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The Jewish Citizen

In honor of the Germans who honor the Jews

By Donald H. Harrison



SAN DIEGO—I learned yesterday from the [foundation](#) established by Boston philanthropist Arthur Obermayer that based, in part, on an article I had written from Buttenhausen, Germany, nine years ago, Walter Ott will be among the non-Jewish Germans honored early next year in Berlin for improving German-

Jewish relations.

The following letter from Arthur Obermayer explains:

Dear Mr. Harrison,

Thank you for nominating Walter Ott, a winner of the Obermayer German Jewish History Award. He has been chosen as an award recipient by the jury consisting of Walter Momper (Berlin), Werner Loyal (Jerusalem), Ernest Kallmann (Paris), Sara Nachama (Berlin), Karen Franklin (New York), Ernst Cramer (Berlin), and myself (Boston).

We appreciate your taking the time to submit so much information about Mr. Ott. Of course, we agree with you that he is an outstanding example of a German who, on a volunteer basis, has contributed so much to preserving the Jewish history of his community.

We have already informed him that he is a winner.

You are invited to attend the award ceremony on Wednesday evening, January 25, 2010 at the plenary chamber of the Berlin Parliament. It will be an elegant affair, and will be accompanied by a day of enjoyable activities including bus tour of Jewish Berlin and a press conference. ...

It's a polite overstatement to say that I nominated Walter Ott. That distinction belongs to George Arnstein of Washington, D.C., who included my article about Ott as part of his careful documentation about why Ott deserved the award.

So outspoken was his father against the nazis, said Ott, that he was required to report every week to Gestapo headquarters as a dissenter. Once, he recalled, the nazis told his father that he and two other dissenters in his town of Aalen would be shot after "the final victory." The father, however, survived to an old age.

Although children during the nazi regime were encouraged to report any suspicious activities of their parents, Ott said he never told authorities about the meetings at his home of Christians who believed Hitler to be morally wrong, nor of his parents listening surreptitiously to radio reports over the British Broadcasting Corporation. He said he never repeated to authorities the comment made by his mother after Kristallnacht that "the state which burns synagogues will itself perish."

However loyal he was to his parents in this regard, Ott said he was openly rebellious over the issue of his future career. Ott said more than anything else he wanted to be a farmer. "My father was a railway man and as a railway man he had no ground to give me--no farm," Ott said.

The Hitler Youth offered to Ott in 1942 what he considered an irresistible opportunity. He could become an apprentice farmer in Poland, where Germans had confiscated Polish farms and were producing basic vegetable crops and meat. Ott's father refused to give his permission for him to leave home, but through the Hitler Youth the young man arranged to go anyway.

Except for the fact that he knew his Jewish primary school classmates had been banned from his school in Aalen, farming in Poland was to be Ott's first direct experience with the nazi theories of racial superiority.

Summarizing Ott's comments in German for me, Gausam said that along with the other Germans who had settled on the 12,000-acre farm near the Polish town of Gembyetz "he was to form a new kind of German society in this region. He was expected to someday marry an Aryan girl and to build a kind of superstructure to rule and reign over the Poles, who were considered to be sub-humans.

"There he wondered how it should be that the (German) boss should have a whip and a wolfhound and beat the Polish man who worked for them," the interpreter continued.

I had several reactions upon learning of Ott's selection, and they came so quickly I cannot tell you their order.

One was a feeling of gratification that Ott, an impressive and dedicated man, will be so saluted. Later in this column, I will reprint the article that I wrote about him so that you will understand.

Second, I felt a wave of affection for my daughter Sandi, who unknowingly started this chain of events when she fell in love with and married Shahar Masori, an Israeli. Had it not been for the fact that Sandi has always been fascinated by people from other countries, this chain of circumstances never would have occurred.

About the time of Sandi's and Shahar's wedding, I was in the process of researching my biography of San Diego's first Jewish settler, Louis Rose, who had immigrated to the United States in the mid-19th century from Germany. It was arranged that I would meet Shahar's brother, Avi Masori, and his future wife, Holly Mathis, who were both at the University of Tübingen, Germany. They would conduct me on a tour of Germany to further my research and would also help me develop Jewish-interest stories for the *San Diego Jewish Press-Heritage*, of which I was then editor.

