



01/29/2009

Exposed remains pose potential health risks

by Lee Landor , Editor

It might have been better left neglected.

The unkempt Bayside Cemetery in Ozone Park has become a breeding ground for vandals who desecrated mausoleums, destroyed crypts, smashed coffins and scattered human remains on cemetery grounds.

The hoodlums use the thick brush and overgrown weeds that blanket the cemetery, located on Liberty Avenue and 84th Street, as cover during their hostile intrusions. To their advantage, the cemetery is practically abandoned, at least according to one man whose grandparents are buried there.

On behalf of his deceased family members, John Lucker is suing Congregation Shaare Zedek, a Manhattan synagogue that bought the land in 1865, for failing to maintain it. The congregation said it is not its responsibility to do so: shortly after it was bought, about 90 percent of the land was sold to various Jewish burial societies that no longer exist.

Lucker, a 47-year-old Connecticut man, and others are concerned that the vandalism created a possible health and safety risk. Scientific literature documents the potential dangers of exposure to human remains and the dust in and around coffins, according to Lucker.

The chemicals, bacterial and viral pathogens that can be transmitted from the remains can have disastrous catastrophic consequences, according to Alexandra Bybee who wrote "Risky Business: Potential Hazards in the Archaeological Investigation of Historic Cemeteries."

She noted that in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, bacterial and viral infections had a great effect on populations in the United States.

In her research, Bybee found that "smallpox is probably the most significant potential health risk arising from the excavation of historic cemeteries."

Because the virus has essentially been eradicated and the vaccination is no longer performed, "the release of smallpox organisms could be catastrophic," she wrote.

Bybee further noted that fluids used in embalming and materials used in coffin construction and decoration can create chemical hazards.

Lucker wants to raise awareness of the situation so that public officials and agencies, including the city and state Departments of Health and the Office of the New York State Attorney General, will address it.

In the meantime, Lucker is continuing his lawsuit against Shaare Zedek.



Vandals desecrated mausoleums, smashed coffins and exposed human remains at Bayside Cemetery in Ozone Park. Some fear this could potentially cause a health risk. (photo courtesy of John Lucker)

Advertisement