

latimes.com

OBITUARIES

## Alfred Gottschalk dies at 79; a leader of Reform Judaism

**The rabbi headed Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion for three decades. He also actively guided the development of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.**

By Elaine Woo

September 13, 2009

Alfred Gottschalk, a leader of Reform Judaism who ordained the first American woman rabbi and headed Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion for three decades, died Saturday in Cincinnati. He was 79.

A Hebrew Union official said Gottschalk died from complications following an automobile accident late last year.

Gottschalk, who escaped the Holocaust as a child in Germany, oversaw the expansion of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the Reform seminary and graduate school with campuses in Los Angeles, New York, Cincinnati and Jerusalem, during 25 years as president. He later served as chancellor.

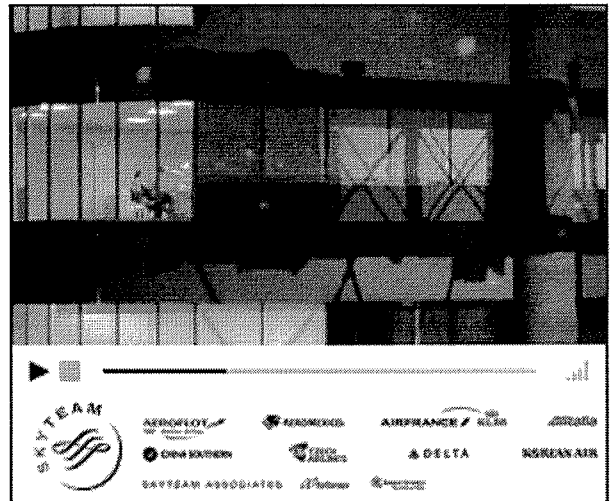
Before rising to president, he was dean for 12 years at the Los Angeles campus, where he created an innovative program to train Jewish community service workers. He also established a novel joint program in Judaic studies with the seminary's neighbor, USC.

Gottschalk served under Presidents Carter, Reagan and Clinton as a founding member of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council and actively guided the development of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, particularly during a critical period after Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel stepped down as chairman in 1986.

He also oversaw the expansion of the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City as its president from 2000 to 2003.

"Alfred Gottschalk was a genuine giant in the Jewish community who never forgot his roots in Germany and labored his entire life to improve the world and strengthen so many educational and religious institutions in the Jewish community and beyond," said Rabbi David Ellenson, the college-institute's president.

Gottschalk experienced anti-Semitism as a boy in Oberwesel, Germany, where he was born March 7, 1930. Oberwesel residents revered the memory of a young Christian boy named Werner who allegedly was murdered by Jews in the Middle Ages. "It was a quiet town," Gottschalk recalled in a 2000 interview with Jewish Week, "excerpt on Werner's Day, when my friends used to beat me up."



In 1938, when he was 8, he witnessed the destruction of Jewish homes and businesses in the Kristallnacht pogrom carried out by Hitler's agents. Decades later, Gottschalk often would recall watching his frail grandfather wade into a creek to rescue pieces of the Torah scrolls that the Nazis had seized from the synagogue and hacked to pieces. Handing the pieces to his grandson, the old man said, "One day you will put it together again."

Rebuilding what the Nazis destroyed became Gottschalk's mission in life.

"There has to be a legacy," he said in the Cincinnati Enquirer. "We have to have successor institutions for those lost in the Holocaust."

With his mother, Gottschalk escaped to New York in 1939. He shined shoes to earn pocket money and learned English at Sunday matinees. "I once thanked President Reagan for teaching me English -- he was in all the movies at that time," Gottschalk recalled in a 2000 interview with the Jewish weekly Forward.

He attended Boys High School in Brooklyn and Brooklyn College, where he earned a bachelor's degree in 1952. He began his rabbinical studies at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York, transferring to the Cincinnati campus in 1954. He was ordained in 1957 and became dean of the college-institute's Los Angeles campus in 1959.

He led the Los Angeles campus until 1971, when he became president of the college-institute.

"He changed the face of Hebrew Union College in that he truly made it an international institution," said Uri D. Herscher, who worked alongside Gottschalk at the college for 25 years before becoming founding president of the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles.

"He is responsible for building the Los Angeles campus; he is responsible for the move of Hebrew Union College in New York from West 68th to the campus of New York University," Herscher said. "In Jerusalem he built the campus. We really could not have called ourselves a four-campus college had he not been forceful in building three of the four."

In Cincinnati in 1972, Gottschalk ordained Sally Priesand, the nation's first female rabbi.

"The Conservative movement and the Orthodox movement thought we had betrayed tradition by ordaining a woman as rabbi. He bucked the system. It was a very courageous statement," Herscher said.

Gottschalk also ordained Israel's first Reform rabbi in 1980 and its first female rabbi in 1992.

A prolific scholar who earned his doctorate in philosophy and the history of religion from USC in 1965, he was an authority on Ahad Ha'Am, an influential theorist of cultural Zionism.

He is survived by his wife, Deanna; two children, Marc Gottschalk and Rachel Brenner; two stepchildren, Charles Frank and Andrew Frank; and nine grandchildren.

[elaine.woo@latimes.com](mailto:elaine.woo@latimes.com)

Copyright © 2009, [The Los Angeles Times](#)