

November 23, 2015 Monday 11 Kislev 5776**11:22 IST**

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THE JERUSALEM POST

Nu York, New York: Bayside Cemetery

By Ellen Levitt

11/23/2015

I took a tour of Queens, New York's Bayside Cemetery. This Jewish graveyard, located in the sedate Ozone Park neighborhood, is not in good shape. Sadly, there are many stones and decorative items that are in bad shape, even fallen. Only a smattering of burials date after the 1970s, and most are pre-Great Depression. Coupled with the chill in the November air and an overcast sky, this might seem a rather dour way to spend a few afternoon hours.

But I decided to take this tour because I had once visited the cemetery next to it, Acacia Cemetery, which is in considerably better condition. And the tour was given by a friend of mine, Anthony Pisciotta. Anthony is not Jewish (although he does have one or two ancestors who were) but he has worked tirelessly over the past few years, volunteering his Sundays to fix toppled stones, clean up vandalized mausoleums, and conduct research on the people who are buried here.

He showed us an apparatus he has used to lift and shore up fallen headstones, and explained that he once knocked out cold when a stone konked him on the head. He led us to the final resting places of war veterans, a victim of the ill-fated Titanic and General Slocum ferry, several notable merchants and businessmen, a once-member of the House of Representatives, and others. Most of the cemetery is devoted to Ashkenazic people (especially those of Central and Eastern European origins) but there was a section of Sephardic burials.

I helped out a few times by explaining certain Jewish customs and rituals to the group, which numbered about 20 (including one school boy, with his parents, who asked his mom to bury him with his computer when he dies). Actually, I arrived about 40 minutes late to the tour because the subway train I used to travel were slow and there was a delay on one line, (In fact, I biked from

one stop that was a few miles west of the cemetery, due to track work closure.) But it was a fascinating tour, sobering and eye opening. And it was all the more interesting that this preservation work has been done on a volunteer basis by a non-Jewish man and his family, who pitch in.

This is not the only cemetery, Jewish or otherwise, in New York City that is in a dilapidated state. But there are some people here who find the time and gather the courage and fortitude to help society in a way that is not glamorous, and difficult at times. And it is important for people involved in such endeavors to give occasional tours, write articles, snap photos, in order to spread the word about these overlooked sites and the kind of work that can be done.



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