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Germans remember the Holocaust, and the Jewish life that was

von Toby Axelrod

BERLIN (JTA) -- Holocaust remembrance in Germany has many faces.

In the former East German city of Erfurt, illegal squatters hide from the camera but show visitors where the ovens of Auschwitz were designed and made. In Hameln, in what was West Germany, Bernhard Gelderblom has worked for decades „in the darkness“ to return an identity to his town's lost Jews. And in Euskirchen, Hans-Dieter Arntz has been bringing the light of day to a local history buried out of shame and guilt.

Such efforts contribute to a depth of remembrance in Germany at which official commemorations can only hint. To really find out, one has to visit towns and cities across Germany and seek out the local, sometimes unofficial, historians.

Some grass-roots groups „are very creative,“ said Walter Momper, president of Berlin's House of Representatives, who spent this year's Holocaust Remembrance Day hosting the ninth annual Obermayer German Jewish History Awards. „They force society to ask what was there ... and they confront people with what happened just next door.“

This is just what the group of young squatters has been doing in Erfurt. Since moving into abandoned buildings of the former Topf und Söhne oven manufacturers some 10 years ago, they have been giving informal walking tours of the now decrepit site where the company designed and built the Auschwitz crematorium, as well as air-tight gas chamber doors and ventilation systems. The youth have run cultural programs at the site, and teens are asked to remove any Palestinian scarves when they enter.

„It is a symbol of anti-Semitism -- I see it that way,“ said one of the squatters, who gave his name as Timo. „Anti-Semitism did not end in 1945.“

The squatters complemented the work of a local association dedicated to unearthing the site's history, said association member Rudiger Bender, chair for intercultural communications at the University of Erfurt.

„It is important to actually work on a very local level“ and then compare the results „with a birds' eye perspective“ to see how it fits with the bigger picture, Bender said.

Over the years, awareness of the site's history has grown. Now its new owner, Helmut Golla -- though insisting the squatters leave by Feb. 15 -- has agreed to establish an information center and museum in the former administration building using materials developed by historians from the nearby Buchenwald memorial.

The rest of the property is to be razed, and new apartments and commercial sites will be built. Golla has turned down all requests for interviews, a spokesperson for his firm told JTA.

Despite worrying about the future of the squatters, Bender is „very happy because we achieved what I didn't even think possible 10 years ago.“ The previous mayor „had no great appetite“ to see a museum there, explained Wolfgang Nossen, president of the Jewish Community of Thuringia. „I was told to think about the image of the city. I answered, 'One should have said that 70 years ago.'“

Topf und Söhne was an old family firm, he said, that „designed these ovens themselves to make practical use of energy.“ Human bodies were the fuel.

„It was absolutely perfidious.“ For decades, no one in Erfurt talked about this past. The same pattern was repeated in towns and cities across Germany. Few chose to recall what happened to the 500,000 Jews who lived in Germany before 1933. Nearly half fled, though many would later be deported from other occupied countries. Only a few thousand German Jews survived here in hiding.

Even so, long after the end of World War II, there is still much history to uncover, said Arthur Obermayer, the Boston-based businessman and philanthropist who created the Obermayer Award after exploring his own family's roots in Creglingen. The award honors Germans who have tried to find out about local Jewish history and to establish contacts with Jews around the world.

This year's awardees were:

* Klaus Dietermann of Siegen, a history teacher who created a museum of Jewish history where the town's synagogue once stood.

* Bernhard Gelderblom of Hameln, a high school teacher who has documented the names on tombstones in deserted Jewish cemeteries and helped establish an exhibit on Anne Frank, despite personal threats against him.

* Ernst and Brigitte Klein, the owners of a door and window construction business in Volkmarzen who helped create a charitable society that has rebuilt the town's Jewish cemetery and established an education center devoted to Jewish history.

* Theology professor Michael Dohrs of Hofgeismar, who helped set up and run the Jewish history section in his hometown museum and has written extensively on the subject.

* High school teacher Hans-Dieter Arntz of Euskirchen, who has fought to have streets and monuments named for former Jewish citizens and helped Israeli survivors claim pensions based on his documentation of their fate under the Nazis.

Virtually all the nominees are Jews who fled Nazi Germany, or their children. This year they came here from Israel, England, Scotland and Canada.

Dan Frank of Afula, Israel, met Dorhs after his mother, Meta (Koenigsthal) Frank, answered a newspaper ad decades ago seeking Jews with roots in Hofgeismar.

„Over the years we became somehow like a family,“ Frank said. „When I read about the Obermayer Award, I thought it would be a nice way to honor Michael.“

Shulamit Spain-Gayer of Glasgow, Scotland, nominated Arntz for going beyond the abstraction of „masses of victims“ to learn about the lives of Jews of Euskirchen, the home of her ancestors.

„They have faces and personalities and lives that are real,“ said Spain-Gayer, who was born after the war in Basel, Switzerland. „And his research brings it out.“

There is much work to do, said Arntz, amazed at the many Germans still wearing blinders.

In the 1930s, Jewish businesses were „Aryanized“ -- forcibly sold to so-called „pure“ Germans, many of whose ancestors still run these businesses today. And when the local dairy, or butcher shop, or department store advertises „140 years in business,“ one has to „look critically at this,“ Arntz said, „and ask what happened there?“