

7/10
 N. ad Sollicitudinem
 5. 7. 1803
 Acta
 Das Domiciliens-Besetz einiger
 jüden Familien, modo die von jüdischen
 fünf Wesselsheim und Westheimer
 und Strassburger, Henle Ephraim
 Ullmann, und Jacob Obermayer
 gestellter fünfzig fünf Pfund Rindfleisch
 und ferner mit denselben abgepflichteter
 Convention, dass die in
 dem Reichsland Steiermark in
 jenen gemachten Handel, ein auch die
 von den hiesigen Kaufleuten ungetrieben zu
 werden Felder leben, etc.

de Anno 1803.
 N. 1. 14.
 cum Rotulo.

First page from act granting domicile rights to Jacob Obermayer, Henle Ephraim Ullmann, and the Munich bankers Strassburger and Westheimer.

(Courtesy Obermayer family records)

“Not Quite ‘Our Crowd’”¹: The Trajectory of the Obermayer Family, 1618–2009

Kenneth Libo²

Some years ago, I began research on the German branch of Arthur Obermayer’s family while Michael Feldberg of the American Jewish Historical Society began work on the American branch. At our disposal was an enormous family archive containing material from congregational records, official documents, vital statistics, out-of-print books, tombstone inscriptions, marriage records, wills, death certificates, pamphlets, clippings, memoirs, and correspondence. Arthur Obermayer had assembled the archive over the years in a tireless quest to uncover his family’s history from seventeenth-century South Germany to twenty-first-century America.³ It did not take long to realize that in the course of several generations, members of Arthur’s family had occupied practically every one of the limited positions open to Jews in South Germany before the middle of the nineteenth century—from court Jews, Jewish communal leaders, and major philanthropists to *schacherhaendlers* (hagglers), *schnorrers* (scroungers) and *schmoozers* (sellers of information, from the Hebrew *shemu’ot*, meaning hearsay, rumors, idle chatter).

Arthur Obermayer had traced this lineage back to the Tauber Valley farming villages of Creglingen and Archshofen, the manufacturing and trading center of Fürth, and the imperial city of Augsburg and nearby Kriegshaber.⁴ Though these places are no more than a few hours apart, each has a unique Jewish history. Residence rights for Jews in Augsburg had been revoked in 1438 and were not reinstated until 1803, when a number of Jewish bankers, including an Obermayer, obtained such rights for themselves in return for paying Napoleon *not* to enter the city. Jews in Creglingen and Archshofen, on the other hand, enjoyed the right for centuries to own property and live practically anywhere they wanted to in these towns.⁵ In contrast, Fürth’s Jews were permitted to live only in certain areas.⁶

For premodern Jews in German-speaking lands, expulsion often meant moving to a nearby town. Thus, Jews expelled from Augsburg in 1438 had the option of relocating nearby where more tolerant magistrates, for a price, gave them residence rights. In contrast, the Jews of England, the Iberian Peninsula, and France had been subject to nationwide expulsions, and the Jews of tsarist Russia were confined to the Pale of Settlement.

As has often been the case in the history of the Diaspora, after living for generations in close proximity with gentiles, German Jews could not help but acquire the characteristics of the host population. Writes Gordon A. Craig:

The family resemblance between the two people is striking and is evident in their industry, their thrift and frugality, their perseverance, their strong religious sense, the importance they place on the family, and their common respect for the printed word, which has made the Jews the People of the Book and the Germans *das Volk der Dichter und Denker*.⁷

“German Jews,” adds Robert Seltzer, “also excelled at economic initiative and enterprise, communal responsibility and a sense of philanthropic duty.”⁸ These strengths were exemplified by Obermayer forebears Moses Maennlein, head of a foundation in his name for assisting Creglingen’s needy Jews; Israel Lichtenstädter, founder in Fürth of the first Jewish orphanage in Germany; and the Obermayers of Augsburg and Kriegshaber, who opened doors hitherto closed to Jews.

Though the Obermayers do not have the cachet of the founders of “Our Crowd”—most of whom were well on their way to success before Arthur’s ancestors arrived in the United States—they are nonetheless typical of families a social rung below who, cumulatively, have played a crucial role in strengthening Jewish values, the American economy, and peaceful co-existence. (Indeed, they may be considered to have played a far more crucial role than the “Our Crowd” set in shaping American Jewish communal values.) At least several dozen families enjoyed a comparable historical evolution from, at best, enlightened despotism to political and social influence of major importance. Their impact on America and American Judaism continues to affect the lives of Jews today.

What follows is an account of how a representative “not quite ‘Our Crowd’” family lived as Jews in South Germany and to what extent their German Jewishness survived and evolved in America.

The Road to Creglingen

While much of South Germany was Catholic, Creglingen and Archshofen fell under the authority of the margraves of Ansbach, a branch of the staunchly Protestant great electors of Brandenburg-Prussia. The family was inclined to look favorably upon Jews, as they did in 1670, when fifty Jews expelled from Vienna were issued letters of protection by authority of the great elector.

Until Napoleon altered the map of German-speaking Europe, the margraves of Ansbach held ultimate or near-ultimate authority over Jews living in the county of Ansbach in matters regarding population, residence rights, economic rights, and tax assessments. The margraves in premodern Germany were as likely to provide Jews with letters of protection as to expel them.⁹ Simson of Reinsbronn (d. 1635), the first of Arthur Obermayer’s ancestors to settle in Creglingen, received his letter of protection in 1618, at the onset of the Thirty Years’ War.¹⁰ Only gradually did anti-Jewish policies disappear through disuse. The last order of expulsion of a Jew was issued by Margrave Joachim Ernest in 1609.¹¹



Hauptstrasse in Creglingen, c. 1900.
Sinsheimer store and birthplace of Joseph
Sinsheimer are visible on the right.
(Courtesy Obermayer family records)

Even before the Enlightenment, there were numerous indications in and around Ansbach pointing to the dawn of a new era.¹² Under the influence of Enlightenment ideas, the margraves of Ansbach grew increasingly tolerant of Jews, allowing them to settle in towns and villages in growing numbers.

