

February 16, 2010 Tuesday 2 Adar 5770 13:15 IST  Print

THE JERUSALEM POST

Israel's best-selling English daily and most-read English website



Photo by: Eckard Durr

Remembering their past mistakes

By DEBBIE SHAPIRO
12/02/2010

Each year the Obermayer German Jewish History Award honors five German gentiles who work to memorialize the country's lost Jewish communities.

January 27, International Holocaust Remembrance Day, 65 years since the liberation of Auschwitz. While President Shimon Peres recited Kaddish at the Bundestag, just a couple of blocks away, in the Plenary Chamber of the Berlin Parliament, five German citizens were being honored with the Obermayer German Jewish History Award.

The awards were established to pay tribute to Germans who have made outstanding voluntary contributions to preserving the memory of their local Jewish communities. It all began in 1997, when Dr. Arthur Obermayer, a hi-tech entrepreneur, philanthropist and amateur genealogist, traveled to southern Germany to research his family's roots. In each town he visited, he received "treatment normally reserved for visiting dignitaries" and met local citizens who, on a volunteer basis, had made it their business to learn about the Jews who had once lived in their towns.

Obermayer's grandmother came from Fuerth. Prior to the award ceremony, he told me the following story: "We spent a day and a half in Fuerth with Gisela Blume, a widow in her late 50s, who has devoted the past eight years of her life to the preservation of the memory of the Jews of Fuerth. She became interested in the Jews of Fuerth in 1990, while on a walking pilgrimage in northern Spain. One of her fellow pilgrims mentioned how much gratification she had gotten out of doing research on the history of the Jews of Fuerth and how the old Jewish cemetery in Fuerth had been badly desecrated by the Nazis and needed someone to reconstruct it.

"When Gisela offered to help, the other woman said, 'Do it yourself. There is no one to lead you.' So Gisela spent four years restoring the tombstones to their proper grave sites. I know how difficult a job it must have been, because I had visited the cemetery in 1984 and saw that most of the tombstones were in a pile on one side of the cemetery, unconnected to their grave sites. She got photographs and plot plans of the cemetery prior to the Holocaust. She interviewed families, and learned Hebrew so that she could read the tombstones herself. Today the cemetery has been reconstructed and looks like any old cemetery which has not been desecrated. During the course of reconstructing the cemetery, she learned the Jewish genealogy of Fuerth.

"When the cemetery project was complete, she extended her genealogical work and now has put together a computer database with the names of over 15,000 Jews who once lived in Fuerth. She introduced me to my great-great-great-grandfather, Israel Lichtenstaedter, who in 1763 founded the first Jewish orphanage in all of Germany. The orphanage continued in operation until 1942, when its last residents were sent to a concentration camp. Today, the only Jewish services in Fuerth are held in the orphanage's synagogue. Gisela took us to Shabbat services and demonstrated there and elsewhere that she was more familiar with Jewish traditions, customs and history than most Jews."

Upon his return to the US, Obermayer shared this and similar experiences with his fellow genealogists and discovered that it was not unique. "I was amazed at what these people were doing. They were giving so much of themselves, yet no one was doing anything to pay tribute to their contribution. That is why, in the year 2000, I established the awards."

Over the last 10 years, 50 German non-Jews have received the Obermayer Jewish German History Award for their work in preserving local Jewish history. In addition to official recognition and a framed certificate, each of the awardees received a 1,000 euro prize. Almost all of the recipients have used the money to further their work for the Jewish community.

This Year's Awardees

Angelika Brosig: Schopfloch, Bavaria

Brosig adopted the Jewish cemetery of Schopfloch together with the Jews who are buried there. In addition to posting the results of her research – which contains a wealth of genealogical information and includes extensive family trees, photographs and documents – on her Web site, www.juden-in-schopfloch.de, she has taken upon herself to assure that the once thriving Jewish community of northern Bavaria will never be forgotten.

Rabbi David Shapiro, the first person to nominate Brosig for this award, is enthusiastic in his praise. “Not only is Angelika recording all the names of the people buried in the Schopfloch Cemetery, which was a regional cemetery that served all the surrounding Jewish communities in addition to Schopfloch, she’s also renovating the abandoned graveyard. She cleaned the lichen that had grown over the inscriptions, and in cases where the stones were beyond repair, she found descendants willing to cover the costs of erecting a new stone or raised the money through her ‘adopt a stone’ project in the local schools.

“I discovered her work in May 2007, when I was researching a branch of my family that lived in the nearby town of Moenchsroth. At the time she had the German transcriptions of about 100 tombstones posted on her Web site. Assuming that the Hebrew inscriptions would contain additional information, I offered to translate them for her and that information was also posted on her Web site.”

