Steve Weinreich has an unusual hobby. He walks through Jewish cemeteries in St. Louis, clipboard and pen in hand, and documents the gravesites. Then, he begins researching those individuals to learn about their lives and legacies. It's a solitary but rewarding endeavor that Weinreich, 74, refers to as his “mitzvah cemetery research project.” After Weinreich collects enough information, he enters it into two online databases at www.findagrave.com and www.jewishgen.org. His goal is to share with descendants of the deceased a history and narrative. More often than not, the stories of their lives are fascinating.

“It’s a mitzvah to do this,” Weinreich said. “What I get out of it is personal satisfaction, but I realized when I started doing this, that I am making these people alive once again.”

Weinreich is currently compiling data on his third cemetery, Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol. He previously documented Ohave Sholom Cemetery and the old section of B’nai Amoona Cemetery, both in University City. The project began after Weinreich’s son David died in 2009 at the age of 39. While visiting his son’s grave at United Hebrew Cemetery, Weinreich spotted a large number of graves without any remembrance stones.

“I noticed that a lot of grave markers there had no stone, nobody visited them, nobody cared,” Weinreich said. “Those people are gone and nobody visits, and there’s an absence of any public record of their lives. “So I started looking on www.findagrave.com and I found that when you log on and look at our local cemeteries, you might see that somebody in California is asking for a photograph of a relative’s grave at a local cemetery and they can’t get here. They may want a photo of grandma’s grave, so I started photographing and uploading the photos, and I did a lot of it.”

Thus began his quest to create a living memory for the digital age—an online record, accessible to anyone with internet access. The project was ideal for a solitary person like Weinreich, who is also highly organized and a tenacious researcher. He chose Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol in part because it fits well with his sense of order.

“There are 5,400 people buried at Beth Hamedrosh...
Jewish-SIG and Genealogy Resources

Jewish St. Louisans interested in researching their family and ancestors will have a new resource in 2019. The St. Louis Genealogical Society will re-launch a Jewish Special Interest Group (J-SIG) with a wide range of opportunities to learn and conduct research. The J-SIG is co-sponsored by the society and the Brodsky Library/St. Louis Jewish Community Archives. It will be led by Diane Everman, Phyllis Faintich and Ilene Kanfer Murray.

“We have a full program for 2019,” said Murray, St. Louis Genealogical Society publications director. “I’ll be leading a two-part session on foundations of Jewish genealogy on January 6 and 13 at the Kaplan Feldman Complex. We’ll cover the basics. With Jewish genealogy, you have to learn regular genealogy first and then you learn the unique aspects of Jewish genealogy but research is research, and the techniques are the same.”

Information on the foundations of Jewish genealogy series is available on the Center for Jewish Learning website: www.jfedstl.org/cjl.

A Feb. 3 meeting at the Kaplan Feldman Complex (Room 123) will feature a panel discussion following the screening of the documentary, “The Jewish Americans,” which explores the 200-year history of Jews in the St. Louis community. A workshop in December 2019 on old photographs and reading Jewish tombstones will be at the St. Louis County Library Headquarters. Details on all of the sessions are available at the J-SIG webpage at http://bit.ly/J-SIG.

The Jewish genealogy special interest group and the society offer useful resources available to anyone, Murray said.

“You don’t have to be a member of the society to come visit and get some assistance,” she said. “The number one piece of advice in genealogy research is to not do it in a vacuum. Take advantage of the expertise of others to help you document your family history.”

The St. Louis Genealogical Society office is at 4 Sunnen Drive, Suite 140, Maplewood. For more information, call 314-647-8547 or visit www.stlg.org.

Pay tribute to the deceased

Before he retired, Weinreich worked in sales, with little experience doing detective work. But he is persistent and focused, according to Diane Everman, archivist with the St. Louis Jewish Community Archives.