By 1700, hundreds of Jewish families inhabited dozens of small population centers dotting the Ansbach countryside. In 1746, Margrave Charles

William Frederic (1729–1757) allowed the Jews of the court city of Ansbach to build a synagogue.¹³ By the end of the century, the Jews of Creglingen and Archshofen had either followed Ansbach's example,¹⁴ or were about to.

The Ansbach margraves permitted Jews in their domains not only to own property but also to live among gentiles. Thus, Simson of Reinsbronn was granted not only residence rights for himself and his family as a buyer and seller of goods but also ownership of a house in the center of town on Badgasse (meaning "Bath Lane") 3. There he raised a growing family and lived for the rest of his life. Paying taxes must have strengthened Simson's sense of being a fellow Creglinger, as it would have for his son Isaak Simson (c. 1600–1667), known as "Isaac the Jew." In 1641, Isaac paid taxes on the house at Badgasse 3; that house remained in the family until the twentieth century.¹⁵

While Simson and his family survived the Thirty Years' War in Creglingen, much of the rest of South Germany was in shambles. Catholic marauders were killing Protestants and Protestants were killing Catholics, with Jews fair game for either side. Not even in a walled city like Creglingen were Jews safe. In 1631 Isaac Jekhuthiel was beaten to death by Swedes "in the synagogue." A year later, "Nathan the Jew" sent a desperate appeal to the municipal council of Creglingen:

I'm still holding out in my poor little house in Oberzenn. The King's army as well as the Swedish army have ruined and plundered us through and through, including wife and child; taken everything away even to the last shirt and placed us in utmost poverty. They led me away twice on a rope.¹⁶

Despite such conditions, Simson of Reinsbronn and his descendents prospered in Creglingen as cattle dealers, wine merchants, and spice and salt traders. For generations they lived with their families, not in foul-smelling ghettos as in Fürth and Frankfurt, but on Badgasse and later on many other Creglingen streets, where Jews and gentiles lived side by side. With the exception of houses near the church, unless in need of rehabilitation, prospering Jews like Simson

and those who followed him could reside practically anywhere in Creglingen. By contrast, Jewish options in Fürth or Augsburg were far more circumscribed.

Moyses Isaac (c.1639–1704), like his father Isaac Simson and his grandfather Simson of Reinsbronn, was a pillar of the Jewish community. For many years he served as its *parnas* (president), in which capacity he mediated with the municipal council on matters such as the payment of taxes, the granting of privileges, and the disruption of order—as when two Jewish teachers from Aub came to Creglingen in 1659, had a fight on the street, and were fined ten taler. Jews in Creglingen at the time are described in yearly reports to the municipal council as “pious,” “good hearted,” “neighborly,” and “well behaved.”¹⁷

Moyses Isaac’s grandson, Moyses Maennlein (1700–1786), served for many years as Creglingen’s *parnas*. Moyses Maennlein also established a foundation for providing money to the poor on the anniversary of his death in return for their prayers; a dowry fund for the daughters of poor Jews; a tuition fund for poor Jewish boys; and five hundred guilders to build a new school for the Jews of Creglingen. Out of a deep-seated religious obligation to help the less fortunate, Moyses Maennlein made the following provisions in his will:

First and foremost is the fear of the Lord! These are my orders!

- 1) I want 395 times four pennies, because the numerical value of the word “neshama” is 39... to be distributed when I am approaching death to observant and poor people nearby.
- 2) Upon my death, and between my dying and the burial, 26 times 3 pennies, the numerical value of the word “Elohim,” is to be distributed among the poor and observant.
- 3) At the funeral, the poor and observant are to be given an amount equal to the numerical value of the word “levair” 18 pf, i.e. 3 fl: 49 ½ kr.¹⁸

Not everyone in Moyses Maennlein’s family prospered. In 1799 a nephew, Hirsch Jacob, approached the Moyses Maennlein Foundation for help. Hirsch Jacob was a widower with eight children, four at home. He had no earnings and owned only the ramshackle house he and his children lived in, more than half of which was mortgaged. He asked for fifty guilders to pay small debts and buy bread. When it was discovered he had already gotten 150 guilders from Aaron Schwab, his request was denied.¹⁹

Moyses Maennlein’s grandson Raphael Blumenfeld (1769–1854) was both a *warehaendler* (merchant) and a *schacherhaendler*, depending on how well he was doing. In 1809 Raphael applied for funds to the Moyses Maennlein Foundation to buy bread for himself, his wife, and six children.²⁰ Only with the help of municipal property tax exemptions was Raphael able to hold on to a house he had inherited from a rich relation. Raphael’s son Lazarus (1797–1886), a fellow *schacherhaendler*, was, unlike his father, educated in both Jewish and secular

subjects by a government-approved teacher. A reader of Friedrich Schiller (a set of whose works is listed in an appendix to his will), Lazarus might very well have experienced firsthand the pangs of German romanticism and nationhood.²¹

In Creglingen, Jews' lives changed little over the years.²² Raphael's sons, who were mostly in the cattle trade, remained close to home. His sons-in-law were also in the cattle trade in neighboring towns and villages. As buyers and sellers, *schacherhaendlers* and *schmoozers*, they "sought out small farmers in their homes or met them at local markets, offering them... goods and information as well as buying agricultural products or lending money on the anticipated harvest or livestock production."²³

Lazarus Blumenfeld lived with a wife and five children in three small rooms of a family house on Hauptstrasse 32. Lazarus might have been able to quote Schiller's Ode to Joy; yet he had to endure the constrictions and confinements of the life of a *schacherhaendler*. Only for succeeding generations of dissatisfied Blumenthals, Sinsheimers, and Oberndorfers, from whom Arthur descends, would the promise of a better life in America become a reality.

