

Cemetery mitzvah

Row by row, Steve Weinreich documents graves in St. Louis' Jewish cemeteries

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BILL MOTCHAN | SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH LIGHT

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

Steve Weinreich walks through Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol Cemetery in August, documenting the location of gravesites and researching the lives of those buried.

PHOTO: BILL MOTCHAN

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 will also be held at the complex. Two additional 2019 sessions on researching court documents 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.

Hagodol and I have researched over 4,200 thus far,” he said. “When I chose this cemetery—and I had many to choose from—I liked the way it was organized, with sections and rows that you can follow.”

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

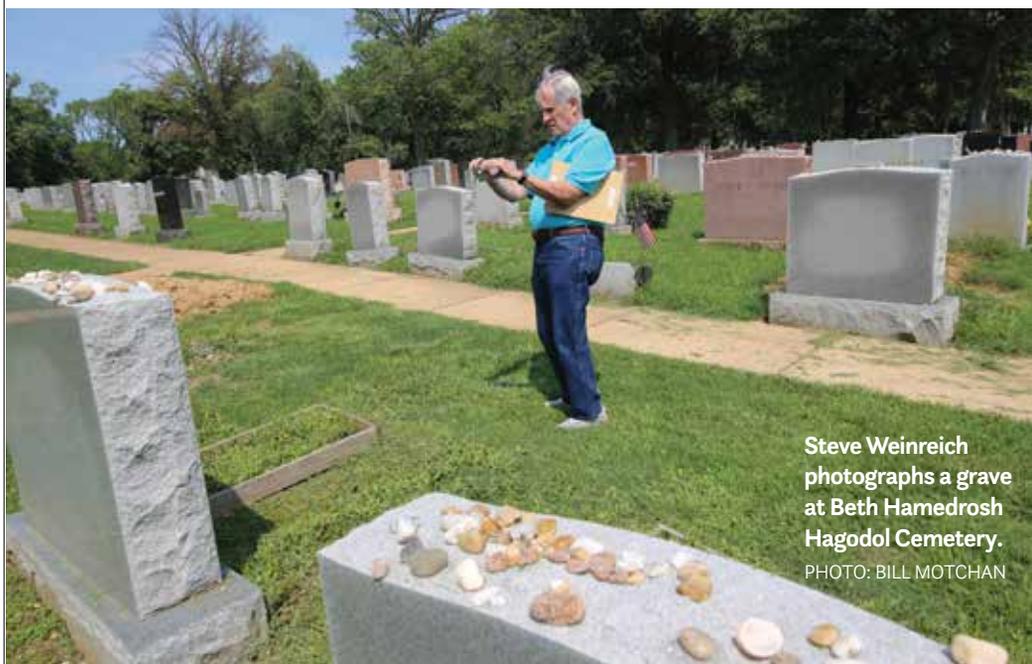
tell their story for them.’ I think that’s pretty much what Steve, and those of us in the history and archives profession, try to do—we help tell their stories for them in recognition of their lives and to help everyone from now on to remember.”

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-



Steve Weinreich photographs a grave at Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol Cemetery. PHOTO: BILL MOTCHAN

tions left an indelible mark on St. Louis. Their names are on buildings at Washington University, Miriam School and other cultural institutions and their committee efforts, plus the countless charities they've supported, have benefited thousands. I feel fortunate to have found their graves and can share their special lives."

Weinreich meticulously researches each story and adds the narrative online. When he conducts 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.

"There is always sadness in death, but even more so when the death is unexpected and violent," he said. "Many Jewish men in the early 1900s worked in businesses with storefronts. They were always at risk. They included retail, jewelry stores and repair shops. Brutal robberies and shootings were not uncommon. Those sudden deaths must have created terrible sadness for their families."

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 Benrubi, buried at Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol Cemetery, were the grandparents of Abraham Benrubi, who played Jerry on the TV series "ER." More significantly, the Benrubis 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.



Weinreich's clipboard shows his diagrams of gravesite locations.

PHOTO: BILL MOTCHAN

"One of the people I was researching was Harold Gold," Weinreich said. "He passed away at the age of 91, and he played for seven minor league baseball teams so he was pretty good. I discovered a baseball website, which has every statistic imaginable. It had Harold's name, and the years and teams he played for, so that's pretty cool. I'm always finding interesting things about people. He was an outfielder. That's what he did for an avocation. In the off-season, he worked for Edison Brothers."

Otto Josef Baer was another accomplished athlete who grew up in Germany.

"His family told me he was a talented sprinter and could have competed at the Olympics and conceivably challenged Jesse Owens," Weinreich said. "However, the Nazis and World War II ended his Olympics hopes. He escaped from Germany in 1934, and Owens won four gold medals in 1936. Otto Baer ended up in St. Louis where he worked for Continental Grain Company for 50 years."

There is any number of unusual causes of death Weinreich has discovered. One such odd circumstance was the case of Max Trube, a merchant and community official in Alton, Ill.

"All the dignitaries in the city of Alton were riding on the back of this brand new fire truck during a demonstration. Some other cart and buggy got in front of the fire truck and it had to swerve. Max fell off the back and hit his head on a nearby telephone pole. He didn't recover from the accident."

Other accidental deaths Weinreich researched demonstrate the fragility of life. One such incident was when he encountered a triple burial site at Chesed Shel Emeth Cemetery. Three young boys (Simon Lichtenfeld, Benjamin Schwartz, and Louis Weinfass) died within days of

each other in 1925—one a result of a fatal auto accident and the other two from drowning. They were just teenagers.

"You can just imagine the pain for three families experiencing such a mutual loss and then having to make the choice to bury these good friends next to one another. These three youths are perpetually connected by a stone lentel that straddles the three identical headstones at their graves."

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." ■