In some cases, this information has been life-changing. Philip Urwin-Smith of Canada, for example, didn’t know that he was Jewish until he started researching his family history after his mother died in 1995. “I was raised in the Church of England. I knew there was some kind of Jewish connection, but it was never talked about. Although today I am not religious, I am very proud of my Jewish background. If it wasn’t for Angelika Brosig’s research, I would have never learned about my maternal ancestors.”

Although my husband and I have been in contact with Brosig through e-mail for several years, we finally met for the first time on January 24, in the lobby of Berlin’s Abion Spreebogen Hotel. After a flurry of hugs (from me), nods (from my husband) and exclamations (from all of us) of “I can’t believe we’re actually speaking to each other!” she introduced us to Birgit Haehnlein-Haeberlein, the female stonemason who works together with her in erecting new stones. Haehnlein-Haeberlein’s great grandfather was the cemetery’s last mason.

“The Nazis refused to let him build headstones for the last two Jews – both women – buried in the cemetery,” says Brosig. “So Birgit and I erected new ones.”

When I asked Brosig what impelled her to begin such a mammoth task, she explained, “A friend of mine wanted to see the Jewish cemetery in Schopfloch. When she saw the conditions there, she started to cry, saying, ‘It’s terrible. The stones aren’t readable, the plants and trees are all overgrown.’ I was surprised, because I had thought that it was natural for a cemetery to decay. But she said, ‘No, it’s not good for the descendants.’ This was how it all began.”

Brosig’s work goes beyond cleaning lichen off old stones and recording information. “I give guided tours of the cemetery to schools and church groups. The cemetery is 500 years old, and there’s a lot of history buried there. I use the stones as a springboard to talking about that history, and how it was destroyed during the Nazi era.

“That’s what interests me most – the Nazi era. I wanted to learn what happened here; why are the Jews gone? The more I asked, the more I realized how little I knew. The tourist brochures all say the region was Jewish friendly. But it’s not true. National Socialism was very strong here. It is important for me to see what was in the past and to bring about a connection to that past.”

Helmut Gabeli: Haigerloch, Baden Wuerttemberg

A lawyer and former officer in the postwar German army, Helmut Gabeli has devoted decades of his life to researching, writing, lecturing and leading tours about the Jews who once lived in Haigerloch and has helped countless families locate the graves of their ancestors in its Jewish cemetery. Thanks to his hard work, the town’s synagogue is now preserved as a regional monument and museum.

Forty-two years ago, Gabeli and his wife had just moved to the small Swabian town and were shopping in their local supermarket when they noticed something unusual about the structure’s architecture. That’s when they discovered that the building had once been a synagogue and decided to stop buying there.

“I had respect for the Jewish religion. How could I shop in a building where the Jews had prayed?” asks Gabeli.

Twenty-one years later, despite the opposition from local residents who would have preferred to forget that chapter of German history, Gabeli raised 200,000 deutschmarks (80 percent of the cost) toward purchasing the synagogue and having it preserved as a national monument and museum.

As part of his extensive research into Haigerloch’s Jews, which spans from the Middle Ages to World War II, Gabeli has written numerous articles and books on the subject, including a fascinating history of Jewish cattle dealers, stories of wartime deportations, a chronicle of each of Haigerloch’s Jewish residents from 1933 to 1945, a century-long history of Jewish schooling and a biography of Gustave Spier, the town’s last teacher and religious leader. Helmut has also helped countless families locate the graves of their ancestors, given lectures on Jewish history at Tuebingen University and led some 400 guided tours through the town.

“Although initially I thought the most important thing for me would be the restoration of the synagogue,” says Gabeli, “I later realized that it was the contact with the people, the Jews from all over the world, whether they have their roots in Haigerloch or not. The contact is so important for me that I would work day and night for it. That’s my life.”

At the reception following the award ceremony, I had the opportunity to speak with Tom, one of the “people, the Jews from all over the world” who made contact with Gabeli. Tom told me that he and his family celebrated their daughter’s bat mitzva in the Haigerloch synagogue, together with his elderly mother, who had lived there prior to the Holocaust. Tom was overwhelmed with emotion as he described how Gabeli had facilitated the entire event, and how, while visiting the restored synagogue, his mother had recalled details of life there before the war. “It was a feeling of being connected to something greater than myself, and for all of us, it was extremely meaningful.”

Barbara Greve: Gilserberg, Hesse

Barbara Greve has spent the last half a dozen years researching the Jewish communities that thrived in the very traditional, Christian villages in the Kreis Ziegenhains region of Hesse, central Germany.

When asked what motivated her to unearth the Jewish past in the area where she lives, Greve responded, “I view it as a type of mitzva. It’s a moral duty; I am giving people back their history.”

