

TIKKUN OLAM / PROVENANCE OF CEMETERY REMAINS A MYSTERY

# Neglected Jewish cemetery in White Oak restored by non-Jewish volunteers

Mark Pudlowski stumbled across the tiny burial site, in shambles, about a year ago. After months of prayer, he decided to 'fix it.'

By **TOBY TABACHNICK**

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A tombstone at the Rippel Road cemetery before Pudlowski got to work. (Photo provided by Eric Lidji)

For months, Mark Pudlowski could not get the bleak image out of his mind: a tiny cemetery in shambles, overgrown with tall weeds. Several of its tombstones, inscribed in Hebrew, were toppled or askew.

Pudlowski, 60, a Christian and the founder of the Family of God Biblical Reasoning and Counseling Prayer Center in White Oak, Pennsylvania, came upon the cemetery about a year ago, as he was driving up Rippel Road off Route 48 toward Center Street. From his car window, he could see what looked like a tombstone behind a stone wall and obscured by brush. When he returned later to investigate, he was distressed by what he found.

"I went through the woods and stood there," said Pudlowski, a family therapist and retired surface warfare specialist for the United States Navy. "I was all by myself, and I started feeling very sad. This was somebody's mom, somebody's dad, somebody's sister, somebody's brother."

The fact that these Jewish graves had been neglected haunted him.

"I prayed about it," said Pudlowski. "I asked God what he wanted me to do."

After several months of prayer, Pudlowski said, he got his answer: "Fix it."

But the job of clearing out and restoring that cemetery was too vast for one person, so Pudlowski enlisted the help of his friend Mike Lia and Lia's son, Daniel, who had been searching for an Eagle Scout project.

"We took it on," said Pudlowski.

His first step was to try to determine who owned the cemetery property, which was not so easy.

"I asked the White Oak borough, and they said they didn't know who the property owners were, all they knew was that it was a Jewish cemetery," Pudlowski said.

He also called the two synagogues in White Oak, Temple B'nai Israel and Gemilas Chesed Congregation. No answers were conclusive.

There are eight headstones that remain in this tiny cemetery, ranging in dates from 1902 to 1924. That time frame is curious, because there is a larger Jewish cemetery nearby with headstones of similar dates.

"It doesn't make sense," said Eric Lidji, director of the Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives at the Senator John Heinz History Center. "During that time, there was an established cemetery down the road."

Four of the eight headstones have names inscribed that are still legible: Joe Mendlovitz (1902); Fanny Rittenberg Bergstein (1912); Morris Goldman (1919); and Isaac Rittenberg (1924). Relatives of those people, said Lidji, are buried in other cemeteries, which makes the existence of the Rippel Road cemetery even more perplexing.

"It's a very interesting mystery that I would like to get to the bottom of," Lidji said.

When Pudlowski contacted rabbis at Temple B'nai Israel and Gemilas Chesed prior to commencing his project, he got a "brief backdrop" concerning what they knew — or rather, what they suspected — to be the story behind the cemetery: A group of Gemilas Chesed members left the synagogue to form a break-away shul and obtained land to bury the newly formed congregation's dead. The two groups got back together shortly thereafter, and the new synagogue ceased to exist.

Documentation for that theory is scant, and the records that have surfaced so far are not conclusive, according to Lidji. That documentation includes an excerpt from a manuscript called "Jewish History in McKeesport," discovered by longtime Gemilas Chesed member Claire Iszauk, which states that in around 1892 — about six years after the founding of Gemilas Chesed — a group broke away and called itself Ahavas Achim. Gemilas Chesed's president, Gershon Guttman, tells a similar story.

"I can't swear this is the truth, but back when Gemilas Chesed started in 1886, there was a split off from the shul in 1890 or something," he said. "I don't know where it was located, or the differences. But they bought a piece of property for a cemetery. Then, a few years later, they got back together. There were a few casualties buried in that cemetery. For many years, no one knew what it was, because Gemilas Chesed had a cemetery right down the street with similar dating on the stones. That was the story."

