

## Hello, Germany

*The Hour*

**By Leonard Fein**

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It is cold, unreasonably cold, and the fact that the news from around the world is mostly terrible doesn't help. Having in mind the good and welfare of my readers, as also my own desire for an uplifting thaw, here is some news to warm the freezing heart.

For the 11th year in a row, the Obermayer Foundation, of Newton, Mass., has given awards to five non-Jewish Germans who have made extraordinary contributions to preserving Jewish history, culture, cemeteries and synagogues in their own local communities. The Obermayer German Jewish History Awards are co-sponsored by Berlin's House of Representatives and given in its elegant plenary chamber. You can access the full report on all 55 winners (so far) of the award [here](#), and that is really the only way to comprehend the extent of their efforts.

Many of the awardees began their work by reviving dead cemeteries — neglected places with broken and toppled tombstones, overgrown with vegetation, abused. And work on clearing the debris and refurbishing the stones and their legends led many to search records and to develop elaborate genealogical histories. And sometimes their research recovered names and histories that had been long forgotten, men and women and children whose names and therefore whose existence would otherwise have been obliterated. More: They reached out to Jews around the world whose roots lay in the towns and cities where they lived, and invited them to visit; many have.

One example: Brigitta Stammer, who was largely responsible for relocating a synagogue that had survived Kristallnacht from a town called Bodenfelde, where there are no longer any Jews, to her own town of Göttingen 25 miles away. Göttingen had precisely the reverse problem: It is home to a small Jewish community (immigrants from the former Soviet Union) but had no synagogue.

Stammer raised 500,000 euros, much of it from Protestant and Catholic congregations, for the project. Every board from the synagogue was labeled and brought to Göttingen, where the synagogue was rebuilt in its original design. The project, including its painted decorations, took 12 years to complete. The "new" synagogue, as the award citation notes, "was rededicated in November 2008, 70 years after the destruction of the large synagogue of Göttingen" during Kristallnacht. (And this I learned just the other day: The great-grandfather of a dear friend of mine in Jerusalem used to pray at the Bodenfelde synagogue.)

Many of the awardees are or were teachers, but there are others, too — a psychoanalyst, a mailman, social workers, a farmer, journalists, lawyers, a mechanic, medical doctors and Protestant ministers, a stone mason. The awards are given on or about January 27 each year, commemorating the liberation of Auschwitz; the date is both the German Holocaust Memorial Day and International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Of course this is all about the Holocaust, often prompted by guilt, more often by curiosity. Their questions: Who were these people, our neighbors? Why did my parents have nothing to say about those times? Can we do more than discover and remember, can we in any way revive? Can there be a future for our past? Genealogies yes and museums, yes — but yes also to community centers. And our questions, obviously: Who are these people, these friends, and wherefrom their passion?

Another example: Heinrich Schreiner was president of the Central Bank of the state of Rheinland-Pfalz. After retiring, he began the work for which he would, in 2002, be honored. He, too, was responsible for the reconstruction of a synagogue, this one in Mainz, which had once been considered one of Europe's leading centers of Jewish scholarship. This synagogue had lasted from 1737, when it was built, until Kristallnacht, two centuries later, when it was vandalized. After the war, the synagogue's site was used variously as a chicken coop, for storing lumber and as

a dump.

As the award's citation recounts, it was Schreiner, a leader in the Catholic church, who "raised the funds (about \$2 million), encouraged community leaders to participate; engaged the architects; handled the complex legal, business and political issues; and oversaw the physical restoration of the synagogue." It was not, however, rededicated on Holocaust Remembrance Day but rather on May 27, 1996, commemorating the 900th anniversary of the slaughter of Mainz's Jews in the First Crusade.

Not all questions have answers. Some beget, instead, responses. When you read through the 55 citations, and the brief biographies that chronicle the work of the honorees, you are left with the puzzle: What is it that led them to devote themselves to searching out the history of the Jews, to refurbishing the cemeteries, to rebuilding houses of worship and often adding cultural or community centers hard by?

I doubt we will ever know, beyond occasional glimmers of insight. What we can know and can celebrate is what has been accomplished and the gift of recognition provided by Judith and Arthur Obermayer, whose eclectic interests include not only their own family history (see "The Obermeyers: A History of a Jewish Family in Germany and America") but also social justice work both in the United States and in Israel. Not for nothing was Arthur Obermayer, in 2007, honored by the Bundesverdienstkreuz award, the highest honor provided by the German Federal Republic. No, for something both modest and immense, for encouraging and acknowledging the ongoing repair of a rent fabric.

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