Augsburg/Kriegshaber

Over a period of three centuries, Simson Reinsbronn and his descendents owned and/or occupied no fewer than ten houses in Creglingen—on Badgasse, Hauptstrasse, Lindleinstrasse, Kreuzstrasse, and Stadtgraben. Conditions for Jews in Augsburg could not have been more different. As a result of pressure exerted by the Fuggers, Jews were expelled from Augsburg and, until 1803, could enter only with a daily pass and stay overnight only at designated places.

As earlier noted, in Germany expelled Jews might move to a neighboring jurisdiction, sometimes only half an hour away by carriage or chair or on foot. The Jews of Augsburg thus moved to nearby Kriegshaber, a part of the margravedom of Burgau. Burgau passed into the hands of the Holy Roman Emperor, who raised no objection to Jews settling there. By the time the Obermayers arrived, half of Kriegshaber was under the jurisdiction of the emperor, and half was under the jurisdiction of a local bishop.

As in Creglingen, "Kriegshaber's Jews enjoyed domicile rights," notes military historian and Obermayer biographer, Franz Josef Merkl;

however, they were not free to reside among gentiles [as in Creglingen], but rather had to live in designated areas. They enjoyed the use of small farms, though, where they kept cattle. Some may have actually owned these farms, though pre-Napoleonic ownership for Jews was difficult as land could be sold only with the consent of the highest authority in the land. So it was for Christians and Jews alike until 1848 and the liberation of the farmers.²⁴

The Obermayers trace their Kriegshaber ancestry back to Isaac Mayr, a butcher known in Kriegshaber in 1757 as Jud Hitzig. Isaac Mayr's son, Mayr

Isaak, was among the first in his family to take on the Obermayer name in conformity with a 1782 imperial *Toleranzedict* (edict of tolerance) issued by Hapsburg Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II. The edict forced Jews to take on family names as a means of identifying them with greater certainty on official documents and tax records. If there happened to be another family in Kriegshaber headed by another Mayr Isaak, “Obermayr” may have been the name chosen by the family living above the Untermayrs.²⁵

A butcher in South Germany was often also a cattle dealer, a horse trader, a barterer of crops for manufactured goods, and someone who lent money to farmers to tide them over. So it was with Mayr Isaak’s son Jacob Obermayer (1755–1828) who, during the Napoleonic Wars, provided horses, slaughtered cattle, and sold foodstuffs to army suppliers. Whatever he could buy from the farmers and sell to the army for a profit, he did. Obermayer historian Anke Joisten-Pruschke notes:

Jacob normally lent money to farmers at relatively good interest rates, because he was interested in long term business relationships in which, if the partner does well, the lender does well. Jacob’s own letters reveal an excellent German writing style in addition to an amazing grasp of the history of the topic at hand. Not only does he seem to know what to say and do; he also knows how to behave with all classes. I have looked through the guest book of a prominent industrial family named Sander of the Christian upper class, and in it often appears the names of Jacob Obermayer, his son Isidore, and his grandson Carl.²⁶

Over the years Kriegshaber attracted several important banking families, including the Kaullas. Madame Kaulla, one of the most powerful court Jews in eighteenth century Germany, lent money to members of the Hohenzollern court and the Duke of Wuerttemberg. During the Napoleonic Wars, Madame Kaulla’s son, Veit Kaulla, moved to Kriegshaber and formed a partnership with Jacob Obermayer. On 27 August 1800 Jacob’s brother Isaac (1764–1835) purchased from Veit Kaulla a house in Kriegshaber that later belonged to his son, Heinrich Obermayer. Heinrich’s sons, Hermann and Jacob, were born there. Hermann was Arthur’s grandfather.

Whereas the cattle trade remained central to the lives of those Obermayers who stayed in Kriegshaber, Jacob Obermayer, as a prospering banker, longed to share in the splendors of Augsburg. The opportunity arose when—in an effort to keep Napoleon’s troops out of the city—Augsburg’s city council borrowed money from Jacob Obermayer and Veit Kaulla as well as other Jewish bankers. In return, after a hiatus of three and a half centuries, the Jewish bankers and their families were granted residence rights in Augsburg, along with the right to be addressed as “Herr” instead of “Jud” in written salutations and on the street. For whatever reason—fear of competition, fear of a backlash—the first to arrive did what they could to keep other Jews out.²⁷

Those Jews allowed back were not permitted to build a synagogue or engage in retail trading, nor could they bring with them more than one grown child, contingent on payment of a “recognition fee.” Jacob tolerated all this in exchange for living with his family in a commodious townhouse on Domherrenhof, later the residence of the first *bürgermeister* of the city. Notes Anke Joisten-Pruschke:

In lieu of building a synagogue, Jacob conducted prayer services in his home every day and on holidays, providing a special [T]orah ark and a bimah. Every Shabbat, every festival, no one had to go to Kriegshaber. The house still exists. It’s close to the fruit market—the *obst platz*. Jacob Obermayer added a mikvah to that house. Since running water was needed, Jacob installed a tub that took water from the sky. A decade or so after Jacob died in 1828, only one old lady used the mikvah. After her death, women went to the Lech River.²⁸

While Jacob and his brother Isaac were products of a traditional Jewish education, their children received secular educations at highly acclaimed institutions. Isaac’s son Johann Jacob attended the illustrious Sachs School in Frankfurt, as did Jacob’s son Isidore. Isidore’s son Carl was enrolled in the oldest gymnasium in Augsburg, the St. Anna Elisee. As they moved up the socioeconomic ladder, all three went where few Jews in South Germany had gone before. In addition to cofounding Hypo-Bank, still an ongoing concern, Isidore was instrumental in building the first railroad between Augsburg and Munich in 1838–1840; Johann Jacob became well known in the money markets of central Europe; and Carl (1811–1889) achieved fame as a military advisor and social and political progressive.²⁹

