

Final Mitzva

A New York cemetery offers dignity for the poor

STORY AND PHOTOS BY PAUL C. MARGOLIS



All cemeteries are sad places, but the Hebrew Free Burial Association's (HFBA) cemetery on Staten Island in New York is an especially poignant one.

Buried here in the slightly overgrown Mt. Richmond Cemetery are more than 30,000 Jews who had no loved ones or whose families were too poor to pay for a

Jewish burial. This largest free cemetery in the Diaspora is the final resting place for those Jews who didn't "make it" in America.

Walking through the graves is a tour of the dark side of the Jewish experience in the United States. Staring out from photographs mounted on weather-worn headstones are young men from the early decades of this century, fathers, sons and brothers whose lives were likely cut short by overwork and disease. (The use of photographs is forbidden today.) There are children carried off by ailments long since eradicated by better sanitation and modern medicine. Inscriptions like "Daddy's beloved little girl" adorn small headstones, some with lambs carved on them. Mothers who died in childbirth in their 20s and 30s are buried under stones with inscriptions reading, "Gone but not forgotten." One area holds the remains of many of the young women who perished in the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911.

Grass is just beginning to grow on newly filled graves, the final resting place of recent Russian immigrants, AIDS victims, homeless, suicides, addicts, mentally ill and elderly who have outlived family and friends. The plagues of poverty, disease and abandonment have not been eradicated since the HFBA was chartered late last century.

The HFBA was founded in 1888 to meet the needs of Jewish immigrants flooding into New

York. By 1909, the first HFBA cemetery, the Silver Lake Cemetery on Staten Island, was filled to capacity and the seven-acre Mt. Richmond Cemetery was opened. Today, the HFBA buries some 400 Jews a year, 50 percent of whom are immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

According to religious law, every Jew must be given a dignified burial which includes *tahara* (the ritual cleaning and purification of the body), a cloth shroud, a plain coffin and interment in a cemetery with fellow Jews. Burial in a potter's field or cremation are anathema to Jewish law and tradition.

Rabbi Shmuel Plafker, rabbi of the HFBA, makes sure that New York's indigent Jews receive a proper burial. Referrals come to the HFBA office from the police, the morgue, neighbors of the deceased, nursing homes, rabbis and family members.

A thin, clean-shaven Orthodox rabbi, Plafker presides over an ad hoc congregation of mourners and departed souls. In addition to the usual rabbinical accoutrements of a kippa and prayerbook, Plafker has unique equipment specific to his job: a shovel, a cache of booklets with the Kaddish in English, Hebrew and Russian, and foul-weather gear for the rain of spring or snow of winter.

Last winter, during the long stretch of sub-freezing weather, the rabbi had at least one burial every day. In order to keep the ground from freezing too hard to dig graves, the plots were covered with a thick blanket of straw. Plafker says that while other Jewish cemeteries couldn't function because of the extreme cold, Mt. Richmond was always able to perform burials.

The year 1993 set a record for burials, the rabbi says, with 450 in all. He explains the large number by an increase in the immigration of elderly and ailing immigrants from the former Soviet Union, and by a downturn in New York's economy which made it impossible for many families to afford a private burial.

The rabbi spends much of his time ministering to the needs of the mourners. "I try to give them a feeling for Jewish tradition in the few minutes that I have with the families," he says. "In many ways, I feel that my job is outreach to those

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Jews who've never had any Jewish education."

Just as the rabbi must explain the restrictions of Jewish burial traditions to mourners who might want flowers or music, he diplomatically tells Russian immigrants with little knowledge of Jewish tradition that the ashes of their cremated relatives from Russia must be buried in a special part of the cemetery. Though Judaism prohibits cremation, newly arrived Russians have received an unusual dispensation permitting them to bury these ashes with full Jewish rites in one corner of the cemetery. However, those individuals who are cremated in this country may not be buried in the Mt. Richmond Cemetery.

At the end of each service, the rabbi encourages mourners to participate in the Jewish tradition of personally shoveling earth into the grave. When he is alone, or if the mourners are too few or too feeble, Plafker covers the top of the coffin with earth and the backhoe fills in the rest. A temporary aluminum and plastic marker is placed on the grave until the family decides on a permanent monument. Often the family is too poor to afford a permanent monument or there is no family to erect one. More than half of the graves in the cemetery are unmarked.

The rabbi finds the saddest burials those which have no mourners. Only Plafker and the backhoe operator attend these "unaccompanied" burials which comprise 40 percent of the HFBA's work. "That's the most terrible thing to me," the rabbi says. "Imagine people without anyone to mourn for them. Terrible."

Unfortunately, sometimes people who do have living relatives are buried with no one at their funerals. The rabbi recalls estranged children who will make burial arrangements, but won't attend the funeral. "I'm sorry to say that I've had relatives tell me: 'I don't give a damn where you bury him,'" Plafker says.

For the most part, however, Plafker finds that families are very grateful to him and to the HFBA for making a traditional Jewish burial available to their loved ones at little or no cost.

The R. family is typical. Dr. R. was a physician in his native Romania and, later, in Israel, but had not yet been certified to practice in this country when his wife died after a long illness. The family — the doctor, his wife and four children — had subsisted on savings and support from relatives but could not afford a private burial.

