

03/19/2007

A lost cemetery, a lost child, a lost soldier: All found

By: Daniel B. England , Special correspondent

It all started when Martin Green got a call one day recently about a grave. As the financial secretary of the Hebrew Sick Benefit Association of Fairfield (a Jewish benevolent organization that sometimes assists Jewish people with funerals and burials), he does occasionally get such calls. But the man on the other end of the line was looking for a Ruth Coakley, an 11-month-old girl, poor thing, who had died not long after her mother had fallen out of a window in Hartford in 1918. Could he find her?

Well, the Hebrew Sick Benefit Association does have a cemetery in town, on Black Rock Turnpike, but she wasn't there. (At this point, you might want to start a diagram to keep track of the story.) On the same grounds as the HSBA cemetery is a separate cemetery that used to belong to Congregation Adath Israel, a synagogue established in 1889 on Washington Avenue in Bridgeport. The body of the baby turned out not to be there either.

That cemetery had been purchased by the Adath Israel congregation from the HSBA in the 1930s. Then, when the Adath Israel Congregation broke up, the cemetery changed hands, and eventually was given to the Jewish Home for the Elderly in Fairfield, Green explained. At some point, the management of the Jewish Home for the Elderly decided it didn't want to be in the cemetery business, with all of the attendant upkeep, and asked the HSBA if they'd like to have the former Adath Israel cemetery on Black Rock Turnpike. They agreed, and so it was that the ground that the HSBA had once sold now returned to them.

A notable feature of the Adath-HSBA cemetery on Black Rock Turnpike is that it is the final resting place of Minerva Pious, a fairly famous comedienne who used to appear on the old Fred Allen radio program (think circa 1947). The thing of it was, while Minerva was certainly there, little Ruth wasn't.

However, among the papers that came with the transfer of the property to the HSBA was a list of people buried, not in Fairfield, but in Bridgeport in a little strip of land at the back of the Park Cemetery on Lindley Street. No one, not the Jewish Home, not Park Cemetery, knew who owned that cemetery or even why exactly it was in the Adath folder. But it was indeed Jewish (you can tell by the Hebrew inscriptions on the headstones).

And when Green looked through the list of the names buried in the Bridgeport cemetery, there she was - Ruth Coakley, 1918, 11 months. So now Green knew where Ruth was, but still didn't know who owned the cemetery.

Then he got an idea. Among the tombstones on the Bridgeport site, he found a legible inscription. So he went in search of a death certificate of the person, and there on the death certificate was listed where the person was buried and - with the utmost clarity - the owner of the little Bridgeport cemetery. It was Congregation Adath Israel.

Green was able to find the infant Ruth in the little cemetery that apparently had been used by the congregation from about 1890 until about 1930. With a growing congregation, however, Adath Israel sought more room, and that's when they purchased the Black Rock Turnpike site. But as everyone with relatives in the original cemetery died out, it was largely forgotten and neglected. So now the HSBA had not one, but two, additional cemeteries.

Once rediscovered, however, Green thought the little cemetery ought to be taken care of. "The people buried there ought to be remembered somehow," he said recently while visiting the site with his friend Bernard Simmons. Simmons just happens to be the vice president of the Loyalty Lodge, another Hebrew aid society in Fairfield, which, to confuse matters further, runs its own cemetery. The members of the Loyalty Lodge (Green is also the financial secretary of that group) have agreed to raise money for the restoration of the old, little Bridgeport Cemetery and bring it up to the high standard of both the HSBA's and Loyalty Lodge's cemeteries in Fairfield.

"We're hoping to track down some of the families with relatives buried in the Adath Bridgeport cemetery who will help us with the restoration," he said. "One thing we want to do is try to place markers on the graves of the children. There were a lot of children who died." Indeed, a quick tally of the names reveals that about 111 of the 158 or so people buried there were children, some listed as "SB," still born, some two hours old, some one month; some, like Ruth, made it to 11 months. The oldest person there is Jacob Cohen, 79 years old. And there is another interesting man buried there.

While standing in the cemetery this week, Simmons, 86, pointed to the tombstone of Charles W. Knopow, killed in France during the First World War at the age of 24. His tombstone is interesting because it looks like part of a tree with the limbs sawed off. "That's what they used to do when a young life was cut short," said Green. Tragically, the date on the tombstone is Oct. 18, 1918 - just one month before the signing of the Armistice that ended the war.

"We can't find anything about him," Simmons said.

But now we have. Thanks to a Minuteman computer and Google Books, we tracked down a book called "From Upton to the Meuse, A History of the 307th Infantry" by W. Kerr Rainsford, the captain of the 307th infantry. Knopow is listed in the back as a member of Company 1 and the battle in which he died - the Meuse-Arconne Defensive - is detailed in its pages. On the last page of the book is a poem with the line "We have buried our dead on a thousand hills."

For Charles Knopow and the child Ruth, who are buried on a very nearby hill, it is good to know that there are people like Marty Green, Bernie Simmons and all those who will contribute to the restoration of the old Adath cemetery who want to honor them still.

Green can be contacted through the Loyalty Lodge at 452-1221. He can also supply the list of the names of the people who are buried at the Bridgeport site.



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