“Something of a Casanova,” Joisten-Pruschke notes, “Carl moved to Vienna with his bride, the daughter of a wealthy banker. After a bad divorce—good only for the boulevard press—Carl returned to his father’s house in Augsburg with his son and remained there until 1840.”³⁰ In 1848, on orders from the king of Bavaria, Carl travelled to the United States to study its military operations. After returning to Germany, he made similar trips to Belgium, France, Poland, and Prussia before writing a special report that led to the reorganization of several military regiments in Bavaria.³¹

In addition to his military and diplomatic achievements, Carl established a number of progressive societies and organizations in Augsburg. A society for rehabilitating ex-convicts and a soup kitchen expanded on the work of his mother Nanette, who established a foundling hospital. As *parnas* of Augsburg’s Jewish community for more than fifteen years, Carl played a major role in equipping the first synagogue in Bavaria with an organ.³²

While Carl and his progeny remained in Europe, other members of the family looked to America as a place to start their lives anew. Carl’s first cousin, Hermann Obermayer (1829–1897), is a case in point. The third child of a

Kriegshaber butcher, Hermann faced grim prospects at home. Getting married, domicile rights, work papers—everything was subject to approval from an unpredictable higher authority. Family folklore has it that Hermann was an early supporter of Carl Schurz and that his emigration may have been hastened by the Revolution of 1848.³³ In any event, under the sponsorship of an aunt, Henrietta Obermayer Guggenheimer, nineteen-year-old Hermann traveled from Bavaria to Lynchburg, Virginia, before becoming a clerk in a store owned by his uncle's brothers in Richmond. For twelve years, Hermann worked in that store, occupying a room in an upstairs hotel.

Fürth



Shabbat in front of Fürth synagogue, c. 1800
(Courtesy Obermayer family records)

As in Augsburg and Kriegshaber, Arthur traces his roots in Fürth back to the eighteenth century. The Holy Roman Empire at the time included more than 150 German-speaking fiefdoms and principalities. With the rise of princely power, the creation of free and independent imperial cities, and an increasingly powerful religious establishment, the emperor's authority had

diminished considerably by 1756, when Arthur's ancestor Israel Lichtenstädter (1698–1789) arrived in Fürth with his family.

Jews are first mentioned as residing in Fürth in 1440, only to be banished at the end of the century in accordance with policies in other South German cities. Jews were expelled from Cologne in 1426, Augsburg in 1438, Erfurt in 1448, Nuremberg and Ulm in 1499, Regensburg in 1519, and Wuerzburg in 1565. By the dawn of the seventeenth century only Frankfurt, Worms, Prague, and Vienna supported large Jewish communities. By contrast, South German Jews resided mostly in farming communities like Creglingen and Archshofen, or near cities where Jews had been expelled, such as Kriegshaber (outside Augsburg) and Fürth (outside Nuremberg) where, as in a few other places, Jews had been allowed to return.³⁴ Depending on where in the city they lived, the Jews of Fürth fell under the jurisdiction of one of three magistrates—the bishop of Bamberg, the municipal council of Nuremberg, or the margrave of Ansbach. Expulsion thus might mean nothing more than moving across the street to the domain of a friendlier magistrate, as opposed to leaving an entire country with little more than the clothes on one's back.

Though the Jews of Fürth were denied citizenship rights and entry into most guilds, they benefited in other ways: Not only were they excused from military service, but they could not be forcibly baptized, nor could they fight in a duel with a Christian.

In the wake of the 1648 to 1649 Chmielnicki massacres, despite objections from the city of Nuremberg, Fürth became a haven for Polish Jews.³⁵ They were granted protection by the margrave of Ansbach, whose fiefdom, as you may recall, included Creglingen. In 1670 an influx of Jewish refugees from Vienna soon put Fürth on the map as a center of Jewish learning, with a Hebrew printing industry dating back to 1690 and in continuous operation until 1868. Over the years the Jews of Fürth felt increasingly at home. A municipal charter dated 1719 granted Jews a greater degree of autonomy than any other Jewish community in Germany, including the right to be tried in a Jewish court of law.³⁶

In 1785 a traveler passing through Fürth observed that the Jews were “in every kind of trade, big and small, on the streets, in the open shops, and within buildings.” Jews were well represented as buyers and sellers of locally manufactured goods, such as clocks, pocket watches (exported to Turkey), eyeglasses, and jewelry (on which they had a monopoly). Of the fourteen steam-driven engines in Fürth in the nineteenth century, seven were operated by Jewish manufacturers of everything from brewing machines and mirrors to furniture, toys, bronzing agents, and cotton thread.³⁷ By the time Israel Lichtenstädter and his family arrived in 1756, Fürth lay claim to a larger proportion of Jews than practically anywhere else in the Holy Roman Empire.³⁸

At the time, homeless Jews overran Fürth’s streets. Some 10 percent of the Jews in eighteenth-century Germany earned their living as itinerant merchants with no letters of protection, no fixed abode, and no means at their disposal to keep rapidly growing families from falling apart. In Franconia as a whole, to which Fürth belonged, more than a quarter of the Jewish population had no permanent address. Under the leadership of Arthur’s forefather, Israel Lichtenstädter, the Jews of Fürth in 1763 organized the first Jewish orphan society in Germany. According to Fürth historian Gisela Blume:

Lichtenstädter’s dream was not only to give refuge to those who lived in the street and had to beg for their daily food. Certainly, Israel was not opposed to that. However, his idea was based on the Jewish injunction not to make a beggar feel like a beggar—not to shame someone, but to give the needy one an opportunity to do something good for the one who does him good, like receiving an education with which one can pray for the soul of a deceased benefactor. That was what guided Israel Lichtenstädter.³⁹

In the true spirit of *tzedakah*, Israel devised the following plan for housing, feeding, clothing, and educating homeless boys:

