

Arthur Obermayer, 84; activist helped change state politics



FAMILY PHOTO

Arthur Obermayer on Martha's Vineyard in 2006.

By **Bryan Marquard** | GLOBE STAFF JANUARY 13, 2016

In a series of overlapping pursuits, Arthur S. Obermayer helped alter the course of the Democratic Party in Massachusetts, change the future for innovative small businesses across the country, and encourage Jews to recognize efforts made by contemporary non-Jewish Germans to preserve their cultural heritage.

“He really is somebody who lived nine lives,” said his nephew Joe Sellers, a civil rights lawyer based in Washington, D.C., who added that Dr. Obermayer dedicated himself to all his interests “with the kind of passion and zest and dedication that one would expect of somebody who was pursuing each single-mindedly, but each was but one single dimension of Arthur

Obermayer.”

Dr. Obermayer, who was 84 when he died Sunday in his Dedham home of metastatic prostate cancer, wrote himself into Massachusetts political history at the end of 1969, when he and other Newton activists were seeking an anti-Vietnam War liberal to challenge US Representative Philip Philbin, a hawkish incumbent Democrat. Dr. Obermayer asked: “What about Father Drinan?”

With a push from Dr. Obermayer, who was the campaign treasurer, the Rev. Robert Drinan became the first Catholic priest elected to Congress, and his victory opened the political door in Massachusetts to liberal Democrats such as John Kerry and Barney Frank.

At the same time, Dr. Obermayer and his wife, Judith, were advocating for federal investment in small businesses to engage in research and development. Their work came to fruition in 1982 with the US Small Business Innovation Research program, which was supported by US Senator Edward M. Kennedy.

“It was one of those things you did that you hoped was going to have an impact, and the impact turned out to be larger than we ever could have imagined,” Judith recalled. “And it started basically with a conversation between Arthur and Ted Kennedy.”

In a White House ceremony last June, the Obermeyers were inducted into the Small Business Innovation Research Hall of Fame for their pioneering efforts.

For the past 16 years, meanwhile, Dr. Obermayer turned an inspiration from a 1997 genealogical trip to Germany into the Obermayer German Jewish History Awards.

The awards, he said in a videotaped interview, are given annually to non-Jewish Germans “who have done extraordinary work in preserving Jewish history, culture, synagogues, cemeteries, and other remnants of the Jewish past in their own communities in Germany.”

He added that he hoped the awards would address an international misperception about the German people. “So many people in the rest of the world, especially Jews, have not yet forgiven the Germans and don’t recognize that the German population today almost entirely had nothing to do with the Holocaust and are trying to do their own part to make amends for their ancestors’ past actions,” he said.

Judith Obermayer said her husband believed most Germans had done more to deal with their past than those in other nations that abetted the Holocaust and “felt that in many ways they were getting a bum rap in other parts of the world, especially in the Jewish community.”

The awards were a way to address that perception. Dr. Obermayer “had that mind that is able to create something that is really big,” said Karen S. Franklin, director of Family Research at the Leo Baeck Institute and a past president of the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies. “This one really touched people’s humanity and made a difference worldwide.”

Arthur Sinsheimer Obermayer was the youngest of three children born to Leon Obermayer and the former Julia Sinsheimer. Dr. Obermayer grew up in Philadelphia, where his father was a lawyer who served for many years on the city’s School Board. “His father would have the mayor over for dinner,” said Dr. Obermayer’s son Joel of Arlington. “It was that kind of household.”

Dr. Obermayer graduated from Swarthmore College in 1952 with a bachelor’s degree in chemistry and received a doctorate in chemistry from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1956. In the early 1960s, he founded the research and development company Moleculon in Kendall Square in Cambridge.

While building his company, he met Judith Hirschfield through friends. She was finishing a doctorate in mathematics at Harvard University and teaching at Wellesley College. They married in 1963.

“We just hit it off. Sometimes you just do,” she recalled. “Arthur likes to talk about what he’s doing and talk things out. He hadn’t dated anyone with a scientific background who could listen to him and understand what he was talking about. He thought that was great.”

In 1968, the couple attended the Democratic National Convention in Chicago as journalists. Dr. Obermayer’s brother, Herman of Arlington, Va., was a newspaper publisher and political conservative. He wanted to attend the Republican convention and suggested that the Obermeyers go to Chicago.

“It was eye opening,” Judith recalled.

“What really bothered me at the convention was how the delegates were herded around like sheep,” Dr. Obermayer told the Globe in 1970. “The leaders of the party were not people I could be proud of for the most part.”

The tight control imposed on delegates inside the convention hall and the violence and upheaval outside in Chicago’s streets were a political turning point for the couple.

“My wife and I had three choices,” Dr. Obermayer said in the 1970 interview. “One was that we could leave the country, but we like it here. Another was that we could concern ourselves with

just work and family and ignore the political situation, but we're not made that way. A third was to become politically active." He said he was on the phone with other activists "within a half hour after we got home from Chicago."

"Arthur always wanted to make a difference," his wife said. From their longtime family home in West Newton, Dr. Obermayer extended his reach into the state's Democratic Party at a time of historic changes, into Cambridge's burgeoning technology industries through his entrepreneurship, across the country through his unceasing push for funding for innovative small businesses, and across the ocean into Germany through his philanthropy and the [Obermayer Foundation](#).

"I don't know how else to say this, but he was a relentless person and I don't mean that in a negative way," said his son, Joel, who added that Dr. Obermayer "was somebody who was always generating ideas and when he decided to move forward with one, he was relentless about it."

In addition to his wife, son, and brother, Dr. Obermayer leaves another son, Hank of Oakland; a daughter, Marjorie Raven of Durham, N.H.; and five grandchildren.

The family has held a private burial. A public celebration of Dr. Obermayer's life will be held at 2 p.m. Feb. 28 in Temple Shalom in Newton.

When Dr. Obermayer sold his business after running it for about a quarter century, "people asked if I was afraid he would be bored, and I said no, he has too many things to do," his wife said.

During Dr. Obermayer's illness, in the past year, "we were able to have conversations with him about his emotions and his motivations for doing things, conversations that had been impossible before," Joel Obermayer said.

"It was completely amazing to me," he added, "and honestly, he and his family agreed it was a huge gift."

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