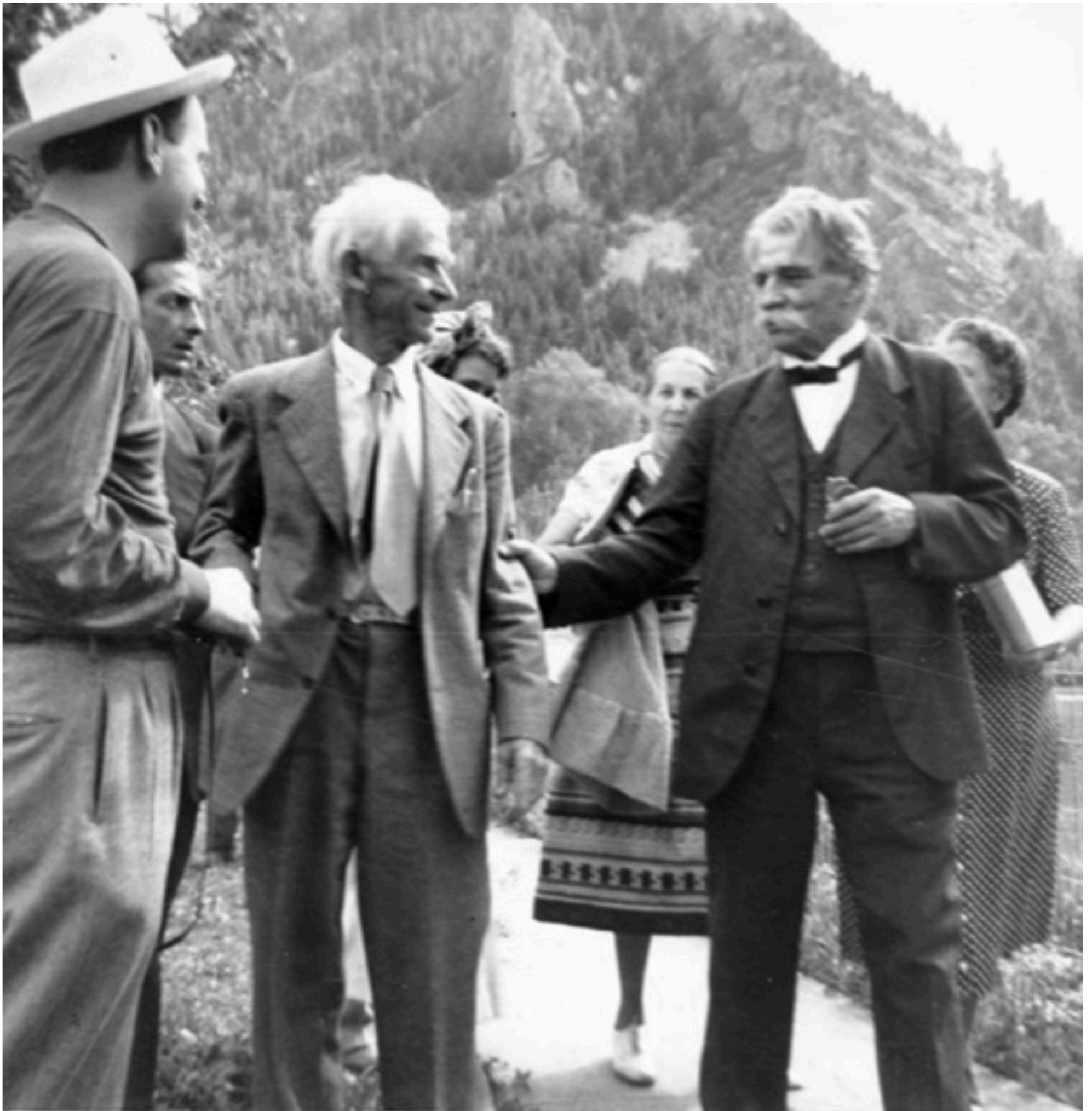


# Willoughby: Albert Schweitzer Sesquicentennial Convocation — his significance in the formation of modern Aspen

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[Tim Willoughby](#)

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**Albert Schweitzer when he came to speak at the 1949 Goethe Bicentennial.**

*Aspen Historical Society/Hofmann Collection*

A series of local events will celebrate Albert Schweitzer's outstanding life and the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his speeches in Aspen for the 1949 Goethe Bicentennial Celebration, beginning June 30. While that was the only time he visited Aspen, it was significant in forming the philosophical roots of the Aspen Institute For Humanistic Studies (original name).

