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Remembering Arthur Obermayer

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In the decades since the end of World War II and the Holocaust, many non-Jewish Germans worked to erase the stain on their nation’s honor that the wartime Nazi regime had created. They repaired crumbling Jewish cemeteries, gave tours of their towns’ Jewish past, and investigated local Jewish history, often doing their work without pay or recognition.

Arthur Obermayer decided that these noble Germans deserved to be recognized.

In 2000 he founded the Obermayer German Jewish History Awards, initially in partnership with the German Jewish Community History Council and now co-sponsored by the Jewish genealogy nonprofit JewishGen in conjunction with the Leo Baeck Institute, a New York-based research library for German-Jewish History. Over the past decade and a half, the organization has given awards to nearly 100 German men and women.

Mr. Obermayer, a resident of Needham, Mass., and descendant of Jews from a small town in southern Germany, died of cancer on Sunday at 84, two weeks before the 2016 Awards, which will be presented in Berlin on Jan. 25.

A longtime activist in political and Jewish genealogical causes, Mr. Obermayer created the awards to ensure that the work of the recipients, often done without the knowledge or support of their local communities, would be honored.

“These people are doing this with a great deal of recognition, and not for an honorarium,” he said at the 2004 Awards ceremony. “They do their work because they feel they ought to, because they want to.”

Mr. Obermayer received the Cross of the Order of Merit, Germany’s highest honor, in 2007. An entrepreneur in the fields of chemistry and biotechnology, he was equally successful in business and philanthropy; last year he and his wife Judith were inducted into the White House’s Small Business Innovation Hall of Fame.

While Mr. Obermayer did not live long enough to see one more presentation of the awards that bear his name, his legacy, recognizing the quiet good that people do, will live on.

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