We feel particularly driven to do this because we see with amazement fatherless orphans, others driven from their father's table and now homeless, hungry and without any religious training whatsoever.... Poor boys, whatever their family situation, would be welcome as religious students from the ages of five to fifteen. They would get their food and clothing and would receive religious instruction in the five books of Moses, the Mishnah and Gemara. They would learn how to write in Hebrew beautifully, since it is good to connect other knowledge with the knowledge of one's religion.... We appeal to you to strengthen and support the weak and faltering, the abandoned youth wandering around on the street, and G-d will certainly repay you for working to bring about a virtue—proper religious instruction—that goes beyond the grave to the honor of the living.⁴⁰

In the beginning, childless couples contributed a *freiplatz* (scholarship) to pay for whatever a boy needed. Initially, the boys were not housed in a separate building but lived and ate instead with families, joining their peers only for prayers and education. After a sponsor died, the boy would say kaddish for him or her. "Thus," notes Blume,

he had the chance to say thank you to the person who enabled him to get an education, because saying kaddish for a person who has died is very important in Jewish life. It is believed that it helps the soul to go up to heaven. At a *leviah* (burial) which moved from the house to the cemetery, the orphans walked in front of the body which was covered in a *tallis* (prayer shawl) and white linen and often placed on a piece of wood. In olden times in Fürth, those who invited Jews who didn't have their own home for shabbes dinner were buried quite often on their table top which signified their good deeds. I am sure that is the way Israel Lichtenstädter was buried.⁴¹

In Fürth, generations of Israel's descendents lived out their lives as tradesmen in glass, cattle, baskets, and groceries. The marketplace where many of them conducted business had been a center of Jewish life for centuries. Israel Lichtenstädter's grandson Mosche Krakauer (1767–1816) was a familiar sight there. A retail grocer, Mosche had five children, all of whom were born and died in Fürth. The youngest, Nettie Krakauer Lehmann (1814–1875), was the wife of a glass faceter and cattle dealer and the mother of Veronika Lehmann (1851–1928), the future wife of Arthur's grandfather Hermann Obermayer. Veronika came to Philadelphia with her parents in the early 1870s.⁴²

Coming to Terms with America

The large-scale migration of German Jews to America began soon after the defeat of Napoleon. Partly this was the result of young German Jews' frustration with the slow pace of emancipation; partly that transportation across the North Atlantic became more feasible after the Napoleonic Wars; and partly the attraction of economic opportunities in America, as early arrivals relayed

to their families back home. Some of Napoleon's "improvements," such as the abolition of ghettos, were kept in place; but restrictions, especially economic and professional ones, were restored after the Congress of Vienna. Moreover, having peaked in 1848, German liberalism by the 1850s was on the decline.

In contrast to such conditions, the idea of America as a land of unlimited freedom of opportunity and rights appealed all the more to Hermann Obermayer (1829–1897) of Kriegshaber and Joseph Sinsheimer (1869–1950) of Creglingen, as well as to their future wives, Veronika Lehmann of Fürth and Helmine Oberndoerfer (1869–1916) of Archshofen.

Like the vast majority of single male German Jews who came to America in the middle and latter part of the nineteenth century, Hermann Obermayer and Joseph Sinsheimer partook in the creation and expansion by German Jews of America's ready-made clothing and dry-goods industry.⁴³ Hermann became a Main Street/middle America merchant, and Joe became a Brooklyn corset manufacturer. Descended from generations of Creglingen cattle dealers, butchers, *schmoozers*, and soap manufacturers, Joe had mastered the essentials of business before leaving Creglingen—with little more than his father's consent—at sixteen. But one of thousands of German Jews who prospered in the *shmatte* (garment) trade, Joe started out as a bookkeeper and retired as treasurer of the second-largest corset manufacturer in America and, for years, a major employer of east European Jews.⁴⁴

Just as Joe's rise to riches in the clothing industry struck a familiar chord in German Jewish circles of his day, so did Hermann Obermayer's movement from place to place. Hermann began his slow rise as a clerk in his uncle's dry-goods store in Virginia. After twelve years of clerking, Hermann enlisted in the Confederate army and fought at Antietam before being captured. He was released after signing an oath of allegiance to the United States.⁴⁵ After the war Hermann headed west to Mora, New Mexico, where he joined the firm of Lowenstein and Strauss, a grocery and dry-goods store run by German Jews from a family he knew in Kriegshaber. By then hundreds of German Jews had passed through Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Las Vegas, New Mexico, as well as scores of smaller settlements scattered throughout the American Southwest, bringing with them a credit economy outlawed under Catholic rule for centuries.⁴⁶

Hermann spent twelve years in Mora before moving to Sciota, Illinois, where his brother Jacob had opened a dry-goods store eight years earlier. Here Hermann and Jacob enjoyed the esteemed status of Main Street merchants.

In 1878, on a trip to Philadelphia to replenish supplies, Hermann met his future wife, Veronika Lehmann, behind the counter of a store Hermann visited in the course of business. Hermann and Veronika were married at Congregation Adath Jeshurun, a German Jewish congregation established in Philadelphia in 1858. With a central aisle for weddings, Adath Jeshurun reminded Veronika of the synagogue her family attended in Fürth, where she had received a certificate

of confirmation from Rabbi Isaak Löwi in 1869, a few years before immigrating with her family to America. According to historian Blume, Rabbi Löwi

attended the Yeshiva of Fürth where Meyer Rothschild's sons studied before receiving a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Munich. His head filled with modern ideas, in addition to moving the bimah to make room for a middle aisle like in a church, Rabbi Löwi also had an organ installed which was played on the Jewish Sabbath, much to the consternation of the Orthodox. Löwi wanted his inaugural speech printed in Hebrew; however, Jewish printers turned him down on the grounds that what he had to say was too radical for them to print, like advocating an end to the Chevra Kadisha, the society for the burial of the dead. "They are so old fashioned. Stop it. We don't need them," Löwi declared.⁴⁷

Adath Jeshurun, which did not replace German with English at synagogue services until 1897, had provided Veronika and her family with a sense of continuity unknown in Sciota, the midwestern town to which Veronika moved after her marriage. Her sons Henry (1881–1964) and Leon (1886–1984) were born there. Like other immigrant German Jewish families who went west, opened stores, and raised children, the Obermayers were isolated from an organized Jewish community. As their boys grew older, the parents felt the need to move to a larger population center, where they could live in a Jewish community. That place was Philadelphia, to which the Obermayers moved to in the early 1890s and where, as members of Adath Jeshurun, their sons became bar mitzvahs and confirmands.