Avi and Holly introduced me to a fellow graduate student, Udo Gausam, who in turn arranged for me to meet and interview Walter Ott. Udo not only drove me from Tübingen to Buttenhausen, but also served as an interpreter for the interview with Ott.

I also thought of my friend and assistant editor Gail Umeham, who has just returned from a trip to Germany where she visited the Buchenwald Concentration Camp and the Jewish Museum in Berlin. The other night, when Nancy and I shared dinner with her and her husband Okoronkwo, she spoke of how moved she was by the way Germany was coming to grips with its history.

With the joy of these memories, there came a stab of pain as well. I thought of Hal Wingard, who had died earlier this year, and realized I could not share this news with him. I remembered the many occasions that Nancy and I had discussed with Hal and his wonderful wife, Eileen, the belief that the younger German generations—born after World War II—in a sense shared the victimhood of their Jewish age cohorts.

Hal had been a Fulbright scholar in Germany, and through our conversations, helped me hone this thesis. We Jews suffer with the awful knowledge that members of our families were murdered in the Holocaust, and that in all likelihood, had we been there, we would have been murdered too. Germans born after World War II know that, for the most part, their parents and grandparents did nothing to stop the Nazis and even may have abetted them.

Many young Germans' feel contempt for their older generations' lack of character, all the while torturing themselves with the question of whether they, themselves, would have had sufficient moral fiber to stand up to the Nazis. Although what previous generations did is not their fault, they nevertheless must contend with feelings of inherited shame and guilt.

For these reasons, young Jews and young Germans have much to

Further, "he could not understand why he was forbidden to talk to the Polish people" with whom he worked on the farm. "He worked in a stable with cows, and there were other (Polish) people in the stable milking the cows and they had to communicate in a way. They talked and he was punished for it. He had to do some extra physical exercises for going against the rules."

More traumatic was the day that Ott was required to line up with other Germans to observe as "Polish workers were beaten up by the head farmer because they had been accused of stealing the grain," Gausam said. "He remembers the scene: the Polish workers in the yard, and the Nazi officials on the stairs and he lining up somewhere. He asked himself as a youth, as he would later ask here in Buttenhausen, why these things happened."

In 1944, Ott heard from a co-worker that there had been mass shooting of Jews. The co-worker's father had participated in the executions. "As a youth, he never could have imagined that Jews should be killed or gassed," the interpreter said. The following year, when Ott received a call to report for service in the German Army, which by then was reeling under the weight of successive Allied victories, "he deserted, so to speak. He didn't answer the call to join the Army. He left with some co-workers and he went home."

Back in Aalen, Ott was again called upon to join the German army, and again he refused to report. Before any action could be taken against him, the Germans surrendered in April of 1945. Soon French prisoners of war who had been forced to work on German farms went home, opening positions in Aalen for young farmers like Ott. The woman on whose farm Ott went to work had a relative in Buttenhausen who needed help even more. She ran a camp and school for the reform of prostitutes who had worked in such big cities and Frankfurt and Stuttgart. The camp had its own farm, but needed knowledgeable supervisors.

So in 1946, Ott moved to Buttenhausen to begin the life as a farmer from which he only recently retired, growing such crops as wheat, corn, maize, potatoes and turnips while also raising cows.

Of the 700 people in Buttenhausen, 500 lived or worked at the camp while the other 200 villagers kept to themselves. "He wasn't accepted when he came here to Buttenhausen; they didn't accept him," Gausam interpreted. "He imagined himself on the basis of his experiences in Poland as the Polish ones -- as one you shouldn't talk to."

As the Allied government searched for Nazi perpetrators, rumors abounded about a certain villager who had run away. He was the man who back on Kristallnacht in 1938 had burned down Buttenhausen's synagogue. The story fired Ott's curiosity about what had happened to the Jews who had lived in the town. But it was not a subject that the already unfriendly villagers wanted to talk about.

Years later, he heard another rumor, that up in an abandoned castle of Buttenhausen, in an attic, there might be documents concerning the vanished Jews of Buttenhausen. He investigated, finding there "an early grant from the 18th century -- a grant to the Jews of their rights by the local aristocracy here," Gausam said. Until Jews were emancipated in Napoleonic times, they were required to live and work in certain big cities in Germany unless granted what was known as a "letter of protection" by

talk about -- each oppressed by a history they had no part in making.

