

## Chance, Mystery &amp; Warmth

## Case of the Lost (and Found) Tombstone!

By ALBERT W. BLOOM Executive Editor of The Chronicle

The case of the lost (and found) tombstone -- a 76-year mystery!

Twenty-one year old Abram Harris died on the 23rd day, Menachem-Av 5656, corresponding to August 1, 1896.

Seventy-six years and two tombstones later, Jewish concern sparked an investigation that is not yet finished, and may not ever be.

It began simply enough; but before it ended, or rather reached a hiatus if not an ending, it involved a whole spectrum of people and institutions, and respect for the unknown departed.

Greensburg's Robert Davis, of 205 Westmoreland Avenue, was the man who rescued the tombstone, at first believed to be one vandalized from a Jewish cemetery one knew not where.

Visions of the desecrated Mount of Olives in Jerusalem rose before the protagonists of this story -- when Arab Jordanians tore out the gravestones and used them for building walls, to walk upon with muddy feet, to build latrines.

It demonstrates how in Jewish history -- ancient and contemporary -- the twain do meet, and the gut-feelings churn in Pittsburgh and Greensburg because of events 7,000 air miles away, past and present.

It all started simply enough.

Eddie Steinfield, sometime actor and all-time Histradutnik went out to Delmont, Pa. near here, to check on the possible interest of Apple Hill Playhouse in his "Fiddler on the Roof" vignette of Tevye-the-milkman. Sylvia, his wife, went with him.

They drove up to the summer theater place.

"It was closed," Eddie said.

"So I went across the way about 20 feet to what looked like an inhabited inselbric cottage, near a big house.

"As I came to the little house, I went to put my foot down on the step in front.

"There it was -- a tombstone, with Hebrew lettering, facing us, was being used as a stone stoop.

"My foot stopped in mid-air"...

"I thought about Israel and the cemetery in Jerusalem...



HOLDING THE "mysterious" gravestone are, left, Eddie Steinfield and Bob Davis of Greensburg, right.

em...and of nazis, and anti-semitism in our own country."

A call to The Chronicle brought into action and focus a line of investigation and inquiry.

Jews may differ on many things, but there is an ingrained respect for the dead and for their memorials, whether they be etched in stone or in prayers.

Mel Goldberg, of Station WAJB, suggested that Bob Davis, Greensburg community leader and supermarket executive, might be of help.

Bob Davis is the cool, quiet, executive, take-charge, get things-done-without-fuss-or-fanfare type of fellow.

"I do what I can, and do what I have to do, day by day," he mused.

This was different, and special.

It bugged him.

The same visions of Jerusalem, tombstones from the Mount of Olives in Jordanian Arab army latrines, nazis, vandals were conjured up in Bob Davis, as in all of us who were finding ways to probe the matter.

Fortunately, none of the uglier visions were borne out. But the mystery remains.

Bob Davis, who walks with the muscled stride of an athlete, jumped into his jeep.

"I had to find out who owned it.

He put aside his business.

"I immediately went out to find who owned the place and the stone.

It wasn't hard to trace. A motel owner bought the place in 1958. The stone was there then.

Originally, Mr. Davis related, the place was owned by the Alf Martz estate. Mr. Martz died and willed the property to his housekeeper, Anne Shuster.

Earlier in 1958, Mr. Martz apparently sold the property to Mr. Joe Volek of the Delmont Motel.

Miss Shuster died last January at age 91. She left no will.

That cut off all sources of information of how the tombstone got onto the lawn in front of the little cottage in the first place.

When Bob Davis asked how come no one noticed that it was a gravestone with Hebrew lettering, it was pointed out that only recently was the stone turned over to reveal the Hebrew characters.

Then started the effort anew to unravel the mystery wrapped in enigma.

Davis checked out the synagogues in the area between Greensburg and Pittsburgh.

Who knew the sad story of a boy cut down at age 21 back in 1896. His tombstone, beneath the Hebrew initials "paye

noon", "here lies", told an untold story:

"The esteemed young man, Abraham Yehuda, son of Gedalia Zvi Harris, who died on Sunday, the 23rd of Menachem Av in the year 5656, Twenty-one years old. 'May his soul be bound up with the living (in the world beyond.)'"

The paths in the mystery in deepened by a second stone.

It was traced after County Coroner Cyril Wecht instituted a diligent search into the old Allegheny County death records.

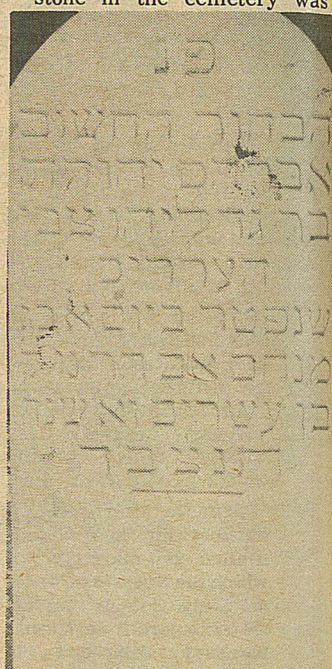
It was Dr. Wecht who confirmed after detailed

No existing trace of the family has been found.

The stone in the cemetery, similar but with some differences and much more weathered than the stone found in Delmont, had a touching inscription in memory of a 21-year-old youth:

"Over these (remains) I weep on the death of my son, the young man Abraham Yehuda, son of Gedalyah Zvi, born in the year 5635, died 23 days in Menachem Av in the year 5656. May his soul be bound up with the living, (in the world beyond).

Mr. Kaplan theorized the stone in the cemetery was



COMPARE The Two: Left is from Beth Hamidrash Hagodol Cemetery while right is from Greensburg.

search of the archives that there was such a person who died here 76 years ago. But there was no cause of death listed on records of that era, Dr. Wecht noted.

That brought the mystery closer. Local synagogues were queried.

Attorney Bernard Kaplan, Pittsburgh community leader, former president of The Jewish Chronicle, and long associated in many official capacities with the historic Beth Hamidrash Hagodol Congregation of Pittsburgh, came up with an answer.

A meticulous search of the old records turned up such a name and such a grave. Located on a plot plan, the Beth Hamedrash, the grave in the Hagodol cemetery in McKees Rocks turned up a weather-beaten stone, with a variation on the inscription.

probably to be replaced by the stone found in Delmont, but for some unknown reason never was delivered.

Thus, the fears of vandals, anti-semitic desecration of a Jewish grave, neo-nazi depredations have all been pretty much eliminated.

But the mystery of the lost -- and found -- gravestone still remains.

Also, the untold story of a young man cut down at age 21 in 1896.

His gravestone, tilted by the winds of life even in death, can be found in Section B, Row 5, No. 13.

People who knew him not, lived to do him honor in 5732, corresponding to 1972...so that in an unexpected way "his soul be bound up with the living."