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OBITUARY for Leo Schelbert

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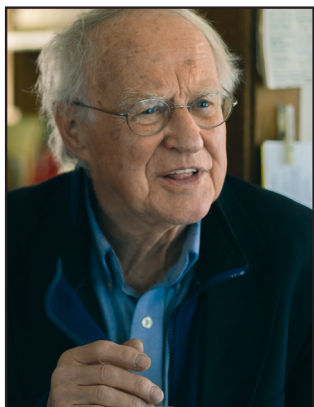
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OBITUARY

for Leo Schelbert

by Fred Steiner

*Swiss historian, educator and author
Leo Schelbert, 93, of Evanston,
Illinois, died on March 30, 2022*

A major scholar of Swiss history and Swiss Americans, his connection with the Swiss-American Historical Society was inseparable, as he helped shape the Society's direction.

He served the Society as co-editor of the *Review* with Heinz K. Meier (1970-1986), as president (1975-1980), as sole editor of the *Newsletter/Review* (1980-2002), co-editor with H. Dwight Page (2002-2006), as editor of the Society's book series (1981-2013), and as a member of the editorial board for the book publications.

Recipient of many academic awards, in 2006 he received the Free Democratic Party (FDP) International's Swiss Abroad of the Year prize, given to an outstanding Swiss citizen living abroad. FDP credited him with helping to encourage more understanding between the United States and Switzerland.

In 1985, 1990 and 1994 he received the University of Illinois at Chicago Shirley A. Bill Excellence in Teaching Award. In 1992, he received the UIC Award for Excellence in Teaching.

A prolific writer, he edited seven volumes, authored two books and more than a hundred articles, reviews, and translations. His works focused on Swiss history abroad particularly as Europe rose to world importance between the 1500s and 1900s.

Among his works includes the 616-page first edition of *Historical Dictionary of Switzerland*, published in 2007.

Much of Schelbert's scholarship focus was Swiss immigration to the United States. Writing in November 1982, of *The Immigration History Newsletter*, he expressed the view that "In the history of the United States immigrants from Switzerland are nearly invisible. Depending on the language they happen to speak, they are taken either to be Dutch, German, French or Italian."

In a 2015 *Review* tribute, Marianne Burkhard's wrote this about Schelbert's contributions to the Society: "His influence has

shaped the Swiss-American Historical Society in many ways, but he never weighed in with an overpowering academic rhetoric. Instead, he was and is, a vivid presence offering possibilities and contributions for consideration and helping to bring them to completion. With his consummate scholarly skills and his amiable, engaging personality, he is a unique example of personal and intellectual hospitality.”

She identified Schelbert as a true researcher whose knowledge and interests never stopped growing, branching out into other fields. She further described him as an unassuming person, always willing to listen, to modify his ideas, to cooperate with others, and also to further younger person’s careers.

In 2013, the Society created the Leo Schelbert Prize, an annual prize awarded for the best paper available to undergraduates or graduate students, with the intent to increase the understanding of Swiss and Swiss-American history. Award recipients are recognized at the Society’s annual meeting and their papers are published in the Society’s *Review*.

Schelbert graduated in 1948 from Gymnasium Immensee, Switzerland; in 1960 received a master’s in history from Fordham University; and in 1966 earned a doctorate from Columbia University.

From 1963 to 1968, he served on the faculty of Rutgers University. He also had visiting appointments at the University of Zurich and University of Dusseldorf.

But it was as a faculty member at the University of Illinois at Chicago, from 1971 to 2003, where he spent most of his career. Serving first as an associate professor and then as full professor. In 1999, the university granted him professor emeritus status. He then taught part-time until his retirement in 2003.

He lived in the United States for more than 40 years, however maintaining his Swiss citizenship, he claimed that he never saw himself as a Swiss abroad, rather a Swiss working abroad.

He was born March 16, 1929, in Kaltbrunn, Switzerland, is survived by one brother, his wife, Virginia, and children, Kenneth, Erik, Kirsten and GioMattias, with families in the United States.

Sources used to prepare this obituary include:

- University of Illinois at Chicago: <https://hist.uic.edu/people/in-memoriam/>
- *The Immigration History Newsletter*: <https://iehs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/IEHN-14.2-1982-winter.pdf>
- SAHS website—notes from the 2013 annual meeting: <https://www.swiss-american-historical-society.org/leo-schelbert-prize>
- Marianne Burkhard’s 2015 tribute in the *Review*: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sahs_review/vol51/iss1/6/
- SWI Swiss Info: <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/leo-schelbert--historian-of-swiss-emigration--dies-aged-93/47549358>