

Students from Stella K. Abraham Yeshiva High School, Nassau County, NY, participate in the Cemetery Clean-Up Project at Silver Lake Cemetery on Staten Island.



THE LIFE OF THE Hebrew Free Burial Association

By Barbara Finkelstein

Annie Glickman, an aspiring actress from Canada, spent her last day on earth in a Manhattan Lying-In Hospital. She was eighteen years old, case number 1269, when she was transported on October 28, 1904, by one horse-drawn car to the Staten Island Ferry and then by another to Victory Boulevard and buried in Silver Lake Cemetery.

For more than a century, Annie has shared the same ground with Bertha Quitman, a nineteen-year-old Austrian who was murdered at the Morton House Saloon in Schenectady, and with William Neufeld, a twenty-seven-year old suicide whose last address was Sing-Sing Prison. Most of the indigents lowered into graves at Silver Lake, and at

Mt. Richmond Cemetery six miles south, lived less sensational lives as tailors, peddlers, rag-pickers, sewing machine operators, servants, cigar-rollers and scores of other low-wage jobs performed by semi-skilled European immigrants. They were frequently in their twenties and thirties, although many in the early twentieth century were infants who died with their mothers in childbirth, or several months later from intestinal intoxication, a bacterial infection resulting from malnutrition. Whatever their place of birth or death, they all had two things in common: their poverty and their life as Jews.

It was in death, however, where poor Jews – everyone from the devout to the impious – ran the risk of losing their connection to Jewish communal life.

By 1910, many of the Jews who resided in Manhattan's 2,500 six-story slum walk-ups could not afford the cost of a funeral or grave. Thousands each year ran the risk of burial on Hart Island, a potter's field in the easternmost part of the Bronx, where, according to a Wikipedia entry, the tenants received neither graveside ceremony nor marker: "Babies are placed in coffins of various sizes, and are stacked five coffins high and usually twenty coffins across. Adults are placed in larger pine boxes priced according to size, and are stacked three coffins high and two coffins across." Leo Birinski, a Jewish screenwriter who died in 1951, can be located only by his cemetery address: Plot 45, Section 2, Number 14.

Little is known about Barnett Freedman, a Jew from Europe, who

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organized the Chebra Agudas Achim Chesed Shel Emeth – the Society of the Brotherhood of True Charity – in 1889 along with eight other men. Nina Freedman, his great-granddaughter, speculates that he owned a men’s clothing store, which he passed down to her grandfather. “We don’t think he was a wealthy man,” she says. “He was sensitive to the poverty of the recent Jewish immigrants and established a free burial society because he believed that no Jew should be alone in death.”

What is certain is that Freedman and his cofounders – Messrs. Michilitsky, Bergman, Silva and five others – took the name of their burial society from the passage in Genesis in which Jacob says to Joseph, “[D]o kindness and truth with me – please do not bury me in Egypt. For I will lie down with my fathers and you shall transport me out of Egypt and bury me in their tomb.” V’asiti imadi chesed v’emet. . .

In an era before the Holocaust, and before the establishment of Israel, Freedman had retained enough of his faith to believe in the distinctness of the Jewish nation – and in the right of every Jew, regardless of social condition, to a dignified Jewish burial among his own people. His commitment to his project, known since 1965 as the Hebrew Free

Burial Association, was so strong that three of his great-granddaughters continue to provide philanthropic support through the Silverweed Foundation.

Today the Hebrew Free Burial Association (HFBA) is housed on West Thirty-fifth Street in Manhattan, NY. It shares a building with Creative Computing, New York Marketing Agency and Ember Media – enterprises built on a decidedly twenty-first century digital economy. By comparison, the work of HFBA has remained stubbornly unchanged. For 120 years, HFBA has buried Jews without the finances or family to pay for a commercial funeral. Among the 60,000 recipients of the organization’s largesse:

- Daniel Grossman, age 8. Died: July 2, 1902. Last residence: Riverside Hospital. Occupation: Cleaner.
- Annie Goodman, age 21. Died: September 19, 1902. Last residence: Morris Plains Insane Asylum. Occupation: Candymaker.
- The gangrenous leg of Max Bandofsky, age 63. Burial: March 17, 1927. The body parts of poor New Yorkers are buried on Hart Island in unmarked graves.
- Twenty-three burn victims of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, including the sisters Sarah and Ida Brodsky, ages 21 and 16, respectively.

Sarah’s funeral arrangements were alleged to have been made by her fiancé.

- Hundreds of Holocaust survivors, including Eva Schwartzman,* a watchmaker from Lodz who jumped from her sixth-floor Bronx window in 1946.
- 2,200 Jews to date from the former Soviet Union, such as 79-year-old Mikhail Landau,* a Medicaid recipient, who was killed in a hit-and-run accident.
- Jews from Ukraine who came to the United States to seek medical treatment after the 1986 nuclear accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant.

