

The Jews Who Lived Among Us

Thousands of Germans are documenting, restoring, and perpetuating the memory of Jewish life and culture before the Nazis took power.

BY DAN FLESHLER

In the early 1930s, about two hundred Jews lived in Siegen, a small city 100 miles north of Frankfurt, Germany. Today there are none, but they have not been forgotten.

For more than three decades, Klaus Dietermann, a local schoolteacher, has been obsessed with documenting and restoring the memory of this vanished Jewish community. He wants local residents not only to lament the loss of the town's Jews to the Nazis' horrors, but also to celebrate their noteworthy contributions to Siegen life.

Dietermann has led hundreds of tours to places where the Jews once lived, worked, and prayed. He's also written books and articles, everything from Jewish family biographies to histories of Jewish cemeteries. And in 1996, on the site of a synagogue destroyed in Kristallnacht (November 9, 1938), he helped establish the Active South Westphalian Museum to teach the history of Siegen's Jews, Gypsies, and other Nazi victims.

Klaus Dietermann is part of a grassroots phenomenon that began in the 1960s, when a small number of path-breaking, non-Jewish Germans devoted

themselves to documenting, restoring, and perpetuating the memory of Jewish life and culture before the Nazis took power. Today, thousands of Germans

who have insistently kept Jewish memory alive are being publicly recognized and honored.

When Obermayer traveled to southern Germany in 1997 to explore his family roots, he was struck by the generosity—indeed, the enthusiasm—of Germans who tried to help him in his search. In each of the five communities he and his wife visited, they encountered non-Jews engaged in researching the fate of local Jews in order to tell their stories.

"I witnessed a voluntary effort by ordinary people to respond to the injustices that had been done by their parents and grandparents," Obermayer recalls. "Soon I realized that this was going on in just about every town and city in Germany, and no one was acknowledging

it. Many Jews of my generation"—he is now 77—"are still hostile to Germans. I felt, and still feel, that it is wrong to have an automatic prejudice against today's Germans for crimes they had nothing to do with."

In 2000, Obermayer established what would become the annual Obermayer German Jewish History Awards (<http://www.obermayer.us/award/>) in honor of "individuals who have made outstanding voluntary contributions toward preserving and recording the Jewish history, heritage, culture, and/or remnants of local German communities."



This photograph of Ruth and Joseph Hollander (in his WWI uniform) and their daughter Julie was part of a 1998 exhibition dedicated to celebrating the lives of Jewish residents of Hilchenbach, Germany killed by the Nazis. Klaus Dietermann, a local schoolteacher, organized the event. The whole town turned out.

engaging in commemorative work in cities and towns throughout Germany. While Jewish communities have not been brought back to life—except in a few German cities—these German volunteers have managed to evoke a sense of Jewish presence in a more tangible and life-affirming way than the presence of memorial plaques throughout the country possibly can.

Now, thanks largely to Arthur Obermayer, a member of Martha's Vineyard Hebrew Center and Temple Shalom of Newton, Massachusetts, the efforts of Klaus Dietermann and other Germans

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Most of the 52 Obermayer awardees—usually five per year—have gone about their work quietly and anonymously, intent on preventing the kind of hatred that made their country a fertile ground for the growth of Nazism. Retired mechanic Ernst Schall (2007 awardee) spent 20 years building and sculpting tombstones in the Jewish cemetery in Laupheim. Teacher and historian Gerhard Buck (2008 awardee) created detailed genealogies of Jews in the Hesse/Nassau region. Renowned artist Gunther Demnig (2005 awardee) fashioned small brass monuments throughout Germany in front of the former homes of Jews who were killed.

All of the recipients are nominated by Jews living abroad, many of them Holocaust survivors whose families once lived in the very places where the German volunteers have been conducting their work.

One of the nominators of 2009 awardee Klaus Dietermann, Ottawa resident Roger Herz-Fischler, knew almost nothing about Germany while growing up in the heavily German Jewish neighborhood of New York City's Washington Heights in the 1940s. Herz-Fischler's father had left the country in 1927 and his mother—whose family came from Hilchenbach—emigrated ten years later. They almost never spoke of their European past, although Herz-Fischler was aware that his mother's parents and brother had perished in the Holocaust. "Germany was like a virtual country to me, a fantasy," he says. "It didn't seem real."

