enjoyed privileged status. Thus, her mother was not

forced to wear the Judenstern, the yellow “Jewish badge.” Ursula’s grandfather starved to death at the age of 84 in the concentration camp Theresienstadt (Terezín, now in the Czech Republic). Her grandmother and her aunt, the sister of my mother-in-law, were in Shanghai and Peking. Two sisters of Ursula’s grandmother committed suicide in October 1941 so that they would not be deported to the East for extermination.

Shabbat Shalom: Elie Wiesel said, “There is no rational explanation for the Holocaust, and when we will find one, it will be wrong.” This is my question then: Why the Holocaust? How could we explain this magnitude of evil?

Schubert: A rational explanation for the Holocaust is only not possible if we understand “rational” as referring to a reason led by general moral principles. However, for Nazi ideology Judaism was the metaphysical antiworld whose extermination was the task that “Providence” had placed upon the German nation. Just read the headlines from the Jew-baiting Nazi paper *Der Stürmer*: “Without breaking the Jewish control, no salvation of humanity,” or “Who fights with the Jew, fights with the devil.”

Such an ideology was already prepared in the last decades of the nineteenth century by writers like Wilhelm Marr, Eugen Dühring, and Houston Stewart Chamberlain. Nazis applied a slogan to Jews that was originally formulated by Heinrich von Kleist in his *Germania Ode* against the French: “Slay him/them, the last judgment does not ask for reasons.”

Shabbat Shalom: Do you think that the Holocaust could have happened elsewhere and at

another time? Is the Holocaust a unique event? How does it compare to other holocausts, for example, Armenian or Rwandan?

Schubert: The Holocaust must not be compared with any other genocide. The Holocaust is rather a phenomenon *sui generis*. It was

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not a pogrom, not an emotional outburst, but a planned mass murder executed with technical perfection. Therefore, we cannot compare it with so-called ethnical purges. It was not about territorial claims and rights in this world. Rather the Holocaust was the consequence of an ideology for which the extermination of unworthy and racially inferior life had unmistakably a pseudoreligious, metaphysical function, a task that “Providence” had placed upon the German nation.

Shabbat Shalom: What lessons should Christians learn from the Holocaust, both ethical and theological? What do we learn about us humans? And what do we learn about God?

Schubert: Since the Holocaust was the consequence of a diabolical ideology, it can only be understood on the basis of Genesis 3 and 4. Nazism was initially welcomed by many Germans—for example, for the elimination of economic competition; just think about Aryanization activities. As in Genesis 4, the process ended in planned murder.

Regarding humanity, we learn that the Holocaust is an extreme form of human susceptibility to sin.

About God, we can only learn something from Job and the Jewish religious literature. In the

apocalypse *4 Ezra*, which dates to ca. 100 C.E., that is, after the crucial date of 70 C.E., it is stated that it is not given to humans “to understand the ways of the Most High.” The *angelus interpretis* said to “Ezra”: “You are not a better judge than God, or wiser than the Most High!” (7:19), and “For you

come far short of being able to love my creation more than I love it” (8:47). Even more articulate is the Talmud in *Menachot* 29b (a tradition from the third century C.E.) which refers to the martyr’s death of Rabbi Akiba, who had expounded the Torah in an excellent manner. In terror Moses asks for the meaning of all of this: “Lord of the Universe,” cried Moses, ‘such Torah, and such a reward!’ He replied, ‘Be silent, for such is My decree.’” A supplement to this is found in *Abodah Zarah* 18a, which deals with the martyr’s death of Chanina ben Teradion. Even when he was on the burning stakes he felt encouraged because his executioners had wrapped him in the Scroll of the Law. He replied to his disciples: “The parchments are being burnt but the letters are soaring on high.”

In spite of all its diabolism and inconceivability it must be clear that the Holocaust is not God’s last word to His people of witness, Israel. If we Christians understand ourselves also as Israel, then this is also true for us. For this reason the Christian churches developed after the defeat of the Nazis a new way of thinking in connection with Romans 9-11. Now we speak about the “covenant never revoked by God” made with His covenant people Israel. And

Christ created for all human beings a new entry into this covenant!

Shabbat Shalom: Why was there a Christian anti-Semitic ideology existing for two millennia? Is such an ideology inherent in Christian theology or is it superimposed? How has Christian theological thinking and teaching changed after the Shoah?

Schubert: Anti-Semitism is pre-Christian. Compare the book of Esther and Daniel 3 and 6. The strict monotheism in Jewish thought was an offense for the pagan world, which reacted to the “Jewish unbelief” in the ancient gods with contempt.

Christianity developed as Jewish Christianity in rivalry with Judaism. The inner-Jewish polemic within the Church was taken as reason for the existing anti-Semitic animosity among the Gentile Christians. The Christians understood themselves as the sole heirs of the Old Testament covenant people with their promises, excluding the original covenant people. That way the heathen anti-Semitism was not overcome, but aggravated.

After the Holocaust the successionist “replacement theory” was modified to a great extent and therefore today we have the concept of the “covenant never revoked by God.” Further conditions for such a new approach are ecumenicalism and historical-critical exegesis, particularly in view of the possible anti-Semitic interpretations of New Testament texts. [Compare on this subject matter Kurt Schubert, *Jesus im Lichte der Religionsgeschichte des Judentums* (Vienna: Heroldverlag, 1973)].

Shabbat Shalom: Let me take up the theological aspect: If the

covenant was never revoked by God, then what theological role does Christianity or the Christian church play in relation to the covenant? In other words, What is our biblical identity in relation to God’s chosen people, Israel?

