

## In Memoriam

# Pfarrer Dr. Wilhelm Salberg (1925-1996)



The **Mount Zion Foundation** devotes itself to fostering mutual understanding between Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Holy Land. Every two years, on Nostra Aetate Day at the end of October, at the Benedictine Dormition Abbey on Mount Zion, the foundation bestows the **Mount Zion Award**. It is granted to people or organizations that have made outstanding contributions to overcoming prejudice and to fostering dialogue between the three monotheistic religions. The foundation is headquartered at the *Institute for Jewish-Christian Research* of the University of Lucerne. The estate of its founder, Dr. Wilhelm Salberg, is housed there as well.

# In Memoriam Pfarrer Dr. Wilhelm Salberg



Wilhelm Salberg was born on July 5, 1925 in Steele on the Ruhr (Germany). His mother, Dr. Lucia-Maria Hartmann (1894–1984), was Catholic. His father, Dr. Willy Salberg (1870–1935), was a Liberal Jew whose family tree can be traced back to 1730. During World War I, Dr. Salberg was an Oberstabsarzt, a senior army-physician, and was repeatedly decorated. After the war, he was the co-founder of the Reichsverband jüdischer Frontkämpfer, an organization of Jewish soldiers, and chairman of the Kriegerverein in Steele. Following his conversion to Christianity, Willy married Lucia-Maria in 1924. With the rise of National Socialism, Wilhelm's mother, also a physician, lost her doctor's license and, as a Jew, Dr. Salberg was able to treat only a few patients. In 1935, the last savings were used up and Dr. Salberg died of heart failure.

In order to safeguard him, Wilhelm's parents had sent their son to a Jesuit college. Wilhelm Jr. attended Catholic schools until his graduation in 1943. Due to his Jewish ancestry, he had to go underground during the last two years of the war. After 1945, he began to study Catholic theology in Cologne and received his priestly ordination there in 1949. From 1949 to 1951 he was a chaplain to the miners in the coal mines of Oberhausen.

His Jewish-Christian origin shaped his theological position: "I stand in both Testaments; in the First and the New! I stand in a Christianity rooted in Judaism." At the

age of 45, he started studying Judaism at the Martin Buber Institute of the University of Cologne.

Salberg's experience of persecution and anti-Semitism motivated his lifelong critical examination of anti-Judaism in the Christian tradition. In 1986 he observed:

*"Auschwitz – that was not so much the physical catastrophe of Judaism but the theological catastrophe of Christianity." – I once read this sentence and never forgot it. It seems to me to be seen right: the physical destruction of the Jews was only possible because before that, for centuries, Christians had denied their theological right to exist. [...] On the Cross of the Romans a Jew died, and his brethren died under the Hakenkreuz [swastika]. During my lifetime, I have had to think a great deal about these connections, and I also studied Judaism as a Catholic priest. The question of whether Christians really need 'a corpse in the cellar' in order to testify to their faith, has become the question of my life. My father was of Jewish origin, my mother a pious Christian. Half of my family was exterminated. Since 1974, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem has confirmed eleven names to me. [...] Yet this is true too: I owe my survival to the institutions of the Catholic Church, which offered me refuge within its own schools and colleges. The archbishop of Cologne, and later Cardinal, Dr. Josef Frings, may be mentioned here as one of many."*

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) became the theological and

biographical turning point in Salberg's life, in particular the Declaration on the Relation of the Catholic Church to non-Christian religions, *Nostra Aetate*, which was proclaimed on October 28, 1965, and which, in its fourth article, fundamentally renewed the relation of the Church to Judaism. This little text with great effect initiated a revolution of the mind and the heart and aroused a new awareness of the fraternal connection between Judaism and Christianity. For the first time, a Council acknowledged the common spiritual heritage of Jews and Christians as well as the Jewish origin of Jesus, his first disciples and the apostles. It condemned all manifestations of anti-Semitism and called for mutual respect and brotherly dialogue.

Salberg indeed acknowledged the Council's declaration as "a complete rethinking of the Catholic Church" towards Judaism, but twenty years after *Nostra Aetate* the practical process of coming to terms with the shortcomings of the past seemed "horribly slow" to him. He saw the Judeo-Christian understanding as an ecumenical obligation and already then demanded the inclusion of the third Abrahamic religion, Islam. He was aware of the political dimension of this objective for the Middle East. He implemented his idea in 1986 by establishing an ecclesiastical foundation named the Mount Zion Foundation:

*"Thus I have decided to substantiate through a foundation what has always been important to me in my life; a foundation that will outlive me. It is to serve the acceleration of the journey of Jews and Christians towards each other, as well as to serve the hesitant*

*approaches to a mutual understanding with the Islam [...]. To all three religions, Mount Zion in Jerusalem is holy, with its traditions of David's tomb and of the upper room, in which the disciples gathered. Zion is a symbol of the Spirit of God in the history of man; the Spirit that shows us new ways to the future, of which we shy away."*

On December 18, 1996, Wilhelm Salberg died in Essen-Werle, but his legacy lives on in the Mount Zion Award. Since 1987, numerous personalities and organizations have been distinguished for their interreligious commitment, contributing to fostering understanding of between religions and cultures, and to promoting peace in Israel and Palestine.

Prof. Dr. Verena Lenzen  
Translation: Rabbi David Bollag PhD

Prof. Lenzen is the head of the Institute for Jewish-Christian Research at the University of Lucerne. She shares the chairmanship of the Mount Zion Foundation with the abbot of the Dormition Abbey. Prof. Lenzen and P. Markus Muff OSB, Rome, serve as board of trustees.

<http://www.dormitio.net/engagement/friedensarbeit/zionaward/zionaward2/index.html> [15.05.2017]



## The Mount Zion Award has been bestowed upon

- 1987** Dr. Mahmoud Abassi, Al-Masreq Publishing House, Shefar'am  
Rose-Therese Sant, Sister of Sion NDS, Jerusalem
- 1989** David Grossman, writer, Mevasseret Zion
- 1991** Elisheva Hemker, lay pastor, Haifa and Nahariya
- 1993** Dr. Kirsten Stoffregen-Pedersen („Schwester Abraham“), Jerusalem
- 1995** Elias und Heyam Jabbour, social workers, Shefar'am  
Yeheskel und Dalia Landau, social workers, Ramle, Jerusalem
- 1997** Prof. Dr. Sumaya Farhat-Nasser, University of Birzeit  
Yitzhak Frankenthal, Netivot Shalom, Jerusalem
- 1999** Shmuel Toledano, politician, Jerusalem  
Ass'ad Araidy, Druse, mayor of Maghar, Galilee
- 2001** Kifaya Jadah  
Reuven Moskovitz  
Emil Shoufany
- 2003** Keren Assaf, „Breaking Barriers“, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem
- 2005** Rabbi Dr. David Rosen, Jerusalem
- 2007** Sr. Monika Düllmann, St. Louis Hospital, Jerusalem
- 2009** Daniel Rossing, Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations, Jerusalem  
Dr. Nedal Rashed Jayousi, Palestinian House for Professional Solutions, Ramallah
- 2011** Samiramis Kutlo, Gidon Bromberg, Munqeth Meyhar, Friends of the Earth Middle East
- 2013** Yisca Harani  
Margaret Karram
- 2015** The Coordination for Pastoral among Migrants (CPAM)
- 2017** Amos Oz, writer, Tel Aviv

### Mount Zion Foundation

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