As in its early days, the organization is overseen by a voluntary board of directors. Many of the fourteen members work as real estate owners, attorneys, financial services professionals, social workers and businessmen – a testament to the complexity of running HFBA’s not-for-profit cemeteries in a real estate-hungry city.

Indeed, the board’s chief mission is to plan strategically for the future of HFBA: What kind of investments will ensure financial stability – especially today when once-reliable sources of funding have dried up? How much fundraising work should be directed at philanthropic institutions and at indi-



The Hebrew inscription: “Here lies Rivka, daughter of Rav Simcha and Rachel.”

viduals? How can joint efforts ease the financial strain on like organizations? What kind of outreach should be done with the Russian Jewish community?

Regular meetings seek to ensure that HFBA not go the way of the *landsmanschaften* – immigrant Jewish benevolent societies that drew their membership from Eastern European cities and *shetlekh*. The Rohatyn *landsmanschaft*, for example, established in 1894, once provided cemetery plots to landsleit at group rates. Today its closure is a bit certain – and so is the fate of the group's two cemeteries in Queens: When the group disbands, it must deed the plots back to the cemetery or to the families that plan on using them. Otherwise, according to New York State law, they must remain empty. In any case, with no *landsmanschaft* in existence, who will keep the Rohatyn burial plot safe from weeds, rodents and vandals?

"The *landsmanschaften* may have seemed like a good idea at the time," says HFBA executive director Amy Koplow. "But once they fold, nobody wants to deal with their burial plots."

The problem isn't academic. Early in the twentieth century, a number of *landsmanschaften* purchased plots in HFBA's Silver Lake Cemetery. With virtually nobody left alive to tend the graves, the burden – financial and topographical – has fallen to HFBA.

For HFBA, taking responsibility for Silver Lake actually creates a best-case scenario. By contrast, a legal case involving a New York synagogue and a Jewish cemetery stems from the fallout related to defunct *landsmanschaften*.

The temperature on Wednesday,



Rabbi Shmuel Plafker recites *tehillim* (Psalms) over a newly departed soul.

but by the mid-twentieth century in the United States, secular skepticism about ritual practice made it a rarity. Thanks largely to the efforts of Rabbi Elchonon Zohn, director, Vaad Harabonim of Queens Chevra Kadisha, and of former board president Gerald Feldhamer, *tahara* is done in all HFBA funeral preparations today.

"If performed appropriately, *tahara* strengthens the appreciation of life for the living," Rabbi Zohn says. "Just as a seed in the ground regenerates a plant, *tahara* prepares the human soul for its resurrection."

Among the day's mourners was a handful of secular Jewish family members as well as several African-American and Caribbean students whom Paulette Dollinger had once counseled. They huddled in a knot at the foot of the grave and listened to Rabbi Shmuel Plafker, the cemetery chaplain, deliver a eulogy. Although he did not know the deceased, Rabbi Plafker spoke respectfully of the impact that Ms. Dollinger had had on her friends and students.

"The word we use for 'funeral' is *levaya*," Rabbi Plafker said. "It is Hebrew for 'accompany,' because we are accompanying Paulette's soul on her journey to the next world."

Hardly another man – even another rabbi – could have spoken more deeply, and more simply, about the death of an ordinary human being. Rabbi Plafker did not purport to understand why a woman as beloved as Ms. Dollinger should suffer through a long, painful illness and die at the height of her career. He did not try to second-guess the "intentions of the Al-Mighty G-d."

February 4, 2009 clocked in at 17°F. It snowed the day before and the ground at HFBA's Mt. Richmond Cemetery was so hard that the scoop on the earth-moving machine broke. Yosi Shalem, the 69-year-old cemetery supervisor and former Golani brigadier, had worked in the snow with his team of Mexican gravediggers to open the grave in time for the funeral of Paulette Dollinger, a 53-year-old guidance counselor, who died of cancer late Monday night.

By the time the Dollinger mourners had assembled at the cemetery chapel, HFBA's office staff had dealt with all the mundanities, as well as halachic, or religious, obligations associated with returning a human being to the earth. The coffin had been ordered, the plot reserved, the gravediggers called to action, the cemetery rabbi notified. An additional task – *tahara* – had been performed: The HFBA's Chevra Kadisha, or "sacred society," had washed the body and dressed it in the ritual twelve-piece shroud. The practice stems from the belief that every Jew must be ready to stand before G-d in a state of physical cleanliness and in the same kind of clothing worn by the Biblical high priest.

In Europe, the *tahara* had been an integral part of every religious funeral,

He spoke only about the actions that the mourners themselves could take as a sign of their own humanity toward a woman they had loved.

"We have a tradition of asking forgiveness of the deceased," he said. "If you want to ask forgiveness, you may now do it silently."

As Rabbi Plafker recited the Twenty-Third Psalm in Hebrew, the gravediggers lowered the coffin into the ground. The mourners bowed their heads. A young African-American woman wept.