“Barbara pieced together numerous family trees reaching back to about 1600,” says Elizabeth Levy, a descendant of Jews from Oberaula and now a resident of Mevaseret Zion. “Through her numerous articles and books as well as talks to current residents of the villages, Barbara is reviving the lives of these people and their communities. She strives to remind local residents that Jewish life and history is a part of German life and history.”

The research was far from easy. Many documents were lost or not attainable. Despite the obstacles, Greve persisted. “It was often like a big puzzle, and I would become so excited whenever I’d find missing links in the family stories.”

Greve is also passionate that local residents get their facts straight. In Neukirchen, for example, people thought that “only” nine Jews were deported. “I discovered that prior to the Holocaust there had been more than 100 Jews living in Neukirchen, and more than half were killed, but people don’t know that.”

Heidemarie Kugler-Weimann: Luebeck, Schleswig-Holstein

Heidemarie Kugler-Weimann has devoted the last 18 years to researching Luebeck’s Holocaust history and then spread her knowledge through teaching, tours, exhibitions, forums, memorials, articles and books. In addition to impacting her community, she has developed very strong personal relationships with survivors from Luebeck.

In 1992, when Kugler-Weimann started working at Luebeck’s newly opened comprehensive school, it still lacked a name. Later, while researching the history of Luebeck’s education system under the Nazis, Kugler-Weimann and colleagues came across the stirring story of the three young Prenski siblings who had been deported to their deaths.

Kugler-Weimann placed an advertisement in the local press, inviting residents who remembered the Prenski family to share their memories and then assembled the interviews, photographs and documents in an exhibition. A year later, in 1993, she met Sophie, the only surviving Prenski sibling, who told her, “It would be good if you named the school for them. They were so small,” which is how the Geschwister Prenski Schule (The Prenski Siblings School) got its name.

Kugler-Weimann has started a Jewish and Holocaust studies program in the local school and worked with her students on an exhibition about the *Exodus*, a ship carrying Jews to Palestine in 1947. After it was turned back, some of the passengers were temporarily interned in Luebeck. She also compiled the letters that two sisters, who were later deported to their deaths, wrote to their sister in Shanghai, and published them as *Hopefully Everything Works out for the Best*.

During a tour of Berlin organized for the five awardees together with those who had nominated them, my husband and I met Riva Oren, one of the women who had nominated Kugler-Weimann. Oren and her husband, Yehuda, Orthodox Jews residing in Ra’anana, were effusive in their praise. “I was deeply moved by what happened when she and her husband, Martin, accompanied us to Luebeck’s cemetery, where my grandparents, great-grandparents and other members of my family are buried. It was a rainy day and very muddy. I looked around for stones to place on the graves, but could not find any. Suddenly I felt Heidemarie silently slip me a handful of small stones. Later on, when I asked her where she found the stones, she replied that they had come from the Valley of the Perished Communities in Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. I was speechless when confronted with such sensitivity and thoughtfulness.”

Walter Ott: Muensingen-Buttenhausen, Baden-Wuerttemberg

Eighty-one-year-old Walter Ott has spent the last three decades telling the people of his community about the Jews who had once lived in their midst. In addition to establishing a Jewish museum where schoolchildren and soldiers from around the region are taught about their difficult past, so that “they can see how it really was,” he has restored the town’s abandoned cemetery and has worked endlessly to reconnect with descendants of Buttenhausen’s Jews.

In 1973, when the castle outside Buttenhausen was being renovated, the chests and boxes were stored in Ott's home. He started going through the boxes, and discovered many amazing documents, including a letter from Baron von Liebenstein permitting the town's first 25 Jewish families to settle there.

"I was impressed, but that history was taboo," says Ott. "When I asked why no one talks about the Jewish community, I was told, 'Oh it was so long ago.' But the truth is that three-fourths of the people living here were Nazis."

As a youth, Ott had joined the Hitler Youth. "As he studied the documents, Walter came to know the names of Jewish families who had lived in Buttenhausen for centuries. But when he asked questions and word of his studies spread through the village, the mayor tried to stop him," recalls Donald Harrison of San Diego, California, one of the five people to nominate Ott. "What I am doing is my personal, private interest, and shouldn't bother you," he told the mayor, and then continued on with his research."

"This was a community until 1933," Walter points out, "and then it came to an abrupt end. It was so hard – so very hard – when the old Jews from Buttenhausen, who escaped in Nazi times, came back and talked about their experiences."

 [Back to article](#)  [Print](#)

[About Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [RSS](#)

All rights reserved © 1995 - 2009 The Jerusalem Post.

כל הזכויות שמורות © 2009- נט אפיקי תקשורת אינטר מדיה בע"מ