Like the vast majority of German Jews in America, Arthur's grandparents inculcated their children with a high regard for the rewards of learning. Joe Sinsheimer's daughter and Arthur's mother Julia (1900–1996) was an honor graduate of Julia Richman High School in New York City. (She went on to Columbia University, where she received a degree in microbiology before becoming a laboratory researcher at Mt. Sinai Hospital.) Arthur's paternal grandparents were no less committed to education. After Hermann died unexpectedly in 1897, Henry left school for work so Leon could go from Central High to the University of Pennsylvania, where he earned a law degree. After graduating he joined the prestigious firm of Mason and Edmunds, soon to become Edmunds and Obermayer.

Leon Obermayer shared with Rabbi Isaak Löwi of Fürth a strong commitment to Jewish philanthropy. In addition to establishing a vocational school to train Jews in Fürth to enter skilled crafts and trades newly opened to them, Rabbi Löwi helped Jews open small businesses by making interest-free loans available to them. Extending his services to gentiles as well as Jews in Philadelphia, Leon championed laws protecting women and children in custody and domestic relations cases. As president of Philadelphia's Board of Education during a time of

much racial tensions, Leon insisted that racial discrimination was wrong and that public education meant opportunity to all. In many ways, Leon continued a tradition started by Rabbi Löwi.⁴⁸

In doing so, Leon played a major role in Jewish communal affairs, serving as president of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun and the American Jewish Historical Society and chairing the building campaign for a new Philadelphia YM/YWHA. Appointed to the board of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), where he received an honorary doctor of Hebrew letters degree in 1954, Leon was a key figure in creating a branch of HUC-JIR in Jerusalem. With his wife Julia, he served on the board of the Albert Einstein Medical Center in Philadelphia and amassed a Judaica collection now on permanent exhibition at Congregation Rodeph Shalom in Philadelphia.

Julia and Leon met at a Jewish resort in Summit Springs, Maine, in the summer of 1921. Leon was thirty five; Julia twenty one. They were married two years later by a rabbi at the Plaza Hotel in New York City. Despite Prohibition, Joe Sinsheimer managed somehow to provide champagne for the occasion.

Julia and Leon's children—Herman (1924–), known as Obe, Helen Obermayer Sellers (1927–1995), and Arthur (1931–)—have made a concerted effort to live up to the educational and ethical standards of those who came before them, as have Obe's wife, the former Betty Ann Levy, who served as president of Congregation Rodef Shalom, the largest synagogue in Virginia; and Arthur's wife, the former Judith Hirschfeld, who earned a doctorate in mathematics from Harvard and has taught at Wellesley. Obe, a graduate of Dartmouth, enjoyed a successful career in journalism as a public advocate and ombudsman. In 1969, as publisher of Arlington's *Northern Virginia Sun*, Obe portrayed the My Lai massacre as "symptomatic of the way in which good intentions and worthwhile ends can falsely justify employing heinous means."⁴⁹ After selling the *Sun* in 1988, Obe joined the publication committee of *Commentary Magazine*, was the finance chair of the *Washington Journalism Review*, served on the national board of governors of the American Jewish Committee, and became a member of the national board of the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs.

"What did I do and what impact did I have on others and the society in which I lived?" Arthur Obermayer asked in 1992.⁵⁰ A graduate of Swarthmore College, Arthur was awarded a doctorate in chemistry from MIT in 1956 and subsequently became president and principal shareholder of Moleculon Research Corporation, a developer of chemical, polymer, and pharmaceutical products and innovator of laboratory equipment for government and industry. As a supporter of a more just, equitable, and creative society,⁵¹ Arthur supported Father Robert Drinan, a Jesuit priest, for Congress (he won five times) and drafted George McGovern's positions on science and technology-related issues during McGovern's campaign for the presidency.⁵²



Exhibit pieces at Creglingen Jewish Museum. At top is the 1769 wimpel (personalized Torah binder) of Raphael Blumenfeld which was made from his brit milah swaddling clothes and then used to bind the Torah at his bar mitzvah.

(Courtesy Arthur Obermayer)

After selling Moleculon, Arthur encouraged the emergence of private enterprise in Russia by producing programs for Russian television, explaining the workings of free enterprise and market economics. Writes Michael Feldberg:

In 1990, Arthur became a board member of The New Israel Fund to support grassroots activities advancing democratic and pluralistic values in Israel. Arthur [also] created the Obermayer Foundation which, in conjunction with the Berlin Parliament, presents annual awards to individual Germans who have made major contributions to the preservation of the history of Germany's Jewish communities. In addition, Arthur established a Jewish Museum in Creglingen to memorialize the lives of the Jews who lived there by remembering local events that shaped their lives. In appreciation for his activities in 2007 the Federal Republic of Germany awarded Arthur the Bundesverdienstkreuz (Federal Order of Merit), the nation's highest award.⁵³

Like Leon and Julia and so many of their parents' generation, Obe and Arthur have responded to American emancipation by leading exemplary lives in which being Jewish, making a living, serving the public, and a commitment to Jewish communal affairs and philanthropy reinforce each other to the point of being inexorably intertwined.

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Notes

¹“Our Crowd,” a self-referential term used by New York’s German Jewish elite in the early twentieth century, was popularized by Stephen Birmingham’s anecdotal history of the same name, published in 1967.

