

FOCUS: The Battle for Memory

The Jews Who Lived Among Us

Thousands of Germans are documenting, restoring, and perpetuating the memory of Jewish life and culture before the Nazis took power.

BY DAN FLESHLER

In the early 1930s, about two hundred Jews lived in Siegen, a small city 100 miles north of Frankfurt, Germany. Today there are none, but they have not been forgotten.

For more than three decades, Klaus Dietermann, a local schoolteacher, has been obsessed with documenting and restoring the memory of this vanished Jewish community. He wants local residents not only to lament the loss of the town's Jews to the Nazis' horrors, but also to celebrate their noteworthy contributions to Siegen life.

Dietermann has led hundreds of tours to places where the Jews once lived, worked, and prayed. He's also written books and articles, everything from Jewish family biographies to histories of Jewish cemeteries. And in 1996, on the site of a synagogue destroyed in Kristallnacht (November 9, 1938), he helped establish the Active South Westphalian Museum to teach the history of Siegen's Jews, Gypsies, and other Nazi victims.

Klaus Dietermann is part of a grassroots phenomenon that began in the 1960s, when a small number of path-breaking, non-Jewish Germans devoted

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themselves to documenting, restoring, and perpetuating the memory of Jewish life and culture before the Nazis took power. Today, thousands of Germans are



This photograph of Ruth and Joseph Hollander (in his WWI uniform) and their daughter Julie was part of a 1998 exhibition dedicated to celebrating the lives of Jewish residents of Hilchenbach, Germany killed by the Nazis. Klaus Dietermann, a local schoolteacher, organized the event. The whole town turned out.

engaging in commemorative work in cities and towns throughout Germany. While Jewish communities have not been brought back to life—except in a few German cities—these German volunteers have managed to evoke a sense of Jewish presence in a more tangible and life-affirming way than the presence of memorial plaques throughout the country possibly can.

Now, thanks largely to Arthur Obermayer, a member of Martha's Vineyard Hebrew Center and Temple Shalom of Newton, Massachusetts, the efforts of Klaus Dietermann and other Germans

who have insistently kept Jewish memory alive are being publicly recognized and honored.

When Obermayer traveled to southern Germany in 1997 to explore his family roots, he was struck by the generosity—indeed, the enthusiasm—of Germans who tried to help him in his search. In each of the five communities he and his wife visited, they encountered non-Jews engaged in researching the fate of local Jews in order to tell their stories.

“I witnessed a voluntary effort by ordinary people to respond to the injustices that had been done by their parents and grandparents,” Obermayer recalls. “Soon I realized that this was going on in just about every town and city in Germany, and no one was acknowledging it. Many Jews of my generation”—he is now 77—“are still hostile to Germans. I felt, and still feel, that it is wrong to have an automatic prejudice against today's Germans for crimes they had nothing to do with.”

In 2000, Obermayer established what would become the annual Obermayer German Jewish History Awards (<http://www.obermayer.us/award/>) in honor of “individuals who have made outstanding voluntary contributions toward preserving and recording the Jewish history, heritage, culture, and/or remnants of local German communities.”