

Unveiling every secret in the cemetery

By CHRIS LEPPEK
IJN Assistant Editor

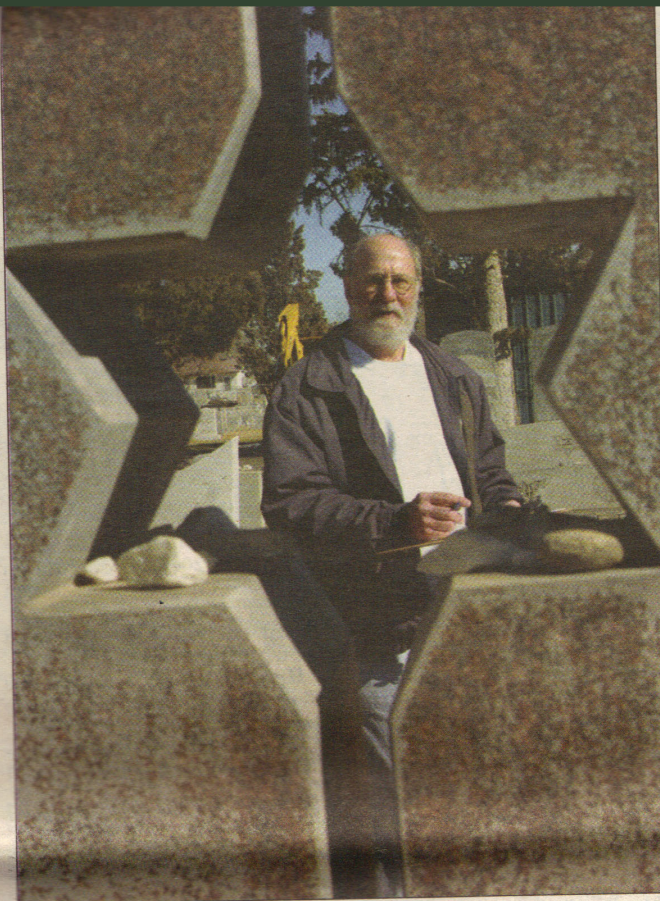
Since the 1890s, more than 6,000 Jewish burials have taken place at Rose Hill Cemetery. Within a few weeks, Terry Laskey will have stood before each and every one of those graves.

Laskey, 62, has become a familiar figure at Rose Hill. For almost two years, the retired database architect with Martin Marietta has been a regular visitor to the Commerce City Jewish cemetery.

In all kinds of weather, with his clipboard and digital camera in hand, he has been making patient and methodical surveys of thousands of tombstones. Sometimes he photographs them; sometimes he writes down their inscriptions; sometimes, if the lettering is badly worn, he'll try to read what they say by feel, running his fingers over the rough surface of the stone.

He was doing precisely those things on a recent chilly and windy February afternoon, when he was just about the only person at the sprawling cemetery. As he walked between streets and alleys of the necropolis that have already become familiar to him, Laskey explained why he devotes just about as much time to this unusual pursuit as he once devoted to his profession.

His interest in graves and cemeteries is neither morbid nor particularly spiritual, the soft-spoken



Terry Laskey on his genealogical mission to record every critical datum from every gravestone at Rose Hill Cemetery.

Laskey says. Rather, it stems from his passion for genealogy, a pursuit that has become almost a full-time job for him and which, he admits, is one of the reasons he opted to retire early.

As a member of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Colorado, Laskey is collecting data that will provide invaluable information for genealogists and those interested in tracing their family trees.

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sive half a million Jewish graves. Soon, Laskey says, the information from Rose Hill will join that capacious and growing list.

The information he takes from tombstones is basic and to the point: Name, names of other family members (if any), dates of death, mention of locales.

Laskey does not write down English language epitaphs, personal inscriptions or scriptural passages, but he does photographically record all engravings in other languages, including Hebrew, Russian and sometimes Yiddish, just in case such text might contain vital biographical data — “the sorts of things a genealogist would be interested in.”

Laskey does not speak any of the above languages, and even jokes that his English skills are such that, “I approach English as a second language.”

Instead, he sends out images of gravestones with other languages to a number of translators, who also work as volunteers for the JOWBR project.

The information on tombstones is an invaluable source of genealogical information, Laskey says, primarily because they can usually be counted on for accuracy.

Unfortunately, the same cannot always be said for cemetery burial records, including those at Rose Hill. Government records of death and birth are generally more reliable, but the process of obtaining such records can be time-consuming and often formidably expensive.

Laskey's work does not end

after his frequent trips to the cemetery. Once he has gathered a certain amount of information, he has to process it. This might include reconciling differences between death dates or name spellings that appear in different sources — on gravestones, in cemetery or official records or published obituaries.

After every grave at Rose Hill has been chronicled and added to the JOWBR database, Laskey expects that Mt. Nebo Cemetery will be his next target. It's about the same size as Rose Hill, so Laskey expects that project to take him a similar two years or so.

Another JOWBR volunteer, Ellen Kowitz, is currently about halfway through Golden Hill.

“We have not yet broached the subject of Emanuel, which is the last one in town,” Laskey says of Congregation's Emanuel's portion of Fairmount Cemetery. He does expect, however, to be the volunteer who handles that project.

Amazingly, Laskey's cemetery data collection is only one of his genealogical projects.

As a volunteer, often with the assistance of his wife Paula (also an avid genealogist), he is also coordinating the transliteration of a list of some 130,000 Russian Jewish voters from 1906-07; and a 1942 census of the Bucharest Jewish community. He is also compiling data (in Hebrew and Yiddish) contained in a Yizkor book from his family's ancestral home in Orhei, Moldova.

Raised as a Reform Jew, Laskey says he has no religious or spiritual motive in his cemetery pursuits. He does not consider his work to be a mitzvah for departed souls nor

does he entertain any other mystical notions.

Nor, for that matter, does he necessarily wonder about the past lives of those people whose names he is carefully transcribing. “That has never piqued my curiosity,” he says.

The hours upon hours of genealogical volunteer work he does began, he says, with a curiosity about his own familial roots. He wanted to collect the names of his ancestors as well as discover who his current cousins, aunts and uncles are.

Once that curiosity was satiated, he wanted to know where they came from, where they lived during their lives, what they did for a living and what struggles they faced as Jews.

In tracing his own family tree, Laskey discovered the names of Holocaust victims to whom he was related, as well as current family lines in Moldova, Israel and Romania he never knew existed. He even managed to meet some of these newfound Israeli relatives.

His research also led to family reunions with relatives he hadn't

seen in decades, as well as some he had never met.

All this, Laskey says, was made possible by the fact that “other people who walked and transcribed gravestones” had provided genealogical information he was able to use. Documents that others had compiled and translated filled in many gaps, as did the generous help of other genealogists, “even though they weren't related and didn't even know me.”

Laskey found the spirit of generosity and shared purpose that genealogists embodied highly attractive, and decided that he'd like to make his own contributions.

“Why do I do this?” he says. “So that other people can find out about their families and have the same joys and knowledge that I have gained. In a way, it is my way of returning the favor or paying it forward.”