Dr. Alfred Gottschalk’s life’s mission – to sustain HUC-JIR as a successor to the institutions that were destroyed during the Holocaust – was determined by the formative experiences of his early youth in Nazi Germany. Born in 1930 in the small town of Oberwesel on the banks of the Rhine River, in whose environs his family had resided for over 350 years as merchants of wine, hides, and cattle, he became a witness to the Nazis’ persecution of his small Jewish community of 35 families in an overall population of 3,500 townspeople.

In September 2006 Gottschalk had the opportunity to revisit Oberwesel, together with his children and grandchildren, to reflect on the past, and to educate younger generations about the ultimate consequences of prejudice and intolerance. His purpose was to dedicate a memorial to the town’s Jews who had been deported to their deaths or had fled from Nazi terror during 1933-1945. He was accompanied by an interfaith group of scholars, educators, and clergy, including Professor Tony Perzigian, Vice President of the University of Cincinnati, and the Honorary Consul of Germany for the Ohio tri-state area – Professor Richard Schade of the University of Cincinnati’s German Studies Department.

Painful memories of the Nazi era colored his return to his hometown. “As a child of six, I watched Hitler saluting as he drove through our town on his way through the newly re-militarized Rhineland, to the frightening roar of an admiring mob,” he recalls.

“On March 7, 1938 – my eighth birthday – my father escaped arrest by the SA (Hitler’s personal shock troops), thanks to an advance warning by Otto Linstedt, a German policeman friend. He fled down the Rhine to Holland, eventually finding safety in the United States.”

Gottschalk’s mother was interrogated almost daily regarding his father’s whereabouts. After extensive harassment, he and his mother’s citizenship was revoked and they became stateless. His mother received an exit visa, but he did not. “My grandfather’s reserve of some silver, buried in our wine cellar as a precaution against inflation during the interwar years, was used to bribe an official to procure an exit visa from Germany for me.

(continued on next page)
By the time we had our exit visas from Germany and our affidavits to America, however, our additional visas to America had expired. Fortunately my mother was admitted to the U.S. in 1939, one month before World War II, on one of the last ships to leave Hamburg. I got in with her, thanks to a special above the quota visa established by President Roosevelt to rescue children out of Nazi-occupied Europe.”

Gottschalk vividly recalls Kristallnacht on November 9, 1938, when the Nazis unleashed pogroms throughout Germany and Austria, resulting in the burning of over a thousand synagogues, the vandalization of Jewish property, and the arrest and deportation to concentration camps of 30,000 Jews. Oberwesel’s synagogue, built in 1886, was tarred but not burned by the Nazis, for fear of burning the two gentile homes attached to both sides of the synagogue building.

“The morning after the desecration of Oberwesel’s synagogue, I watched my grandfather wade into the stream of freezing water running past the building in order to rescue the torn fragments of the Torah scrolls and prayer books. As he handed these precious scraps to me, he said ‘we need to piece the Torah together.’ It was at that moment, in my heart, I believe, that I embarked on the path to becoming a rabbi.”

Gottschalk also remembers how his elderly widower grandfather, Gustav Gerson, remained in Oberwesel after their departure, was denounced by a Nazi court, evicted from his home, and sequestered in a Juden house together with all the other remaining Jews of the town. He was the father of twin sons, Berthold and Alfred, who were deemed national heroes for having been killed on the Russian front in 1915 while fighting for Kaiser Wilhelm during World War I. “My grandfather Gustav was a courageous man, for a time he served as the head of the Jewish community. One of my most precious memories is standing between my father and grandfather at prayer in the synagogue, while my mother and grandmother would throw candy for us children from the gallery above, after the Torah reading.”
Gustav died of a heart attack and was buried in an unmarked grave in the Jewish cemetery in November 1940. Most of the Jews who remained in Oberwesel and the surrounding area were deported in 1942 to Minsk and Auschwitz, where Gottschalk’s paternal grandparents, Jacob and Minna Gottschalk of Niederzissen, and their children and grandchildren perished. His aunt, Else Trum, was sent to Terezin and was killed in a deportation to the East.

On Sunday morning just before the dedication of the Holocaust memorial, Gottschalk participated in an interfaith service with the local Lutheran, Catholic, and Episcopalian clergy. Two thousand people attended the worship service in the Catholic Liebfrauenkirche, located at the end of the street from his childhood home. “As a youngster pedaling my homemade boxcar, I was not allowed by my mother to go past the portal leading to that cathedral, for fear of the consequences, he remembers.”