Gregory Zsidisin, Ms. Dollinger's husband, handed the rabbi two small packages encased in plastic wrap. These contained some memorabilia that the couple wished to be included in the grave. Rabbi Plafker permitted their inclusion as long as they were not inside the coffin itself.

"We have to begin to cover Paulette," the rabbi said. "This is the last act of kindness you can do for somebody."

Rabbi Plafker demonstrated the

"I will never forget the first burial I saw here," he said. "It was for a poor, older woman. Nobody came."

proper way to shovel dirt onto the coffin. He pulled on a second pair of gloves, held the shovel backwards, lifted a small amount of dirt onto the flat side and dropped it into the grave. Several mourners, including Ms. Dollinger's husband and sister, followed the rabbi's lead. "This is the Jewish way of saying that we so much don't want to be doing this," he said.


After the service, Yosi Shalem, the cemetery supervisor, observed that Ms. Dollinger's funeral may have been sad, but it was not tragic. "I will never forget

the first burial I saw here," he said. "It was for a poor, older woman. Nobody came."

One-third of HFBA funerals are like the first one Yosi Shalem experienced: The deceased spent their last years alone in a nursing home, in an apartment with a home health aide or "known to Welfare as #OAA 1481864-1." If not for the intervention of the Hebrew Free Burial Association, they might have been buried on Hart Island, or, in a Jewish worst-case scenario, cremated.

"It's a big city," says HFBA executive director Koplow. "The reality is that we have to get our name out to dozens of hospitals, nursing homes and home health aide organizations. We want to avoid a terrible situation that we see sometimes in nursing homes. They don't have morgues, and they have to act fast to remove a body. We have recovered some bodies just before their interment at Hart Island."

Ms. Koplow notes that HFBA of-



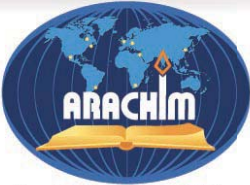
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fers individuals and families low-cost, “pre-need” burial plans to safeguard against the possibility of a Jew becoming the ward of a New York City public administrator, and ending up in a potter’s field.

“When a person dies poor and alone in New York City, a public administrator steps in to assess the individual’s estate,” Koplow says. “If the deceased has no money, the PA can send him to Hart Island. In some cases, a friend or relative will alert us to this situation. That’s when our office goes into action.”

In recent years, HFBA has instituted several programs to ensure that indigent Jews – recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union, ancestors of Jewish celebrities or high-profile victims of man-made disasters – receive the same burial rites and remembrances as Jews with more effective safety nets. Among these:

- Leave Your Mark Campaign. Investment banker and former HFBA board president Gerald Feldhamer initiated a project in 1984 to place markers on 20,000 unmarked graves. Some markers pay silent homage to the fifty children who died at the scandal-ridden Willowbrook State School in the 1950s and 1960s. Donors still contribute \$150 to cover the cost of a single stone marker.
- Perpetual Care Campaign. A donation of \$600 will cover perpetual care expenses for an individual grave.
- Cemetery Clean-Up Project. Schools and other organizations volunteer nothing more than their time to clear debris, mostly from the Silver Lake property.

The primary campaign, however, remains simple: To forestall the burial of Jews in anonymous potter’s fields – and prevent their use as medical school cadavers. The latter case, in fact, nearly came to pass for Harold Glucksman,* an eighty-six year old man who died April 28, 2001.

“Mr. Glucksman was mentally, hearing and speech-impaired,” says HFBA funeral coordinator and office manager Rhonda Stein. “He ended up in an institution in Connecticut that ultimately closed down and sent him to

the Brookhaven Beach Health-Related Facilities in Queens.”

The first snafu occurred when Mr. Glucksman’s death was not reported to the Queens public administrator.

“But one day we get a call from the PA, who had learned about Mr. Glucksman’s death,” says Ms. Stein. “He tells us that the man had not yet been buried. We were supposed to track him down and bury him.”

After checking with Brookhaven and several morgues, Ms. Stein and members of the HFBA office staff finally learned that Mr. Glucksman had been picked up by a funeral home with a reputation for “harvesting” unclaimed corpses for medical school autopsies.

“I reamed out the funeral home,” says Ms. Stein. “I said, ‘This is a man of the Jewish faith! I have permission to bury him. You do not have permission to experiment on him.’ Fortunately, nothing had been done to Mr. Glucksman. We were able to bury him in one

piece.”

On July 26, 2001 – three months after Harold Glucksman’s death – Rabbi Shmuel Plafker presided over the burial at Mt. Richmond Cemetery. Nobody came.

Eva Schwartzman, Mikhael Landau and Harold Glucksman are fictitious names.

*Barbara Finkelstein
is the author of Summer Long-a-Coming,
a novel (Harper and Row).*

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