



# The Seelisberg Legacy and Education

Nike Snijders | 01.09.2017

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the Seelisberg Emergency Conference on Antisemitism. In 1947, much of the initial framework for international interreligious dialogue between Christians and Jews was established.

The conference was not the first of its kind – the International Council of Christians and Jews had met in Oxford a year earlier, but it was in Seelisberg that the international cooperation was formalized and put into action. One often hears of the Ten Points of Seelisberg being the legacy of the 1947 conference, and this document is indeed an important one. However, there is much more to be gathered from the Seelisberg meetings, and much of it is very relevant today, 70 years later.

In the late summer of 1947, sixty-five delegates from nineteen countries gathered, a renowned group in many ways but also one where many of the delegates met each other for the first time. Numerous of the Jewish participants had very recently experienced first-hand the horrors of the Holocaust in Europe. On the participants list we find names such as Jules Isaac, but also a number of lesser-known men and women who contributed with their expertise in fields such as law and education.

Since the narrative of the ICCJ puts such emphasis on the importance of Seelisberg, it's interesting to study what actually constituted the organization prior to Seelisberg. There was a structure made up of national member organizations from various parts of the world, organizations that had formed and grown from a sense of urgency regarding the relationship between Christians and Jews. Two of the national organs mentioned in the Seelisberg reports are The National Conference of Christians and Jews in the United States of America and The Society of Jews and Christians in South Africa. The American organization was established as early as 1928, and its South African counterpart a few years later. Interestingly, the ICCJ today does not contain a South African member organization, while the United States remain influential.

The use of the German language during the Seelisberg conference was not entirely uncontroversial among some of the participants, but it's probably no coincidence that the administrative center of the ICCJ was initially placed in neutral Switzerland. Today, the headquarters of the ICCJ is in Heppenheim, Germany, and the vast majority of the funding for the ICCJ as an umbrella organization comes from German sources. Back in 1947, there was an ongoing discussion about Jews settling outside of Europe that made its way into the Seelisberg debriefings. The United States and the Mandate of Palestine were mentioned. A year later, the State of Israel declared itself independent – a new reality for world Jewry and something countless generations had dreamed of, but in no way the end of Jewish exposure to Antisemitism.

Today, we see alarming tendencies in numerous countries. The Jewish Central Council in Sweden reports on a surge in anti-Semitic incidents, and the Jewish Association in the northern Swedish city of Umeå terminated all activities and closed its community center indefinitely during the past week, following a number of threats and damage to property. Minorities, many of them Christian, are fleeing the Middle East, and Roma are fleeing escalated violence in parts of Eastern Europe. The Seelisberg conference strongly emphasized the importance of education and educational material. There were lengthy discussions on how to create an international infrastructure for knowledge exchange. Much focus was put on primary education and the benefits of introducing topics related to interreligious dialogue to children, and not necessarily waiting until future generations have reached young adulthood. Discussing Racism and Antisemitism can and should be done already in schools,

noted the participants of the Seelisberg debriefings on education – once these young people have reached higher education it might be too late – and not all young people have the opportunity, resources and motivation to enter higher education.

Since the Ten Points of Seelisberg focus on the relationship between Christians/Churches and Jews/Judaism, we tend to associate the Seelisberg legacy with Jewish-Christian dialogue. However, the participants of the Seelisberg conference did indeed see things in a wider perspective. Engaging in education and transferring knowledge to schools was seen as crucial in order to prevent future horrors such as the ones witnessed in Europe during the Nazi regime. Minorities are vulnerable, concluded Seelisberg, and the same can without doubt be said today, 70 years later.

When we engage in discussions on the Seelisberg legacy, and when we commemorate the anniversary during 2017, we should view Seelisberg not only as a crucial, milestone event for Jewish-Christian relations, but also as one that can teach us something about prevention of ignorance and violence in a wider perspective. Jewish-Christian dialogue is at the heart of the ICCJ and will remain so, but perhaps we as an umbrella organization can contribute more in terms of educational material? 70 years of experience in facilitating dialogue and human encounters should be very attractive to other organizations and communities.

How can we transfer this knowledge? There are member organizations within the ICCJ that are active in local schools, just to mention a few there are branches of the German Coordinating Council of Christian-Jewish Cooperation, the Austrian Coordinating Committee for Christian-Jewish Cooperation and the 3 Faiths Forum in the UK. But how many middle- and high-school students in Sweden know about Samarbetsrådet, the Swedish Council of Jews and Christians? We take pride in letting pupils within primary education meet Holocaust survivors, but these survivors will not live forever. How do we ensure that 70 years of Jewish-Christian dialogue is put to use? Can we revive the legacy of Seelisberg in terms of education, and transfer this knowledge to future generations growing up in a reality where minorities are persecuted, less than a century after the Holocaust? Maybe the best way to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Seelisberg conference is to offer our knowledge to schools locally, gather what we have learned in an educational material, and make this available digitally, in the languages of our members but also in English.

Editorial remarks

Nike Snijders ist ICCJ's Communications Officer.