Over the years, Herz-Fischler's curiosity about his family's virtual past gnawed at him. He began to try to find

out more about his roots. In 1996, after learning of Dietermann's efforts to collect information about the Jews of Siegen—20 kilometers from Hilchenbach—Herz-Fischler sent the school-teacher photos and family correspondence that his mother had brought with her to America: a letter his grand-

mother had written on the eve of her daughter's departure for the United States, a 1939 wedding card his grandparents had sent to his parents in New York City, and more. Herz-Fischler and Dietermann began to correspond, and in 1998 Dietermann staged an exhibition of photos and letters dedicated entirely to Herz-Fischler's maternal family.

"The whole town turned out," Herz-Fischler recalls. "A few people came up to me and told me they remembered my mother. One woman said she

was the last person to see my grandfather before he died. Suddenly it was real to me, not virtual...I finally understood where I had come from."

Eric Mayer, who fled the city of Worms in 1939 at the age of eleven and never again saw his parents, nominated archivist Fritz Reuter for an Obermayer. In 1982, Reuter established one of Germany's first post-World War II Jewish museums, part of the Rashi Haus in Worms. And after the city's medieval synagogue—destroyed during Kristallnacht—was rebuilt in 1961, he was instrumental in refurbishing its sanctuary, bringing back decorative and ceremonial objects to restore it to its former glory. Today, the Alte Schul of Worms is a living house of worship for one hun-

dred Jews, most of them Russian and Romanian refugees who began filtering into the city in the 1980s.

In the late 1980s, Mayer found out about Reuter's work, and when he visited Worms they struck up a friendship. "People like Reuter [2008 Obermayer recipient] need to be encouraged," Mayer says. "They are not doing [this work] for us, for the Jews. They are doing it for the Germans, making sure they don't forget and can't forget."

On Mayer's occasional trips to Worms, he never misses an opportunity to worship in the Alte Schul. "When I hear the prayers," he says, "it brings me closer to my parents. I can picture my father sitting in the front row. Reuter brought back the spirit of the place. He honors the dead, and also affects the living."



German memory is a fiendishly complicated matter. Different generations of Germans have faced different challenges as they confronted—or tried to ignore—the Nazis' legacy. In the 1960s, when Reuter and other Germans began to restore the memory of Germany's Jews, they often experienced a combination of sullen denial and outright resentment. "[Reuter] was not the most popular person in Worms [in the 1960s]," Mayer says. "A lot of people didn't want to be reminded."

While such reactions are less common now, it is still not easy for many Germans to confront the past.

Stonemason Ottmar Kagerer won the Obermayer in 2000 after his company restored a Jewish graveyard in Berlin in which nearly a hundred gravestones had been vandalized, broken, and desecrated with Nazi symbols. A number of death threats followed, his workplace was vandalized, and scores of tombstones were destroyed yet again.

Obermayer recipient Inge Franken, the daughter of a former Nazi officer, also encountered German hostility, in her case within her own family. Her mother, sisters, and daughters shunned her for years because she talked about



Theology professor Michael Dorhs (shown here holding his 2009 Obermayer German Jewish History Award) set up a department of Jewish history in his hometown museum in Hofgeismar. "When I guide students [through the museum]," he says, "I don't tell them all the things they can read in history books about Auschwitz or Poland. I talk about our Jewish families, about the real people who lived here."

her father's Nazi past in schools throughout Germany as part of One on One, an organization which invites the children of Holocaust victims and perpetrators to share their stories. She also chronicled the Holocaust in writing, authoring, among other works, a book about Jewish orphans deported from Berlin in 1942. It was only after Franken received a 2007 Obermayer, with its attendant publicity, that family members finally realized the importance of her work and even expressed admiration for it.



In Germany today, overt animosity towards Germans committed to remembering Jews is less common than what's known as "Holocaust Fatigue," the feeling of having been over-bombarded by reminders of Nazi atrocities in TV programs, museums, memorial ceremonies, and more.

According to a 2005 University of Bielefeld poll, 62 percent of Germans "are sick of all the harping on German crimes against the Jews." While Professor Christina von Braun, director of the Institute for Cultural Studies at Humboldt University, acknowledges that young people in particular do "feel fatigue [in] constantly hearing about genocide," she stresses that the Obermayer recipients' work is perceived very differently. "German students are not fatigued about hearing about what was lost in German culture and history, about the people who lived here for hundreds of years. They are eager to hear about these people, to learn that once, they were a part of us."

Theology professor Michael Dorhs, a 2009 Obermayer winner who set up a department of Jewish history in his hometown museum in Hofgeismar, agrees. "When I guide students [through the museum] I don't tell them all the things they can read in history books about Auschwitz or Poland. I talk about our Jewish families, about the real people who lived here. They see the street names and the houses. Then they can imagine what happened here. They can picture how these ordinary people were taken away." □