Planning for the Goethe celebration began at the University of Chicago with the President Robert Hutchins pairing up with a literature professor, Guiseppe Borgese. Walter Paepcke, at the time, was a member of the board of trustees of the university and a major promotor and funder of the arts in Chicago. He was approached by Hutchins and agreed to be a part of the event, but he wanted it to have a music component and for it to be held in Aspen where he had his own vision of an arts/culture center.

As the planning developed, it was decided to invite Albert Schweitzer to be the opening/featured speaker. He had written a book, “Goethe-Four Stories,” and was considered one of the foremost experts on him.

It was the 200<sup>th</sup> year, but the timing and interest in having a world-wide discussion of Goethe came from the context of the times. Hutchins, and others at the university, were discussing how/why the world went to war, the invention of the atomic bomb (that the University of Chicago had a hand in), and the beginning of the Cold War.

The teaching of Goethe epitomized by his best-known play, “Faust,” focused on finding the essence of humanity and how the world could be educated on how to find and keep it. Schweitzer’s life story and teachings paralleled Goethe’s in many ways, who better to initiate the discussions.


Schweitzer had been a Methodist minister for much of his career and had written a book about the historical Jesus. He had also spent much of his life studying music and was an expert on Bach. He also mastered the organ and traveled doing performances. The coming celebration includes an organ performance by Dr. James Welch at the Community Church, at 4:00 p.m., July 1.


Schweitzer became a medical doctor and, because of his religious beliefs, used his training to minister to those most in need. He opened a medical clinic in Lambaréné in the jungle of French equatorial Africa (now Gabon) that he self-financed. Most of his patients suffered from leprosy. While there he continued to write, focusing on the same kind of existential questions that Goethe explored.

He gave two presentations in Aspen, one in French and the other in German translated by Pulitzer Prize-winner Thornton Wilder. What he had to say sparked discussions by the many other guest speakers and by the attendees. But what he had to say was more meaningful and inspirational because he didn’t just tell them what to do, he was living the life of what he advocated, humanity exonerated.

Hutchins closed the celebration with a summary of the many discussions and speeches. One of his final thoughts included, “The solution was not to reduce our knowledge or to halt the progress of science, but to make our moral stamina equal to it, since the problem of preserving our civilization was a moral problem.”

The momentum from the gathering was instrumental in the, soon after, formation of the Aspen Institute. Three years later, Schweitzer was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Other events (all free)for the Schweitzer Sesquicentennial Convocation include: a presentation by Dr. Jim Withers on “The Rise of the Global Street Medicine Movement” at the TACAW in Basalt, June 30 beginning at 5:30. (RSVP at [tacaw.org/calendar/go-to-the-people](https://tacaw.org/calendar/go-to-the-people))

On July 1, two events are scheduled this. nightat the Aspen Historical Society, a book launch by Paul Andersen, “The Second Coming of Albert Schweitzer,” at 5:30, and at 6:30, the keynote address led by Dr. Jim Withers. Please RSVP by emailing [programs@aspenhistory.org](mailto:programs@aspenhistory.org) .

*Tim Willoughby’s family story parallels Aspen’s. He began sharing folklore while teaching at Aspen Country Day School and Colorado Mountain College. Now a tourist in his native town, he views it with historical perspective. Reach him at [redmtn2@comcast.net](mailto:redmtn2@comcast.net).*

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