

FRONTLINE

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HISTORY

RECOVERING LOST SOULS

Joe Ferrannini at work in Har Hasetim cemetery, now owned by Beth David Reform Congregation in Gladwyne.

A GLADWYNE CONGREGATION EMBRACES THE EFFORT TO PRESERVE THE FINAL RESTING PLACE FOR HUNDREDS OF EUROPEAN IMMIGRANTS.

BY PAUL JABLOW

He can only be observed during the warmer months, working alone on an isolated six-acre tract just off Conshohocken State Road in Gladwyne. Often the sound of his chisel is all you hear, along with the hammering of pileated woodpeckers and an occasional car engine.

Bit by painstaking bit, Joe Ferrannini is uncovering and preserving history in a project that will outlive him by decades.

Ferrannini restores old gravestones and burial sites, an occupation so rare he estimates that only a few dozen people nationally make it a full-time occupation. "It's such meaningful work," says the

former college history major, who switched careers from transportation management 15 years ago at age 41. "These are people whose memories would otherwise be lost."

Right now, Ferrannini is working at Har Hasetim, a Jewish cemetery founded in the 1890s by two burial societies as the final resting place for hundreds of



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European immigrants. The name in English is "Mount of Olives." No one has been buried there since 1945. The cemetery is now owned by the Beth David Reform Congregation, which took it over in 1999 after it had deteriorated into a jumble of bramble and marble. But the real work started in 2015, as volunteers cleared the ground to prepare for the restoration.

The gravestone Ferrannini is currently working on is badly eroded. After using a chemical wash on the stone to strengthen it, he carefully applies a mortar mix to attach a piece that broke away. There's no name on the stone, though he's pretty sure the deceased was a woman, as the inscription is addressed to a "beloved."

Har Hasetim wasn't a rich folks' cemetery, so the stones are often of poor quality. "These people were first-generation immigrants," Ferrannini says. "Even a modest stone was a luxury."

His current project is braced by a metal tripod. "It's my extra set of hands since I work alone," says Ferrannini, a compact man who moves nimbly about the site. "Even if the stone is only bits and pieces, it can still tell a story."

Though Ferrannini recently helped a woman find the grave of her great-grandfather, it's mostly solitary work. "I couldn't do it every day," he says. On this particular afternoon, leaf-blowing equipment from neighboring properties breaks the silence, but he relishes the times when only the woodpeckers compete with the sounds of his chisel. Since 2018, he's spent about two weeks here in the spring or summer and two in the fall, coming down from his home in upstate New York. So far, he's restored more than 150 gravesites out of at least 1,200. The job will obviously outlive him as long as the congregation and other funders can keep it going. "I thought this was going

to be my retirement hobby,” he says.

But that changed when demand for his services kept growing, from Maine to South Carolina. His introduction to the area came in response to a near-disaster—the 2017 desecration of Philadelphia’s Mount Carmel Cemetery, where vandals knocked over headstones, causing serious damage to some of them. He later returned to work at Har Nebo Cemetery in the city’s Oxford Circle section as part of a project supported by the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia.

The Har Nebo and Har Hasetim restorations are part of a growing movement to preserve old cemeteries, particularly Jewish ones. The saving of Har Hasetim was a long and complicated effort started years before Ferrannini’s arrival. In the 1980s, the cemetery’s owners planned to sell it to a developer, who wanted to put a residential development on the site, exhuming the bodies and moving them to another cemetery. Resistance quickly formed. At one point, a resident with a hunting rifle held off a bulldozer. Once the media found out, congregation

members and other volunteers began to clean up the site.

The legal battle with the cemetery’s owners went on for a decade, with Montgomery County Orphans Court finally turning it over to Beth David in 1999. Twelve years later, the Friends of Gladwyne Memorial Cemetery was formed with the support of local preservationists and Beth David. “The greatest mitzvah you can do is for someone who can’t pay you back, can’t return the favor,” says Neil Sukonik, president of the Friends board.

As director of the National Park Service’s Monument Research & Preservation Program, Dennis Montagna has consulted on Har Hasetim and other Jewish cemetery projects. He says the effort is unique—at least in this area. He knows of no other project on this scale sponsored by an individual congregation. For his part, Ferrannini is backed by an array of volunteers. Some do periodic cleanups or raise money. Others translate the Hebrew and Yiddish on the stones into English. About five years ago, a Villanova University class taught by associate professor of history

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Craig Bailey checked databases and death certificates to find out more about the cemetery’s occupants. The hope is to come up with a system that allows visitors to learn about each occupant by cell phone. You’ll also find new aluminum plaques on some of the trees identifying the species. Ferrannini notes that many of the trees didn’t exist when the cemetery was founded.

And there are more basic steps—like access. The cemetery is surrounded by residential property, and there’s no parking. Visitors sometimes park on the Beth David lot on Vaughan Lane and make the 10-minute walk to the property.

As he works at Har Hasetim and other cemeteries, Ferrannini is sometimes hemmed in by his own perfectionism. “I’m



learning every day.” he says.

He worries that other restorers—most of whom work part time—are less meticulous. It’s why he spends some of his time teaching others the tricks of his

trade. That includes knowing what they can do and what they can’t. “Even if I live to be a million years old, I couldn’t do everything,” he says.

Visit gladwynejewishcemetery.org.