Indeed, Oberwesel had a long history of anti-Semitism, dating back to the medieval blood libel case of the Heilige Werner, who allegedly had been murdered by Jews. For centuries, Werner’s annual saint’s day was a cause for pogroms and ongoing violence – Gottschalk himself was accused of killing Werner and bloodied as a young child.

The dedication of the Holocaust memorial took place in the central square of the town, in front of where the 1886 synagogue had once stood. In attendance were those who had organized this project – Mayor Manfred Zeuner, monument architect Hubertus Jäckel, historian Doris Sporman, the catalysts for the project Barbara Fuchs and her husband Victor, and the city council – as well as local television and press, and hundreds of residents of the town, including some of Gottschalk’s schoolmates, who at a reception the following day brought photos of their shared childhoods. Back then, he and Ruthie Lichtenstein were the only Jewish children in his grade; today, Gottschalk is one of the two surviving Jews of the town.

The monument is comprised of a metal Jewish star that floats within the emptiness between two slate rectangular forms – one intact, the second jagged-edged. The void is a visual metaphor for the absence of the 35 families who were deported to their deaths or fled Germany during the Shoah. The names of Alfred Gottschalk, together with those of his parents Max and Erna, his maternal grandparents Henriette and Gustav Gerson, and his aunt Else Trum are mounted on the fragmented stone marker.

At the ceremony Gottschalk said, “Jews lived and raised families here for hundreds of years, and left their imprint on this town. They were loyal to their country and sacrificed for it during the First World War, as did my uncles, after one of whom I am named. During the Nazi years, there were only a few friends who did not abandon us or their other Jewish friends, and the preciousness of their goodness, amidst the overwhelming evil, needs to be remembered. We who were able to emigrate and escape the “Final Solution” that Hitler had planned for us, must continue to bear witness and carry on the responsibility of memorialization. I am grateful to the city of Oberwesel for the decision to erect this monument to the memory of its former Jewish residents, and to commemorate and celebrate their lives through educational programs.”

Later that day, Gottschalk also dedicated a personal family monument. “With the help of German historians researching the Jewish communities of the Rhineland, I was able to discover the location of Gustav and Henriette Gerson’s unmarked graves in the records of the town’s Chevra Kadisha burial society. They had been interred not far from the graves of their twin sons and the memorial to the fallen Jewish soldiers who fought valiantly for Germany in World War I. Surrounded by my family, our group, and caring townspeople, I was able to dedicate a monument for both of my grandparents in the forgotten hilltop Jewish cemetery of Perscheid/Oberwesel.”

(continued on next page)
The culminating event took place the next day at the local high school, where Gottschalk was invited to address 320 students on the legacy and dangers of racial hatred. “They asked me how far I went in school in Oberwesel. I showed them a photograph of myself with my school bag, inscribed ‘my first year.’ They were shocked to hear that there was no second year, because in 1937 Ruthie and I were thrown out of our class. The next day, two nuns came to the house and invited us to study in the Catholic school, which we did for a short time, until the nuns were forced to let us go.” Gottschalk’s memory of their compassion inspired his collegial relationships with Catholic leaders in America throughout his twenty-five years as President of HUC-JIR.

From Oberwesel, Gottschalk journeyed to Dresden to represent HUC-JIR at the first Ordination Ceremony of the Abraham Geiger College for the Training of Rabbis for Europe, the first liberal rabbinical seminary to be established in Germany since the Holocaust. Established in 1999 in the birthplace of the Reform Movement, this academic institution is affiliated with the World Union for Progressive Judaism and is an institute at the University of Potsdam, just outside of Berlin. It was named after a founder of Reform Judaism in Germany, whose call in 1836 for the establishment of a Jewish theological department at a university inspired the founding of the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau in 1854 and the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums (Higher Institute for Jewish Studies) in Berlin in 1870 – both of which were closed down by the Nazis.

Six decades after the Shoah, Judaism is resurgent in Germany today, with a Jewish population that has more than quadrupled since 1990 to 200,000 persons because of the influx of former Soviet Jews. Germany has the largest Reform presence on the European continent. The need for rabbinical leadership for the growing numbers of new synagogues and Jewish schools is urgent, with about twenty rabbis currently spread out over eighty congregations claiming 4,000 members.

The Geiger College’s mission to educate rabbis for Jewish communities in Central and Eastern Europe was realized with the September 14th ordination of its first graduating class: Daniel Alter, who is now leading congregations with several hundred members each in Oldenburg and Delmenhorst; Tomas Kucera, who is the rabbi of a liberal Jewish congregation in Munich; and Malcolm Matriti, who is one of two rabbis at South Africa’s largest progressive congregation in Cape Town, serving 1,000 families.