Members of Gemilas Chesed have been aware of the cemetery's existence for decades.

"I was involved with helping to clean up that cemetery when I was a teenager," said Irv Luzer, 74. "Gemilas Chesed took it over by default, I think. There are no records I'm aware of. We don't know what shul [the people buried there] are from."

Luzer, who has been a member of the congregation since 1948 and is a past president, also remembers Rabbi Irvin Chinn burying holy books there, but acknowledged that "Gemilas Chesed hasn't been keeping the cemetery up."

Only minimal and sporadic maintenance has been provided to the site, according to Guttman, as the cemetery is difficult to access.

Jonathan Schachter, president of the Jewish Cemetery and Burial Association of Greater Pittsburgh, which is charged with taking care of cemeteries that are no longer managed by the congregations to which they were connected, is aware of the Rippel Road cemetery; he once came upon it accidentally when he was driving on Center Road on his way to the Boston Bike Trail.

“I saw headstones and I stopped,” Schachter said. He later went to take a closer look with Freda Spiegel, a member of B’nai Israel, and that congregation’s rabbi, Paul Tuchman.

“I climbed up on the wall,” Schachter said. “The grass was very high. We were looking at it, and there were clearly Jewish headstones, mostly slender flat ones with Hebrew writing on them. I was involved with the JCBA by then, but I had no idea of anything about it.”

The Rippel Road cemetery is “ancient and has been abandoned for a long time,” said Rabbi Moshe Russell, spiritual leader of Gemilas Chesed. So when Pudlowski called to inquire about cleaning it up, “we said, go ahead.”

Pudlowski, mindful about not breaching Jewish laws or customs, sought advice from a Jewish friend in Israel, as well as from Rabbi Daniel Lapin in Seattle, an Orthodox rabbi who heads the American Alliance of Jews and Christians.

“I told him [Lapin] my intentions, and asked if I was going to violate any Jewish traditions going in as a non-Jew,” said Pudlowski. “He said, ‘You’re fine. Best of luck to you.’”

Pudlowski and the Lias tackled the property with chainsaws and weed whackers. They spent several days just clearing it out.

“There were tons of weeds everywhere, and poison ivy everywhere, but not one of us got it,” Pudlowski said.

After clearing out the brush, they saw there were 10 graves on the property, and eight headstones, which they reset.

“A lot of the tombs were so cockeyed, we took all the footings off and used about 25 bags of cement and reset them all,” he said. “Once we reset all the tombstones, we put thick plastic and 4 inches of mulch and river rock all around the graves because people put stones on tombstones. I said, ‘Let’s get river rock in case somebody wants to come by and pray for these people.’”

They also erected a two-level split-rail fence around the cemetery’s perimeter, as well as a three-foot Star of David, painted blue.

It took 10 days, working 12 hours each day, to finish the project. The cost for materials came to about \$3,500. While Pudlowski received some donations and discounts from vendors, most of the funds used to finance the cemetery restoration came out of his own pocket.

“As far as I’m concerned, that’s holy ground,” Pudlowski said. “These are God’s chosen people. All I know is, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’s God, that’s my God, too. The relationship, from my viewpoint, is I have to honor God.”

Members of Gemilas Chesed were overwhelmed by the work Pudlowski and the Lias did.

“I went up there and I was totally flabbergasted,” said Luzer. “I didn’t believe what I was looking at.”

“Wow,” said Iszauk, who has been a member of Gemilas Chesed for more than 60 years. “It was quite an accomplishment.”



The Rippel Road cemetery has been restored, thanks to volunteers.

Pudlowski said he was just “trying to be obedient. If I can help you, good, and if I can learn something in the process, even better.”

For now, it is unclear who, if anyone, will continue to maintain the cemetery.

“I don’t think there is anyone going there regularly to visit,” said Guttman, adding that Gemilas Chesed has “no real plans” to keep it up.

“We will try to maintain it, but I don’t know what that means,” he said. “I don’t think it is our property.” **pjc**

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