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Following is a reprint of the story published April 21, 2000 about the remarkable Walter Ott. It was headlined: "A German passion for the truth: Why did Walter Ott build a memorial to the Jews of Buttenhausen?"

Buttenhausen, Germany -- Walter Ott is of the same generation as Udo Grausam's grandparents, but the two Germans share the same consuming passion: documenting aspects of the Holocaust.

Grausam, a student at the University of Tuebingen, accompanied me on a day last month to Buttenhausen, a town of 700 in the rural Swabian mountains, to serve as an interpreter for my interview with Ott.

Ott is a former member of the Hitler Youth who in post-war times has won recognition from Jewish groups for decades of volunteer work maintaining and restoring what otherwise would be an abandoned Jewish cemetery and for establishing a museum and memorial to Buttenhausen's vanished Jews.

As we drove along the winding road to Buttenhausen, Grausam told me that as part of his master's degree thesis, he plans to interview old farm families residing in another part of Germany where during World War II, Russians and Poles were forced to work as slave labor. He plans to ask the families --of whom, mostly older women survive--to recapitulate their experiences and emotions concerning those non-Jewish, Polish and Russian slave laborers.

He said he wants to know how the German women felt about the Polish women forced to work for them; whether they felt any empathy for their plight. And he wants to understand whether perceptions of German men and women at all differed during this period.

The genesis of his interest was a conversation he once had with his grandmother, who "worked on a farm that took advantage of forced labor." He said he had hoped that his grandmother would have expressed a spirit of dissent, that she would have expressed detestation for what the nazis did.

"But this was not the case," Grausam said. "They had adopted the general opinion very much. They (his grandmother's generation) still show signs of consent and agreement with that. There has not been any working through those opinions in the psychological sense. They know that times were bad then, that people suffered, but they just went on and haven't really acknowledged what was going on."

Grausam said by the time he was old enough to inquire about Germany's nazi past, his grandmother was his only direct-line relative still alive who had lived through it. His parents--born into the post-war generation--never showed much interest in learning about the past, even though many of their contemporaries had such interest. Thus, Grausam said, by probing into history, he is doing in his generation what other families did in his parents' generation.

As a student and researcher he learned that there were things about his family's past that he never had been told. For example, he found to his shock that his grandfather on the other side of his family had been a member of the nazi party. "He wasn't

local nobility.

"He also found some documents relating to the 1940s," Grausam said.

Ott told us that "he started his work on (Jewish) history as a personal private interest in the 1970s. He had five children and one room to spend the evening in with the children, and he had the documents on his desk. This was a kind of chaos at times, but he kept on doing it."

But when he asked questions, and word of his questions and documents spread through the village, "a man who became the burgermeister (mayor) tried to keep him from researching the history." Ott did not submit to the authoritarianism of the burgermeister any more than he had to that of his father. "What I am doing is my personal, private thing and it shouldn't bother you," he told the burgermeister, who had served as a lieutenant in the German army on the Russian front.

As he studied the documents he came to know the names of Jewish families that had lived in Buttenhausen for centuries. One day in the early 1980s he climbed a hill and came across the old Jewish cemetery and found gravestones that were "covered with moss and plants and dirt" and he recognized the family names of people mentioned in the documents. He started to restore the graveyard.

Ott photographed the restored gravestones, and sought pictures and information about the Jews who once had live in Buttenhausen. He made contact with documentation centers at Auschwitz, in Berlin and in Israel.

His work became better known when a German public television station filmed a documentary called *Of Men and Stones*. The attention given Ott and Buttenhausen helped to dispel some of the resentment in the town; villagers actually began to cooperate with his efforts.

Survivors of families from Buttenhausen -- including Maryland residents Walter Lichtenauer, Harry Linauer and Werner Marx -- began corresponding with Ott, seeking information about their families. Marx told Daniel Wroblewski in a 1996 Baltimore Jewish Times write-up that "whenever a Buttenhauser asks for some family history immediately (Ott) goes to work, he finds the right documents, at his own expense."

