

The New York Times

N.Y. / Region

With Demise of Jewish Burial Societies, Resting Places Are in Turmoil



At Bayside Cemetery in Ozone Park, Queens, a lack of funds and oversight had led to neglect.

By [PAUL VITELLO](#)

Published: August 2, 2009

Someone was buried in Florence Marmor's grave, and it was not Florence Marmor.

When Mrs. Marmor visited her deceased husband's cemetery plot in Flushing, Queens, one afternoon, she found that someone had been freshly buried in the spot next to his, where she had planned to rest someday. No one could tell her why.

Strange and wrenching discoveries like that have sprung up repeatedly in Jewish communities over the past few decades as families have discovered that the cemetery properties where they expected to be buried among spouses, children and parents are caught in a legal knot that no one can untangle.

The reason: the Jewish burial societies that sold the gravesites no longer have administrators. Founded by the immigrant ancestors of the people caught in this bind, the societies, in effect, have died.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Robin Kraus, manager of New York State's Office of Miscellaneous Estates, helps people obtain deeds to plots they bought through now-defunct burial societies.

The problem has mainly plagued New York, Boston and other Northeastern cities where Jews arrived at the turn of the last century from Eastern Europe, bringing with them the tradition of dues-paying societies — usually organized by people from the same hometown — that bought and maintained cemetery plots.

Besides reducing burial costs, the societies held periodic meetings that became important social events for networking and keeping up with others from similar roots. Robust for decades, the associations lost members as descendants grew affluent, moved away and left a dwindling, aging few to keep the books and the cemetery lots in order.

Until recently, few religious or government officials took notice. But an accrual of painful scenes has convinced some of the need for intervention.

“There isn’t a week that goes by that we don’t have problems with this,” said Richard Fishman, director of the [New York State Division of Cemeteries](#), charged with regulating burial plots. “A person dies, and they can’t get buried because there is no one left to sign the papers, or the guy in charge is 99 years old and in a nursing home.”

There are no exact figures, but officials like Mr. Fishman and leaders of Jewish organizations estimate that while 20,000 or more burial societies once flourished in the Northeast, managing plots in hundreds of Jewish cemeteries, all but a few thousand are defunct.

By tradition, Jews must be buried within 24 hours of death. If the deceased is a member of a burial society or a descendant of members, relatives are supposed to contact an officer of the society, who verifies the person’s membership and signs a permit allowing the cemetery to open the assigned plot.

But Mrs. Marmor, 76, said that when she asked the cemetery director what happened to her plot, he told her it had been sold by the president of the burial society, who had since died.

“They couldn’t do anything more for me,” she said. After much stress, and with help from a lawyer, she ended up restarting the defunct association, the Trembowla Sisters Burial Society, and discovered to her relief that the plot on the other side of her husband was available.

Some burial society officers are reluctant — and not always reliable — inheritors of the job.

Sam Falk took over the Friends of Zion of Harlem Burial Society after his mother, for many years the society’s acting president, entered an assisted-living residence on Long Island a few years ago. He shipped the society’s file cabinets and cemetery maps to his home in Southern California.

“I tried to send out the notices and keep up,” said Mr. Falk, 59, whose grandfather founded the society in 1911, “but to be honest, in the last few years, I didn’t have the time.”

He was rescued by a tiny agency of the [New York State Insurance Department](#) known as the Office of Miscellaneous Estates. Tucked into a cluttered corner of the state’s Liquidation Bureau in Lower Manhattan, Miscellaneous Estates is where burial societies go to die. The agency took the burial society off Mr. Falk’s hands after an elderly woman — worried that he would not be able to provide her a plot next to her mother in a Staten Island cemetery — found a sympathetic cemetery administrator who referred her to Miscellaneous Estates.

Robin Kraus, the agency’s manager, and her assistant, Alice Jenkins, have taken hundreds of burial societies into a sort of receivership over the past decade, collecting dues from members until the last one is buried. They move with practiced deftness through the thousands of ancient index cards, yellowing ledger books and rolled-up oilcloth cemetery maps entrusted to their care.



Old ledgers and maps from the Jewish burial societies that have disappeared over the years.

“What we do is step up and perform all the functions of a burial society until all the people entitled are buried,” said Ms. Kraus, a lifelong civil servant who, as the child of Holocaust survivors, found an emotional home when she joined the bureau 15 years ago. Almost every Jewish cemetery in New York has her phone number on auto-dial.

Many family members who call are desperate and distraught, she said.

“You have to be able to deal with people who are hard of hearing, and oftentimes speak in thick accents,” she said.

Mark G. Peters, who heads the quasi-public Liquidation Bureau, which protects consumers who hold policies with failed insurance companies, said the government viewed burial societies as a type of insurer. “They may be a historically anachronistic insurance product,” he said, “but we are essentially the only safety net for people still depending on these societies.”

Mark Wittlin, 53, remembered attending meetings with his father at a burial society in Brooklyn known as the Senate Association. Members would address one another with honorifics like “noble grand brother” and solemnly discuss financial and maintenance matters while he and other children prowled the rented hall.

When he graduated from college, his father and other members asked him to become an officer, but he declined. When his father died, they asked again and he declined again.

A lawyer took over the society. When the lawyer died a few years ago, Mr. Wittlin answered the door one day to find a young man there, several large shopping bags arrayed around him, with rolled-up maps jutting out: the records of the Senate Association.

“ ‘My uncle wanted you to have these,’ he says,” Mr. Wittlin recounted. “He was the lawyer’s nephew.”

Mr. Wittlin said he tried to be a good president. But there were 60 remaining members, including some in nursing homes and some unaccounted for — though liable to pop up needing service at any time.

When someone told him about Robin Kraus, he went to see her. He took along the shopping bags. “I just don’t have the energy for this,” he told her.

She and Ms. Jenkins told him not to worry. They unpacked the records and maps, and told him they would take it from there.

(end)