Albert Schweitzer was born on January 4, 1875, in Kaysersberg in the upper Alsace, which had been a French province since the 17th century but was seized by Prussia in 1871. His father, Louis Schweitzer, was an Evangelical Lutheran pastor in the Alsatian town of Gunsbach. His mother, Adèle Schillinger, was also from Alsace. Although Schweitzer considered himself French — and would formally take French citizenship after World War I — his mother tongue was Alsatian, and he later wrote mostly in the German language.

Schweitzer was a musician and theologian before he became a physician. Schweitzer’s first music teacher was his father, and he performed regularly in church as a boy. Between 1885 and 1893 he studied the pipe organ in the Alsatian town of Mulhouse with the organist of the local cathedral.

In 1893, after obtaining his “Abitur” certificate from the Mulhouse Gymnasium (secondary school), Schweitzer began to study Protestant theology at the Kaiser Wilhelm University in Strasbourg, while he also continued piano and organ lessons. He was deeply influenced by the music of Bach and Wagner. He wrote a pamphlet in 1906, “The Art of Organ Building and Organ Playing in Germany and France,” which influenced trends in 20th century European pipe organ construction, and he also introduced “The Schweitzer Technique” of microphone placement for recording performances of Bach’s music.

In 1898, he went to Paris in order to write a PhD dissertation on the religious philosophy of Immanuel Kant at the Sorbonne. His reputation as a theological scholar rests upon the books, “The Quest of the Historical Jesus” (1906), which focused on separating historical evidence of Jesus from tradition and religious belief, and “The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle” (1931).

In the first decade of the 20th century, the Society of the Evangelist Missions of Paris was looking for a medical missionary to serve in sub-Saharan Africa. Schweitzer applied, but was turned down because of his Lutheran theology and inexperience in medicine. Therefore, in 1905, at the age 30, Schweitzer began to study medicine at the University of Strasbourg, much to the surprise of his family and friends. He graduated in 1912; the title of his medical degree dissertation was, “The Psychiatric Study of Jesus”.

In 1912, he married Helene Bresslau, a Jewish woman who was working as an orphanage inspector. In 1913, now with formal medical qualifications, he finally convinced the Paris Missionary Society to support him, and with his wife traveled to the French Equatorial Africa colony to the Missionary Society’s outpost in the village of Lambaréné, 200 miles upstream from the Atlantic on the Ogooué River in present-day Gabon. The Schweitzers established a crude hospital there, with Helene serving as anesthetist.

During World War I, Schweitzer and his wife were considered German citizens in a French colony and were put under close supervision by the French military. In 1917, they were sent to an internment camp in France as prisoners of war. After the end of the war they were released from the camp and the Schweitzers returned home to Alsace and formally changed their nationality to French.

In 1924, he returned to Lambaréné with an assistant but without his wife, and found that the hospital he had built a decade earlier had been destroyed. So he reestablished the
hospital, with much of the building work being performed by Africans, who also served in various critical medical roles. The hospital grew and eventually became known as the “Albert Schweitzer Hospital.”

Schweitzer wrote widely about humanitarian topics and increasingly became known internationally. In 1952, he received the Nobel Peace Prize for his philosophy of “Reverence for Life.” He summarized this concept as follows: “Ethics is nothing other than Reverence for Life. Reverence for Life affords me my fundamental principle of morality; namely, that good consists in maintaining, assisting, and enhancing life, and to destroy, to harm, or to hinder life is evil.”

He received many other honors, awards, and honorary doctorates, including a chevalier of the Military and Hospital Order of Saint Lazarus of Jerusalem, a Catholic organization originally founded by the Crusaders. In 1955, Queen Elizabeth II made him an honorary member of the Order of Merit (OM).

Albert Schweitzer died on September 4, 1965, at his beloved hospital in Lambaréné. He has been honored philatelically on several stamps, including one issued by Germany (Scott number #1160) on January 15, 1975, to commemorate the centennial anniversary of his birth.

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Correspondence: Address to Ahmadreza Afshar, MD, Department of Orthopedics, Urmia University of Medical Sciences, Imam Khomeini Hospital, Modaress Street, Ershad Boulevard, Urmia, Iran 57157 81351 (afshar_ah@yahoo.com).