Gottschalk participated in the Ordination Ceremonies held in the Dresden Town Hall and the newly rebuilt synagogue. In his address, he said, “As one who witnessed the onset of the destruction of European Jewry in Germany, the opportunity to participate in this celebration and help launch a new chapter in the regeneration of the Jewish people is a source of great personal fulfillment.” He noted that “many of HUC-JIR’s senior faculty and recently retired and deceased colleagues, including my predecessors as President – Julius Morgenstern and Nelson Glueck – were exemplars of the scholarly traditions first formulated by the scientific approach to the study of Judaism established by Germany’s great Jewish academies.”

He spoke about HUC-JIR’s historic role in rescuing Jewish scholars out of Nazi Germany and bringing them to Cincinnati, where they taught generations of students and provided the foundation for HUC-JIR’s graduate studies program. Gottschalk charged the ordinees “to educate their Jewish communities within the context of a people...”
reborn out of the ashes, as a Jewish people with a rich mix of ethnic variations of religious beliefs, customs, and traditions, and where the existence of the State of Israel and its pervasive influence on contemporary Jewry gives rise to a new challenge of integrating the best of our religious, ethical, and political experiences.”

Gottschalk’s mission to renew Jewish life and learning also took him to Nanjing, China, where he participated in the November 21st inauguration of the Glazer Institute of Jewish Studies at Johns Hopkins University’s campus at Nanjing University. Gottschalk represented HUC-JIR at the ceremonies, which celebrated the Institute’s important role in advancing Jewish studies among Chinese college students and fostering understanding between the Chinese and Jewish people following the establishment of full diplomatic relations between China and Israel in January 1992.

The Institute has launched the first Chinese edition of the Encyclopedia Judaica; has translated and published numerous volumes on Jewish history and theology, including Gottschalk’s Hebrew book on Ahad Ha-am, Bible and Bible Tradition; offers courses on Judaism, Jewish history and culture, and Holocaust studies for students in undergraduate, M.A., and Ph.D. programs; organizes international conferences; and holds workshops for over 100 Chinese scholars.

Gottschalk has donated a substantial number of books to the Institute’s library collection of 7,000 volumes – making it the largest Jewish studies library in China.

At the inauguration Gottschalk expressed gratitude to Professor Xu Xin for fostering a unique relationship between HUC-JIR and Jewish studies in China. They first met fourteen years ago in China, when Xu Xin was a professor of American Literature and an admirer of the writings of Isaac Bashevis Singer, in whom he found echoes of traditional Chinese modes of thinking and living.

Gottschalk arranged for HUC-JIR to host Xu Xin on a visit to the United States in order to study how departments of Judaic studies were developed and administered. While residing in the dorm on the Cincinnati campus, he studied the Klau Library’s unique collection of manuscripts from Kaifeng, China and decided that one day he would like to send Chinese graduate students to study at HUC-JIR in order to train scholars who could succeed him. After surveying Jewish studies programs for several months throughout America, he returned to China to establish the first Department of Jewish Studies for Chinese scholars, teachers, and students, with the support of the Scheuer and Skirball Foundations. Thanks to Xu Xin’s initiative, several Chinese graduate students preparing to be the next generation of Judaic scholars in China have studied at HUC-JIR’s School of Graduate Studies in Cincinnati, in a combined program with Bar-Ilan University in Israel.

In his address Gottschalk stressed the shared values of the Jewish and Chinese traditions, as demonstrated through the centrality of family and clan; the heritage of scholarship and culture; and the appreciation for both the material and artistic in everyday life. He spoke of the role of lifelong education in Judaism, and how learning is a bridge between the knowledge and values of the past and passionate involvement in the present. “As the philosopher Franz Rosenzweig observed,” Gottschalk stated, “the purpose of Jewish learning is to create an idealistic human being. When a scholar seeks to become a creative, thinking individual who views all knowledge as linked to life, his learning and his humanity blend together. You have taken on this task in the new China to understand and teach the ideals of Jewish tradition, whose basic values deal with the power of the spirit, not the spirit of power. The scholars and students of this Institute have the opportunity to make a creative difference.”

From Germany to China, Gottschalk’s journeys have demonstrated a singular mission: to reconstruct the Jewish past, establish new foundations for the Jewish present, and vitalize the Jewish future. In doing so, Dr. Alfred Gottschalk has not only extended the reach of HUC-JIR throughout the world, he has reminded people of all faiths and traditions of Judaism’s inspiring message: the sanctity of life, the imperative of human understanding, and the aspiration for peace.