“Steve is one of the most dogged researchers I know,” Everman said. “He really wants to preserve the memory of those he researches. Steve has also done a lot to track down and preserve the memory of rabbis who called St. Louis home at some time in their lives. “With the cemeteries, especially Ohave Sholom, I think Steve really wants to present something about the deceased to portray them as individuals, who lived, loved and were loved. He goes beyond just the ‘names and dates’ approach to recording the deceased. His work helps pay tribute, honoring them by helping us recognize them as people.”

“The greatest thing that anyone can hope for in this life is to be remembered by others after we are gone. I think Steve is helping to do that using modern digital technology and the internet. As the Lithuanian-born poet Czeslaw Milosz wrote: ‘The living owe it to those who no longer can speak to tell their story for them.’ I think that’s pretty much what Steve, and those of us in the history and archives profession, try to do—we help tell their stories for them in recognition of their lives and to help everyone from now on to remember.”

The rabbinical research Everman referred to is a side project for Weinreich. He has compiled data and biographies on the 80 deceased rabbis who have served St. Louis synagogues over the past 170 years. This research project was another eye-opener because of the significant role many St. Louis rabbis played over the years. One such individual was Rabbi James Aaron Wax, an assistant rabbi at United Hebrew Congregation in 1942 and 1943. Rabbi Wax relocated to Memphis after his stint in St. Louis.

“Rabbi Wax was involved in civic issues,” Weinreich said. “He lived out his life in Memphis and he was friends with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. He was also heavily involved in the trash collectors strike with Dr. King.”

In the process of documenting and researching, Weinreich began to realize that many long-lost Jewish St. Louisans led remarkable lives. Each grave led him to a unique story of lives well lived.

“When Lucy and Stanley Lopata (buried at Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol Cemetery) passed away, the St. Louis Jewish community lost two treasures,” he said. “Their community involvement and financial acts of kindness to many cultural and charitable institu-
As Weinreich meticulously researches each story and adds the narrative online, he sometimes contacts family members to fill in gaps, but he tries to do so with sensitivity. During his research, he encountered two triple burial sites at Chesed Shel Emeth Cemetery. When he conducted his data gathering, Weinreich sometimes contacts family members to fill in gaps, but he tries to do so with sensitivity. During his research, Weinreich also discovered many Jewish St. Louisans had businesses that put them in harm’s way.

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Unearthing the stories behind the names

The story of Max Passwell (buried at Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol) is similarly disturbing.

“Max was found shot to death in New York City,” Weinreich said. “He sold sacramental wines during Prohibition, and he had a license to sell liquor products to the synagogues and churches for religious purposes, but there evidently was a turf war and he didn’t win.”

A couple of graves in St. Louis’ Jewish cemeteries have connections to Hollywood and celebrity. Esther Factor, buried at the old section of B’nai Amoona Cemetery, was the first wife of cosmetic czar Max Factor. Rachel and Ruben Benrubri, buried at Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol Cemetery, were the grandparents of Abraham Benrubri, who played Jerry on the TV series “ER.” More significantly, the Benrubris rescued Jews from the Nazis during the Holocaust and were honored as Righteous Among the Nations for their efforts.

Weinreich also encountered two Jewish athletes of some note, both of whom are buried at Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol Cemetery.

“Of course, there are also some instances where Weinreich encounters whimsy and a bit of humor in his project. Take, for example, the grave of Gerald “Jerry” Siegel at Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol. The headstone indicates that Siegel was a beloved husband, father and grandfather, and hints that he may have enjoyed poker. In the upper right corner is the engraving of a straight flush—10-jack-queen-king-ace of spades.

Then there is Sue Shear’s headstone, also at Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol. Shear was a member of the Missouri House of Representatives from 1973 through 1998. She died in 1998. The stone bears a simple and poignant inscription: “A Woman’s Place is in The House.”

While Weinreich’s project is intended to benefit relatives and descendants of deceased Jewish St. Louisans, he gets a satisfaction out of it, and an education.

“Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol Cemetery is a history lesson for me,” he said. “Not only was the cause of death revealed in many instances, but the occupations and family connections could be documented. I never envisioned that I would be a researcher and connect and document families but that’s exactly the result of my work. I did know some of the decedents, but most of the people here are strangers. By telling their stories, I have come to know them.”

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