

Obermayer Awards overcome silence with stories of German-Jewish history

Arthur Obermayer's German Jewish History Awards continue to bring forgotten lives to light, personalizing the past to heal communities today.

By **Molly Jackson**, Staff ▼ | JANUARY 27, 2016

"Are there still Jews in Germany?" a sign asked at the Berlin Jewish Museum in 2013. It was "The Whole Truth" exhibit: "Everything you always wanted to know about Jews."

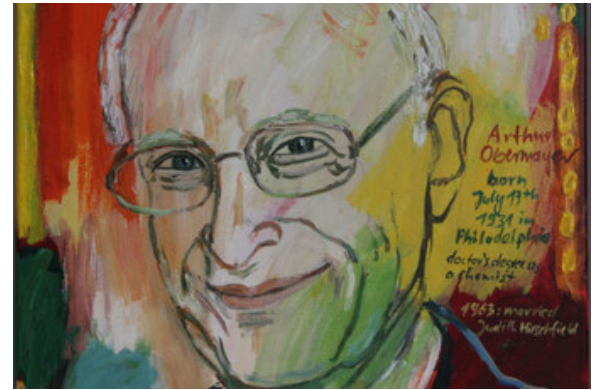
The answer was perched above.

Jewish volunteers took turns manning the "Jew in a box" station posted next to the sign, which earned both praise and horror from German Jews and gentiles alike. But no matter what, their responses underscored one truth: A lot of Germans just weren't sure.

And many Jews weren't entirely certain, either. Decades after the Third Reich murdered nearly all of Germany's Jewish citizens, the Jewish population is actually booming in cities like Berlin. But "the young generation still do not feel like they are German Jews. They feel that they are Jews living in Germany," says Touro College Berlin Rector Sara Nachama.

Ms. Nachama is one of the seven jurors for the Obermayer German Jewish History Awards, an honor bestowed beneath the high glass ceilings of the Berlin state parliament around Jan. 27 each year: That's Holocaust Remembrance Day, the anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp during World War II.

Germany is inundated with Shoah memorials, from Berlin's hauntingly cathedral-like Holocaust Tower to the death camps themselves. But the Obermayer awards celebrate something that somehow slips through the cracks of most Holocaust commemorations: German Jews' actual lives, and culture, their stories interwoven with Christian neighbors' for centuries.



A portrait of Arthur Obermayer by 2015 Obermayer German Jewish History Award winner and artist Marlis Glaser. (Courtesy of the Obermayer family)

The awards have created an extended family of non-Jewish historians, activists, and teachers who want to heal the silence and shame that too often define Jewish-German relations. From genealogists to restorationists to artists, each one wants to do more than save "history" writ large. Their projects are about learning to see seeming strangers for the neighbors they are, with names, faces, and families – a project as urgent today as it's ever been in a Germany of quickly changing demographics.

It's a growing movement that builds "bridges from death to life, from curses to blessings," as German General Consul Dr. Wolfgang Vorwek said in 2007, when he bestowed the Cross of the Order of Merit on award founder Arthur Obermayer, who died Jan. 10, 2016.

But it began with a vacation.

'The rest of the world needed to know'

Whenever "Mr. Doer," Arthur, and his "Mrs. Doer," his wife, Judith, felt called to something, it was likely other people would benefit. After Arthur sold Moleculon Research Corporation in Cambridge, Mass., which he founded in the 1960s, they became influential philanthropists and activists for a variety of causes, from state politics, where the couple helped to elect the first Roman Catholic priest to the US House of Representatives, to entrepreneurship. The Obermayers were inducted into the Small Business Innovation Research Hall of Fame in 2015.

But among Arthur's many passions, tracing his family tree was particularly important. He pursued each clue thoroughly, almost scientifically, his family says.

"He was a scientist, through and through," says Judy. "So being able to actually confirm things with scientific evidence ... that was the best of all possible worlds." There was another element, too. Genealogy "was almost a religious experience" for him, she and her sons say, recalling how Arthur's Jewish spirituality was rooted in his family heritage, past and present.

The search for missing branches led the Obermayers back to Germany, a place many American Jews still shunned at the time. Judy's mother, for instance, refused to buy anything manufactured there.

But as Arthur and Judy traveled from town to town, tracing the Obermayer family back to at least 1618, they were astonished at how much help they found along the way from non-Jewish volunteers and amateur historians, who'd made it a mission to protect whatever traces of Jewish culture still lingered after the Holocaust.

In Creglingen, Germany, for example, they found ancestors' former home, now a Jewish Museum which the Obermayers founded in 2004. In Fuerth, they attended services in a synagogue built by Arthur's "five-greats" grandfather, and met Gisela Blume, who spent eight years restoring a Jewish cemetery torn up for paving stones during the Nazi era: tracing family lines, contacting survivors, and even learning Hebrew, just to return each tombstone to its rightful place.

"The rest of the world needed to know who these people were," says Karen Franklin, a family friend and award jury member; she's also the director of family research at the Leo Baeck Institute (LBI), one of the award's co-sponsors today. She, Sara, and Arthur put their heads together to see how they might call attention to non-Jewish Germans' work, affirming their mission while demonstrating to Jews abroad just how much had changed.

Since 2000, that's what the Obermayer German Jewish History Awards have tried to do, co-sponsored by JewishGen, a nonprofit resource for Jewish genealogy; the Berlin state parliament; LBI; and the Obermayer Foundation.

The awards have gone to non-Jewish men and women like Christa Niclasen, the principal of Löcknitz Elementary School, tucked off a leafy side street in Berlin's Bavarian Quarter – once known as "Jewish Switzerland."