"Jewish people are enthusiastic about his work," Grausam summarized. "He has never had any bad experience with the feedback."

But over the years he also has received recognition from Germans. Schools regularly program visits to the documentation center, and sometimes pupils share in Grausam's experience of learning that there were things their families had never told them. German soldiers also are brought to the center during their basic training to learn a lesson that must never be forgotten.

Ott's parents lived long enough to see some of the work which he and his wife Anneliese performed at the cemetery -- which they encouraged. His children, who often accompanied him to the graveyard to clean the 399 gravestones with chemicals and brushes, meanwhile learned indelible lessons.

"They have been giving their own children biblical names -- Deborah and Sarah -- and he feels that his work has influenced

responsible for crimes, never in the files for the named criminals; he has left no traces so to speak in the files, but I think he just 'fulfilled his duty' and took part in military actions that had criminal aims."

The question that troubles Grausam is whether his grandfather "could have behaved differently? Was it necessary that he drive a truck with ammunition to the front, for example? He was a driver."

The university student further tortures himself with the question of whether, like his grandparents' generation, he would have gone along with nazism or would he have found the courage to resist?

"I feel those were times when people asked less, didn't ask the questions that we ask. We ask questions about what we do. I think the general attitude then towards authority was to obey. Some of them obeyed because they wanted to build a career on obedience. The concentration camps wouldn't have functioned without obedience, without those career plans."

He believes his sympathy and volunteer work in behalf of foreign refugees in Germany is a manifestation of his desire not to be like his grandparents' generation.

But he is not at all smug about his morality. As he continues to study the Holocaust, he realizes that he is driven to succeed. Sometimes, he said, he accepts what he considers to be unreasonable academic demands in order to be successful.

"At the moment I am grappling with the question, what orders do I give into? In this situation do I have to obey these orders? ... I want to make a career. It is a strong wish, the desire to be successful. Could this relate to what happened then? There were people who made careers out of mass murder."

* * *

We met Walter Ott at the upstairs documentation center in a building that once served as a school for both Jewish and Christian children. Wanting some coffee after the long winding ride, we suggested that perhaps we should go to a restaurant. Ott suggested that we instead go to his house, where we took our seats in a glassed-in patio area, which admitted light but kept out cold.

After Ott pattered in the kitchen and kindly brought out to us some refreshments, I asked if he would share with us his wartime memories. He responded that he was born in 1928 and that his father had worked for the railroad, and had been a strict, believing and anti-nazi Lutheran.

[Go to the top of next column](#)

that," Grausam said.

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During the car ride back to Tuebingen, Grausam reflected on what he had heard from this man of his grandparents' generation, whose story -- especially about working as a privileged German on a farm with people treated as inferiors -- had points in parallel with the experiences of Grausam's own grandmother.

"It is a creative process, so to speak, an interview with three people," he said. "For it to be scientific (like his own upcoming thesis work), we should handle it differently and have more time and have a schedule of what we could ask. But this is a first try-- a first effort -- in getting near to such a person. I think this is valid and it is a difficult interview. Of course there are reconstructions in his self-picture."

For example, although Ott suggested that his feeling of being an outsider may have led to his decision to pursue his inquiries into the town's Jewish past, Grausam suggested that "is what he has reconstructed now; I doubt he had been conscious of it at the time."

Grausam suggested there is another interpretation for Ott's course of action: "This is the thing that our interview brought out: that he followed his own path in a way, both as a youth and a grown up person. He was no outsider when he struggled with his father. It was youthful stubbornness, so to speak."

During the interview, Ott had said that although he had talked many times about his work, this was the first time he had discussed his own wartime experiences. If we had gone to a restaurant instead of to his home, he never would have felt comfortable enough to open up.

Said Grausam: "His personal feelings -- I think it is still difficult for Germans, even in the younger generation, to speak of deep emotions. I couldn't do it easily. ... I think he is a witness. He is someone who can testify on his experiences. He is not just to be seen as the upkeep of a graveyard but as someone who has lived in the place and has something to tell us about his own attitudes and perspectives."

Harrison is editor and publisher of *San Diego Jewish World*.
Email: editor@sandiegojewishworld.com