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Obermayer German Jewish History Award

Klaus Dietermann

Netphen, North Rhine–Westphalia

It was once a synagogue destroyed in
Kristallnacht, later a bunker, that is, a bomb
shelter where hundreds of Germans hid and

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Westphalian Museum (*Aktives Museum Südwestfalen*) commemorating the Jewish history of Siegen is something of a small miracle—one that owes itself to the educator’s instinct of Klaus Dietermann.

Dietermann was born and raised in this small city 100 kilometers north of Frankfurt and east of Cologne. Ten years ago, he rejected the *Bundesverdienstkreuz* (Federal Cross of Merit), the highest German honor, insisting that “one does not have the right in Germany but the duty to repair what our parents’ and their parents’ generation did.”

It was that perseverance that led him to fight for four years to get the former bunker-turned-storage building made into a museum, even as local authorities pushed him to choose one of the other 11 bunkers still left standing in the town. “No, it must be this one,” he recalls telling them. Today, vindicated by the growing popularity and success of the community building, he and others can celebrate his decision. “When you’re a teacher you look for ways to teach, and the synagogue museum has become that.”

Dietermann became drawn to Jewish history

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On the Jews in Siegerland (*Von den Juden im Siegerland*). Fascinated with the discovery that Jewish tradesmen once inhabited his region in large numbers, Dietermann pursued the subject and wrote a Masters thesis, *The Investigation of the History of Siegerland's Jews during the time of National Socialism (Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Juden des Siegerlandes zur Zeit des Nationalsozialismus)*. But he didn't stop there.

“There was so little known about Jewish life in the Nazi time,” he says, “and my interest in that history never diminished. I researched and researched the Jewish past; it fascinated me, [especially] that so many people said they did nothing.”

Dietermann, now 59, went on to be elected in 1974 to head the Siegerland Society for Christian-Jewish Cooperation (*Gesellschaft für Christlich-Jüdische Zusammenarbeit Siegerland*), where he wrote essays, articles, school material and a dozen booklets covering different facets of regional Jewish history, from family biographies to synagogue and cemetery histories. Especially popular was his *Jewish Life in Siegen City and Countryside (Jüdisches Leben in Stadt und Land Siegen)*. But he also reported in depth on the

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(*Siegen: eine Stadt unterm Hakenkreuz*) sold out 12,000 copies in four printings.

Dietermann says he always wrote “with a view toward students,” his essential task being to produce short works that were cheap enough to buy and easy enough to read. He wanted “to bring the regional history closer to people through writing that is not complex, that is simply written, that can be understood.”

His communicative skills, though, went beyond the pen and paper. In 1983—exactly 50 years after the Nazis assumed power—Dietermann wrote a guidebook and initiated what he called an “alternative” tour through Siegen in which “we don’t show the ‘good,’ touristic sides of the town but the places where the Nazis had their government, the places of resistance, the memorials to Jews.” He has also led more than 200 bus tours through the region highlighting Jewish history and places of persecution.

It was only in 1992, while organizing an exhibit at the site of the former synagogue commemorating the anniversary of Kristallnacht, that Dietermann thought to reclaim the defunct building and turn it into a museum. He helped found the Active South Westphalian Museum and

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dialogue with officials and the owners of the building, Dietermann saw one floor of the building leased for his purposes.

Now, with some 3,000 to 4,000 people visiting it each year—including tours of 60 to 70 school classes, and many church groups—he intends to expand to another floor by 2010. (“When we make a third floor,” he laughs, “then I will resign.”) Not only focusing on the fate of Jews under the Nazis, the museum emphasizes the persecution of Sinti and Roma, communists, disabled people, Jehovah’s Witnesses and others. The “active” in the museum’s title, he says, means that “we do tours, we do special education for children. We’re not only a museum, but we expand on what people find interesting.”

The Jewish community in the area around Siegen only began in 1817 when the Prussian king changed the law, finally allowing Jews to live there. Half a century later, a new train from Cologne brought waves of Jewish businessmen and tradesmen; nonetheless, by the 1930s Siegen only had a population of about 200 Jews, half of whom were killed.

“We must speak about this history so that nothing of this sort ever happens again,” says

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younger people with “new ideas” to replace the older generation and carry on the work of Jewish remembrance. “Some people are called to do this,” he remarks, but “not everyone.”

On trips he has made to Siegen’s sister city, Emek Hefer in Israel, Dietermann encountered ex-Siegen residents who left the city before the war. A Wehrmacht soldier’s son, who never wanted to ask his father what he had done in that time, Dietermann is committed to the notion that “everyone must do something” to salvage and try to reconcile with the past. In his case, both growing relationships from afar and welcoming those visits by Israeli relatives who want to know their family’s former town.

“People are so comfortable and so lazy that they wait, and that’s a problem. We must also do something for our democracy, and not just let it be,” he says. “We cannot just wait.”

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THIS WALL BRINGS PEOPLE TOGETHER

Students at this Berlin elementary school, built on the site of a synagogue, have been building a wall for the past two decades. It delivers a powerful message about community.

STUDENTS REACHING STUDENTS

When a handful of ninth graders from Berlin met Rolf Joseph in 2003, they were inspired by his harrowing tales of surviving the Holocaust. So inspired that they wrote a popular book about his life. Today the Joseph Group

“I SPEAK FOR THOSE WHO CANNOT SPEAK”

Margot Friedländer’s autobiography details her struggles as a Jew hiding in Berlin during World War II. Now 96, she speaks powerfully about the

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