

NESACS Member Interviews

Dr. Arthur Obermayer



Dr. Arthur Obermayer: 2009 Arno Heyn Book Prize Award Winner

“I’m not a typical chemist,” said Dr. Arthur Obermayer, the recipient of this year’s Arno Heyn Book Award. In truth, Dr. Obermayer’s far-ranging interests and activities are atypical of most people, both chemists and nonchemists. The Arno Heyn award will be presented to Dr. Obermayer at the May NESACS meeting, in recognition of Dr. Obermayer’s significant contributions to NESACS publications.

“I knew Arno for a number of years, and I am very pleased to be recognized with this award,” Dr. Obermayer said.

Website

Thanks to Dr. Obermayer’s initiative, NESACS now maintains a detailed website, www.nesacs.org, in collaboration with web consultant Roy Hagen, which provides details of upcoming NESACS events. Dr. Obermayer organized the initial committee that established the website in the mid-1990s. The website is locally controlled by NESACS, independent of the national ACS. This local control allows NESACS to quickly update the website without requiring a lengthy approval process.

The key question with the website, according to Dr. Obermayer, is who the target audience is. In his view, it should be mainly, but not exclusively, for ACS members. Examples of topics that may be of interest to the general public include the control

of air and water pollution, and the National Emerging Infectious Diseases Laboratories (NEIDL), which is affiliated with Boston University.

“Some people might say that you shouldn’t get into it (the discussion of NEIDL), because it’s political,” said Dr. Obermayer. “but we are the right people to provide objective technical information without taking sides.”

Esselen Award

The establishment of the Gustavus J. Esselen Award for Chemistry in the Public Interest was described by Dr. Obermayer as “my most important contribution to the ACS.” This year the award was presented at the April NESACS meeting to Professor Stephen L. Buchwald of MIT. Dr. Obermayer was chair of the Board of Trustees when the award was established in memory of Gustavus Esselen, who was a synthetic organic chemist. Instead of establishing an award in synthetic organic chemistry, “I convinced Dr. Esselen’s son to establish an award for chemistry in the public interest,” explained Dr. Obermayer.

“At the time, and today as well, chemistry and chemicals can get a bad name,” Dr. Obermayer said. “This award should be for someone where the public says, ‘This is great!’” In his current role on the Esselen Award committee, Dr. Obermayer evaluates potential candidates’ research, both in terms of scientific merit and in the degree of public exposure they have received. “The chemistry really should be described in terms of its importance to the public,” said Dr. Obermayer.

U.S. Government Policy

The Small Business Innovation Research program (SBIR) was established by Congress in 1976 to encourage the development of small, high-tech businesses. Dr. Obermayer played a major role in the development and passage of this legislation. “I went to testify many times before Congress about this program and Ted Kennedy called it my program,” Dr. Obermayer is still asked for advice on various modifications to the program, such as a recent discussion of whether to allow venture capital-funded businesses to be eligible for the SBIR program.

Israel-Palestine Conflict

“The problem with people in general is that they tend to associate with people whose views are like theirs,” Dr. Obermayer said in reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Middle East. “People need to learn more.” As part of Dr. Obermayer’s efforts to educate people on this topic, he serves on the Advisory Board of J Street, an organization that advocates a two-state solution to the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict. J Street believes that through diplomatic, non-military means, peace in the Middle East can be achieved.

“In 1989, I went to visit Israel, and I felt that peace could be achieved,” said Dr. Obermayer. “I don’t give up easily. I still believe peace is possible.

“Very often in the world, and I think it’s true here too, it is the leaders who are seeking power, and don’t want to compromise – and it’s the people who suffer,” Dr. Obermayer said.

German Activities

Yet another arena in which Dr. Obermayer is heavily involved is in providing awards to non-Jewish Germans who have made substantial contributions to preserving Jewish history and culture in their own local communities. The purpose of these awards is threefold: (1) to recognize the recipients and the importance of their work; (2) for other Germans to realize that these people are doing important things; and (3) so that the rest of the world will learn that Germans have really done a commendable job in dealing with their country’s past.

For example, Dr. Obermayer visited the city of Fuerth, Germany, to try to find where his ancestors were buried. He was foiled in his initial attempts, because at the time of his visit all of the tombstones in the cemetery had been piled in a corner. A woman in Fuerth then spent three years reconstructing the cemetery and restoring the tombstones to their proper places, through a combination of photographs, plot plans, and genealogical work. After completing this daunting task, the woman was able to successfully trace Dr. Obermayer’s ancestors in Fuerth to the early 1700s.

Conclusions

Interested readers can read a detailed account of the activities and history of the extended Obermayer family in a book that was published, “The Obermayers: A History of a Jewish Family in Germany and America, 1618-2001,” by Kenneth Libo and Michael Feldberg. They can also check the Obermayer family website at <http://www.obermayer.us/>.

“In conclusion, I’m not really sure how any of these activities relate to chemistry,” Dr. Obermayer said. “But I have a lot of interests, and I’ve been involved in a lot of significant things

Interview by Mindy Levine Ph.D.