Schubert: Christianity, in particular the death and resurrection of Jesus, opened a new way to God’s covenant with Abraham and to the covenant at Sinai that was not limited ethnically any more. Judaism, as defined by its religious tradition, has the task to establish the eschatological reality of salvation by means of the Law from Sinai, the Torah. The

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Christian is integrated into this task by his or her faith. Therefore the request of the Lord’s Prayer is a valid plea for both Jews and Christians: Your kingdom come!

Shabbat Shalom: What do you think of the revisionists who say that the Holocaust never took place?

Schubert: Those who deny the Holocaust cannot be taken seriously as partners in discussion. Where are then the 5-6 million Jews if they had not been murdered? To confront idiots and liars of this nature, just cast a quick glance at the *Reichsgesetzblatt*, the German Law Gazette.

In the *Reichsgesetzblatt* of September 5, 1941, appeared a police decree for the identification of Jews in effect from September 1, 1941. The prohibition of Jewish emigration followed on October 23, 1941. It was the goal of the Nazi rulers to make Germany, and beyond it Europe,

judenrein, free of Jews. First they tried to force the Jews to emigrate by taking harassing measures against them. How should it continue now in view of the emigration ban? The *Reichsgesetzblatt* provides the right answer in the “Eleventh decree to the civil law of the Reich” in the *Reichsgesetzblatt* of November 25, 1941. According to this decree the German Jews had to pay the costs for their own extermination:

“§1: A Jew who has his ordinary place of residence abroad [since the *Generalgouvernement*, the name given to the part of occupied Poland that was not incorporated into the Reich, where the extermination camps were located, was also considered to be abroad, this law referred first of all to deported Jews] cannot be considered a German citizen. The ordinary place of residence is given if a Jew stays abroad under circumstances which suggest that he does not stay there only temporarily [applying for a later stay in an extermination camp].

“§2: A Jew loses German citizenship, . . . if at a later time he takes his ordinary place of residence abroad, with the transfer of his ordinary place of residence abroad.” [Since at the time of issuing this law the prohibition of Jewish emigration was already in place for one month, this can only concern further deportations.]

“§3: The property of the Jew who loses German citizenship on account of this decree falls with the loss of citizenship to the Reich. . . . This property is to support all purposes connected with the solution of the Jewish question.”

This text does not need any further comment.

Shabbat Shalom: Why is it

imperative to remember the Holocaust?

Schubert: As long as anti-Semitism remains a political reality—also among the Moslems!—the remembrance of the Holocaust is necessary and meaningful. It reminds of the diabolical consequences that anti-Semitism has if it is not faced, questioned and correctly treated.

Shabbat Shalom: How should we remember the Holocaust so as not to make it a morbid and unhealthy act? Do you have practical suggestions?

Schubert: Remembering the Holocaust and Holocaust memorial sites are an act of historical research. As none can overcome oneself, such remembering belongs to the process of discovering one's self. More particularly, we need to clearly recognize that Judaism cannot be understood only by the general criteria. I call this the sacred tragic of the Jewish existence. Whenever Judaism receives its equal right in our world, it creates a problem for the others who feel challenged because they do not understand Judaism from within. This is already evident in the emancipation and assimilation movement in the nineteenth century that resulted in a rapid economic anti-Semitism which found its deadly consequence in the racial-biological, in the Final Solution of the Jewish question.

In the thirties, the anti-Semites suggested to the Jews to move to Palestine. The Zionists took this request seriously and thus emerged the problem between Jews and Arabs. Today, the anti-Semites take offense at the Zionists in Israel when they have to push through their rights to live in an Arab land.

Shabbat Shalom: Do you

have a particular story or a personal experience in relation to the Holocaust event that you could share with our readers to make them think more deeply?

Schubert: As I was, according to Nazi law, an Aryan, I do not have any recollections of my own regarding the Holocaust, though I do have a package of memories of the Nazi crimes and the Austrian resistance against the Nazi occupation of Austria from 1938 to 1945.

I was completely taken aback by what I experienced as a fifteen-year old in Vienna. The Nazis celebrated their victory—which in fact was a military occupation of Austria by the German army—

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with insolent slogans, which I do not want to repeat here, and with unscrupulous anti-Semitism, often paired with vehement anticlericalism. After March 11, 1938, Jews had to remove with nailbrush and toothbrush the slogans for a public opinion poll that should have been held on March 13 but could not take place because of the German invasion.

It became clear to me that as Christians we are called to show solidarity with Judaism. So I began to study Hebrew and Aramaic in 1941 to get to know the Jewish sources in their originals and thereby to better understand Judaism. While studying, I realized more and more that only a true knowledge of Judaism will be the best and most effective weapon against anti-Semitic

stereotypes. Hence, I established in 1959 the subject “Jewish studies” at the University of Vienna—with the most energetic assistance of Dr. Heinrich Drimmel, then the Minister of Education—which in 1966 grew into the “Institute for Jewish Studies.” And in 1972 I founded the Austrian Jewish Museum in Eisenstadt on the initiative of Dr. Fred Sinowatz, then the Burgenland regional government's cultural representative and later chancellor of the Republic of Austria.

Shabbat Shalom: In his moving speech to the German Bundestag on January 27, 1998, Yehuda Bauer sharply observed that “the most horrible thing about the Shoah is in fact not that the Nazis were inhuman—the most horrible thing about it is that they were indeed human, just as human as you and I are.” Is another Holocaust still possible? What would prevent it?

Schubert: In a world stigmatized by *peccatum originale*, original sin, there is no evil that could not be repeated. The Holocaust was only the most concrete expression so far. However, with modern means even such a horrible event could be surpassed.

*This interview was prepared and conducted by Friedrich Wagner and Martin Pröbstle.