²As a longtime admirer of Naomi W. Cohen’s work, especially about German Jews in America, it is a great privilege to have been asked to teach the innovative course in American Jewish history that she introduced at Hunter College and to have been invited to contribute to this special issue in her honor—an honor she so richly deserves.

³The Obermayer family archive, currently kept in Arthur Obermayer’s home in West Newton, Massachusetts, includes the findings of four dedicated German regional historians—Claudia Heuwinkel, who combed through three centuries of municipal, regional, and congregational documentation to produce a detailed record of the activities of Arthur’s Creglingen and Archshofen forebears; Gisela Blume, a walking encyclopedia of Fürth’s Jewish past, especially with regard to Obermayer patriarch Israel Lichtenstädter; Franz Josef Merkl, a military historian with an intimate knowledge of the Obermayer family; and Anke Joisten-Pruschke, whose familiarity with municipal, judicial, and church records in Stuttgart, Augsburg, and Kriegshaber proved invaluable in piecing together the history of Arthur’s family. I met and talked at length with all four in Germany and am deeply indebted to them for what they told me. Special thanks also to Uwe Krieg of Berlin for his meticulous reading of the text.

⁴The rights of Arthur’s South German ancestors were predicated on letters of protection issued by the emperor, a prince of the church, a local magistrate, or a delegate thereof. To legitimize the practice, Emperor Friedrich Barbarossa (1152–1190) in 1179 declared Jews in South Germany a part of his “imperial fisc” and as such, under his protection. In 1236, Emperor Friedrich II issued an order granting Jews in the empire “protection on country roads and lanes, freedom of movement of residence, and exemption from special financial duties to rulers and towns,” thus establishing an important precedent. Nachum T. Gidal, *Jews in Germany from Roman Times to the Weimar Republic* (Cologne: Konemann Verlagsgesellschaft, 1998), 46.

The Holy Roman Emperor, being relatively tolerant of Jews in an otherwise hostile Christian environment, came to enjoy near-absolute power over them: “You are ours in body and possession,” Louis IV (known as Louis the Bavarian), Holy Roman Emperor from 1328 to 1347, said to a group of Jewish moneylenders defrauded on their property claims: “We may make, do and deal with you as it pleases us.” R. von Stillfried and T. Marcker, eds., *Monumenta Zolleriana* 3 (Berlin, 1857), 10.

German bishops eager to develop the economies of the domains under their authority might also issue letters of protection. So it was in 1084 when Bishop Rüdiger, governor of Speyer, granted Jews “full permission to change gold and silver, to buy and sell anything they pleased.” To protect them from “the insolence of the populace,” Bishop Rüdiger provided Jews with housing “outside the community and habitation of other citizens.” Bishop Rüdiger’s edict was affirmed by Holy Roman Emperor Heinrich IV in 1090. Alfred Hilgard, *Urkunden Zur Geschichte der Stadt Speyer* (Strasburg, 1885), 11–12.

⁵Obermayer family archive.

⁶Interview with Gisela Blume, 13 July 2002.

⁷Gordon A. Craig, *The Germans* (New York: Meridian, 1991), 126.

⁸I owe special thanks to Bob Seltzer for his enormously helpful responses to this paper in its various manifestations.

⁹George the Pious was the first of his line to grant a Jew, Joseph of Bibern, and his family the right to live in Creglingen as buyers and sellers of goods for an annual fee of three gulden. Werner J. Heymann, *Kleeblatt und Davidstern* (Emskirchen: Verlag Maria Muemmler, 1990), 3ff.

¹⁰Obermayer family archive.

¹¹In 1616, two years before Simson of Reinsbronn's arrival, Margrave Joachim Ernest issued his first letter of protection to a Jew.

¹²In 1609, Simon Marius (born Mayr) discovered the moons of Jupiter from a makeshift observatory in an Ansbach castle tower. A century later Princess Caroline, the future Queen of England, met with Leibniz in the same castle while he was formulating his ideas on Newton in the famous Leibniz-Clarke correspondence.

¹³See Guenther Schumann, *Die Markgrafen von Brandenburg-Ansbach* (Ansbach: Historischer Verein für Mittelfranken, 1980).

¹⁴Obermayer family archive.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Hirsch Jacob did not suffer alone. A cousin, Abraham Lazar, had no easy time with his daughter, Michla. Since 1797, Michla suffered attacks of "malice and nymphomania... and hit her parents and her sister, and insulted the neighbors to such an extent that she had to be locked up in a small room in Badgasse 3." Interview with Claudia Heuwinkel, 8 June 2004.

²⁰Obermayer family archive.

²¹Ibid.

²²Interview with Claudia Heuwinkel, 8 June 2004.

²³Michael A. Meyer, *German-Jewish History in Modern Times, Vol. 2: Emancipation and Acculturation, 1760–1871* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 71.

²⁴Interview with Franz Josef Merkl, 20 July 2002.

²⁵"Today, people are sensitive to exact spellings of names, but there was a great deal of variation in the spelling of my ancestors' names. This was so because many people were illiterate, Jewish records in Hebrew were converted phonetically into German, and standardized spelling in German was not yet prevalent. Thus, Obermayer could also be spelled Obermeyer, Obermyer, Obermaier, Obermair or Obermayr. My great-great-grandfather, Isaac Obermayer, and other Isaacs who preceded him, had their names spelled Isak, Isaak, Isaac, Eysig, Hitzig, and Yitsig." Interview with Arthur Obermayer, 24 August 2003.

²⁶Interview with Anke Joiston-Pruschke, 20 July 2002.

²⁷Raphael Straus, *Regensburg and Augsburg* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1939), 230 ff.

²⁸Interview with Anke Joiston-Pruschke, 20 July 2002.

²⁹Obermayer family archive.