The family's rabbi referred them to the HFBA and a burial was arranged for the following day.

Unfortunately, the HFBA cannot afford to per-

form all burials free of charge. The expenses would bankrupt the association in short order if it had to absorb the full cost of every burial. Whenever possible, the HFBA asks the family of the deceased to defray some of the expenses. Costs are adjusted on a sliding scale and the HFBA only charges for opening the grave site, not for the funeral service itself. Burials are entirely free of charge if the deceased and his or her family have no assets.

As Sandra Weisel, the HFBA administrator, explains: "We don't take anybody's food money. If they can help out, they do. If they can't, nobody forces them to."

The cost of a private funeral averages \$4,400 in the New York City area, and welfare contributes only \$900 toward these expenses. So the nominal cost of an HFBA funeral can make the difference between a dignified, traditional Jewish funeral or cremation or burial in New York City's potter's field.

Regardless of the circumstances of the burial, the HFBA maintains a record of each individual, a practice it has maintained from the very beginning. Today, the HFBA's rolls list the 55,000 people buried in its two cemeteries, enabling visitors to find loved ones and preserving the memory of those buried in unmarked graves. These records helped the family of Rebecca Reines solve a mystery that had lingered for two generations.

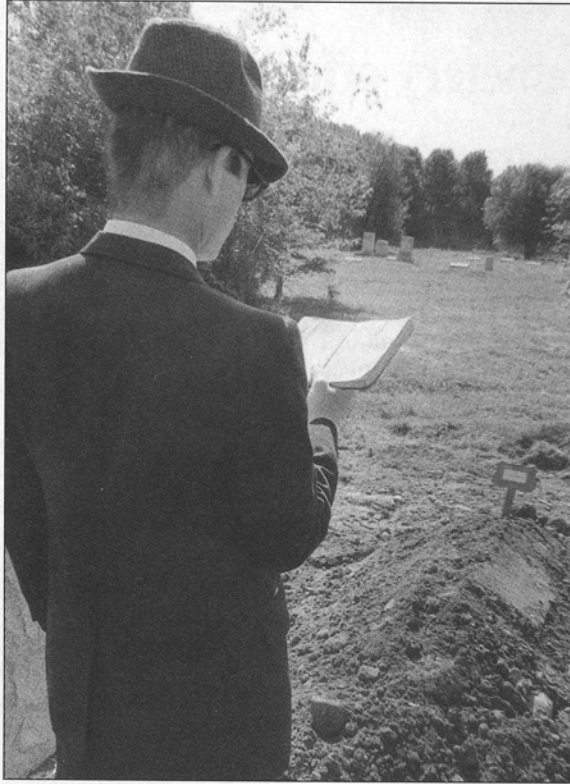
Rebecca Reines was sent to the United States with her younger sister at the turn of the century and was just 19 years old when she was killed in the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. Victims were buried throughout New York City and Rebecca was placed among the poorest in an unmarked grave at Mt. Richmond. Rebecca's younger sister tried throughout her life to find her sister's burial place and the family continued the quest after her death.

Rebecca Sacks, who was named for her aunt, was touring Mt. Richmond with a group from the Midwest when their guide mentioned that some of the Triangle victims were buried there. Sacks asked her son to follow up on this lead and, with the help of Plafker, the family discovered the grave of their lost relative.

On a rainy Sunday morning in late October 1993, the family gathered, at last, to dedicate the monument to Rebecca Reines.

There are 15,000 unmarked graves in the Mt. Richmond cemetery and the HFBA has begun a campaign to install markers over these plots and to remount fallen monuments. "These people didn't have

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any *mishpocha* [family] to remember them, so we're taking the responsibility," says Gerald Feldhamer, president of the HFBA.

Feldhamer, an investment banker, has made refurbishing the Mt. Richmond cemetery his personal crusade since he became president of the HFBA in 1987. "The cemetery was really tottering before 1987," he says. "The grounds were overgrown. Monuments toppled over and were never raised."

Lack of funds, for the most part, prevented the necessary refurbishment. While the HFBA receives funds from the UJA-Federation and from private donations, it wasn't enough.

Under Feldhamer's direction, the HFBA began to change. Rabbi Plafker was hired in 1989 to ensure an on-premises rabbi who would see to traditional Jewish funerals. Major grant funding was received from the Weinberg Foundation of Baltimore, which allowed the HFBA to rebuild the chapel and renovate the cemetery grounds.

"It's been very gratifying to see the cemetery go from its former decay to what we have now," Feldhamer says proudly.

The yearly Chayei Sarah campaign is a major HFBA fundraising event. Scheduled to coincide with the Torah portion about Abraham's search for a burial place for his wife Sarah, the campaign reaches out to more than 300 synagogues in the New York metropolitan area. Reform, Conservative and Orthodox synagogues all participate in the project since the HFBA serves all Jews, regardless of their affiliation.

And, as Plafker notes, the HFBA is determined to continue its mission of serving all Jews who need its help. "The HFBA will be here as long as the Jewish community needs our services," he says. □

For further information about the Hebrew Free Burial Association (HFBA), contact Sandra Wiesel, administrator, at 363 Seventh Avenue, Room 501, New York, NY 10001 or (212) 239-1662. Tours can be arranged.

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