But its 16,000 Jews disappeared: first, barred from public schools in 1938. Then forbidden from schools of any kind in 1942. In 1943, the city was declared *Judenfrei*, or "free of Jews."

In 1994 the neighborhood began releasing lists of its deported residents. Ms. Niclasen felt drawn to the stark rows of names, dates, and addresses, people who might have one day sent their own grandchildren to Löcknitz Elementary.

She thought of what her guide had said at Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial years before:

"You are not guilty. But do something so that it will never happen again."

Niclasen invited her students to research someone on the lists, someone they felt a connection to – a tradition that continues today. Some choose based on a birthday or name; others search by address, looking for their street.

Today, a golden wall stretches across the Löcknitz playground, with each brick bearing witness to an individual the students have come to know: 1,100 bricks, 1,100 stories. The message on the bricks is simple – a name, a date, and where they died – yet profound:

I think of Thomas Adler. Nov. 26, 1937 - Dec. 8, 1942. Auschwitz.

I think of Lilli Goldberger. July 2, 1905 - June 16, 1943. Theresienstadt.

I think of Inge Frey. July 7, 1931 - February 3, 1942. Auschwitz.

It's just one of many projects the school supports, with an eye toward empathy and tolerance – a particularly timely message as Germany struggles to absorb 1 million new migrants, many of them Muslim. 25 of the school's pupils are newcomers from Syria and Afghanistan.

On Jan. 24, 2012, students bundled against the cold welcomed Arthur to their playground memorial, just one day after he'd given Niclasen her award.

"The purpose of these German Jewish History Awards is to learn from the past how to deal with the future," he told them. "You can be proud and hold your head up high, if you make your own decisions based on your own values of what is right and what is wrong."

Names, not numbers

Together, the bricks make a wall. Separately, however, each one hints at an individual face and story, which Christa's students can imagine a little more clearly now.

It's a personalized, localized history that just might combat "Holocaust fatigue."

After years of hoping that "redemption lies in remembrance," as then-German President Richard von Weizsäcker told West Germans in 1985, many Germans feel there's nothing more to say about the war years. They want to box up the constant reminders of "6 million," and turn attention to current issues, like the challenge of integrating 1 million refugees.

"There is no more a collective death than there is a collective life," the New Yorker's Richard Brody wrote in 2012 after visiting Berlin's main memorial to the Holocaust, five acres of solemn, nameless slabs. "An appropriate memorial would commemorate six million times one."

Germans are searching for those "ones," says Hank, one of Arthur and Judy's three children, as he remembers his own years living in Germany in the late '80s and early '90s. Many friendships were marked by a nervous curiosity about his religion, he says.

One roommate, for example, didn't dare bring up the topic until Hank was moving out.

"I don't remember what he asked," Hank says today. "I just remember how visibly vulnerable he was. He wanted to know something, but he didn't know what." He compares it to the US, where the legacy of slavery and ongoing discrimination make many white Americans uncertain how to deal with the country's racist legacy: an "awkward" mix of guilt, ignorance, and curiosity.

"Folks felt not exactly guilty, but they wanted to reach across some barrier, and they didn't know what it was; they didn't know how to reach," he says. "So there was this really profound sense of curiosity and desire to connect, but it wasn't about the Holocaust. It was about me, representing something."

"It's more than curiosity," says Arthur. "They're longing for their past:" a missing piece of Germany.

Sometimes, that curiosity gets them in trouble. A number of Obermayer awardees have faced threats, or simply bewildered loved ones. But over and over, recipients write that the recognition has helped them expand their work, aiding efforts to connect with similarly minded individuals and organizations dedicated to German Jewish history and relations.

Many of them also support recent immigrants, hoping that the face-to-face approach their Jewish history celebrates can benefit German-Muslim relations, as well as Muslim-Jewish ones.

"It's hard to persecute Muslim immigrants if you know who they are," says Joel Obermayer, who has "zero doubt" that his parents wanted awardees' work for respect and tolerance to influence how Germans see their newest neighbors, too.

For some winners, the award means redemption.

Inge Franken had already offended her mother by digging into her father's days as a Nazi soldier. When she created One by One, a discussion program encouraging victims' and perpetrators' families to share their experiences with students, it sent her into "black sheep" status. After seeing that her work earned attention from abroad, however, her family saw her interests in a new light.

"Suddenly she wasn't an eccentric, stubborn old woman with a passion for stirring up trouble," writes Carole Vogel, who nominated Ms. Franken in 2007. "Instead they saw her as a courageous German committed to the truth, a woman who did important work and changed the lives of those she touched."

"Nothing can ever top this," Inge's grandson said as she was honored in the Berlin Parliament. Later that night, at her party with fellow activists and family, "It felt like a cross between a wedding and a bar mitzvah, even down to the Russian Klezmer band," Ms. Vogel writes. For Inge, who died in 2012, it was "the most important thing that has happened to me in my life."

The path ahead

When Arthur Obermayer died Jan. 10, shortly after being interviewed for this article, he was "thrilled" that his children had promised to shepherd the program forward. They aren't sure how it will continue, but know that it will; Hank will represent the family at this year's ceremony, and Joel will likely attend the next.

Arthur will be deeply missed: the man whose search for his own family tree prompted so many others to find trees of their own, and promoted a growing network of Germans who, like Arthur, decided they could do "the right thing."

"He showed me what expressing your heart's longing is," Hank says. "Longing for a world that's more right, more ethical," and putting it into action. Arthur would want the awards to "inspire others to do, and not just watch or say," says Judy.

Löcknitz Elementary is just one place where they already have.

Hearing of Arthur's death, 2004 winner Klaus-Dieter Ehmke reached out with words he'd heard from a rabbi. They captured Arthur's life, he said.

It was Psalms 85:10. "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other."

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