³⁰"Because the number of Jewish households in Augsburg was a fixed figure, Carl had to wait, like anyone else, for another family to move away, die out or convert before he could establish a domicile of his own." Interview with Anke Joiston-Pruschke, 20 July 2002.

³¹"A colonel in the army, Carl attained the highest military rank of any Jew in Germany. Given the title 'von Obermayer' for diplomatic service to the Bavarian government, Carl was knighted by the king of Württemberg in 1869, only because the king of Bavaria refused to on account of

Carl's scandalous personal life. Carl received as many as ten special medals from the Ottoman Empire in addition to the highest Prussian award presented to a non-Prussian. He wrote three books about the military and served for many years as American consul in Augsburg." Interview with Franz Josef Merkl, 20 July 2002.

^{32c}Carl's family married into other prominent families, both Jewish and gentile. One sister, Henriette, married Simon von Oppenheim, head of the Cologne banking firm of that name. Another sister, Emilie, married Heinrich Flersheim, a Frankfurt banker. A daughter, Emilie, married Baron Stefan Kevotshev, Constantinople's Austro-Hungarian consul; another daughter, Henriette, married Baron Louis Gustave Dreyfus, an art collector after whom a room in the Louvre is named; a third daughter married Count Hierschel-Minerbi, a title conferred on him by Pope Pius IX." Interview with Franz Josef Merkl, 20 July 2002.

³³For the life of Carl Schurz and the failure of liberal revolutions in midcentury Germany, see Hans L. Trefousse, *Carl Schurz: A Biography* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1982).

³⁴Marvin Lowenthal, *The Jews of Germany: A Story of Sixteen Centuries* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1936), 136.

³⁵Michael A. Meyer, ed., *German-Jewish History in Modern Times, Volume 1: Tradition and Enlightenment, 1600–1780* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 98.

³⁶Interview with Gisela Blume, 13 July 2002. Fluent in Hebrew, a convert to Judaism, and the source of much invaluable information on the Jews of Fürth, Blume has spent the better part of her life documenting and preserving their history.

³⁷See Hugo Barbeck, *Geschichte der Juden in Nuremberg and Fürth* (Nuremberg: Friedrich Heerdegen, 1878).

^{38c}Prague in 1800, with 8,500 or 10.6 percent of the city's total population, housed the largest Jewish community in German-speaking Europe numerically but not proportionately. Next came Hamburg with 6,300 Jews constituting 6 percent of the population, Berlin with 3,300 or 2 percent, and Frankfurt, with 3,000 or 7.5 percent. Fürth's 2,400 Jews by contrast made up 15 percent of Fürth's population which rose to 17.6 percent or 3,000 Jews in 1848. Even as late as 1935, 50 percent of the wholesalers, 14.5 percent of the retailers and 23.1 percent of the manufacturers in Fürth were Jewish." Interview with Gisela Blume, 13 July, 2002.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Obermayer family archive.

⁴¹Interview with Gisela Blume, 13 July 2002.

^{42c}"During the Hitler period, Fürth was no better than any other Franconian city. During the so-called 'Kristallnacht' the entire Schulhof complex was burned down. Jewish shops along Schwabacher Strasse were destroyed and looted. SA-men broke into the Jewish hospital. Jews were forced together in the main place of the city. The men were taken to the Berlotzheimer Library, established by a Jewish philanthropist. There they were tortured. Their beards were cut off. One person was killed, one committed suicide.

"On November 29, 1941, the first deportation of Jews from Fürth took place. Their destination along with others from Franconia was the death camps of Latvia. Among the deportees of March 24, 1942 to Izbica in Poland were the Jewish orphans from the building on Julienstrasse. The head of the orphanage Dr. Ismar Halleemann (after whom Julienstrasse was renamed) and his wife Clara voluntarily accompanied their charges to this place of no return. The last rabbi of Fürth, Dr. Siegfried Behrens, also fell victim to this transport. In the Shoah at least 886 Jews from Fürth were killed. After the liberation 40 survivors returned. Today the synagogue within the orphanage building is home to the only active congregation in Fürth." Interview with Gisela Blume, 13 July 2002.

⁴³For the role of German-Jewish merchants as agents of commercial progress in nineteenth century America, see Hasia R. Diner, *A Time For Gathering: The Second Migration 1820–1880* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

⁴⁴Joe was also an officer and trustee of New York's West End Synagogue, as well as treasurer for many years of the King Solomon Masonic Lodge No. 279. Not much is known about the life of Joe's wife Helmina Oberndoerfer (1869–1916) other than that she was born in Archshofen to Samuel and Bertha Oppenheimer Oberndoerfer and at sixteen, to avoid an arranged marriage, left for New York to live with a relative before moving into a Jewish-run boardinghouse. In 1893 Helmina and Joe married. (Helmina may have known Joe before she came to New York as there were a number of inter-family connections.) After eight miscarriages and the death of a two-year-old, Julia was born in 1900.

⁴⁵Kenneth Libo and Michael Feldberg, *The Obermayers: A History of a Jewish Family in Germany and America* (Newton, MA: Obermayer Foundation, Inc., 2009), 66–67.

⁴⁶See William J. Parish, *The Charles Ilfeld Company: The Study of the Rise and Decline of Mercantile Capitalism in New Mexico* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961).

⁴⁷“Dr Löwi met regularly with a Protestant minister and a Catholic priest to discuss what was important for the city from each of their points of view. They were very close to each other, very friendly. So one day the priest said, ‘Oh, Dr. Löwi, you are such a wonderful man, such a modern man. And you understand so much, only you still keep kosher. I wonder when you will finally eat pork as we do.’ ‘I’ll tell you, my friend,’ Dr. Löwi answered. ‘The day of your marriage.’” Interview with Gisela Blume, 13 July 2002.

⁴⁸Libo and Feldberg, 97–98.

⁴⁹Ibid., 117.

⁵⁰Ibid., 123.

⁵¹Ibid., 127–128.

⁵²Ibid., 129.

⁵³Ibid., 136.