

Alas, Poor Yankels, We Knew Them Well

Traipsing through a Queens cemetery, resting place for Yiddish literary giants.

The day is cold and gray. The sky hangs low, threatening to shed its tears over the cool granite gravestones. Almost as if God, with poetic insight, had planned this day for a visit to the cemetery.

But wait. The young people gathered around these graves are laughing, singing, reading poetry — anything but mourning. They traipse along the ivy and weed hills on a treasure hunt for their favorite Yiddish authors, resting in peace.

Portnoy, Geliebter, Peskin, Rosenfeld, Charney — Aleichem. Sholom Aleichem. And Abraham Cahan. “I found him!”

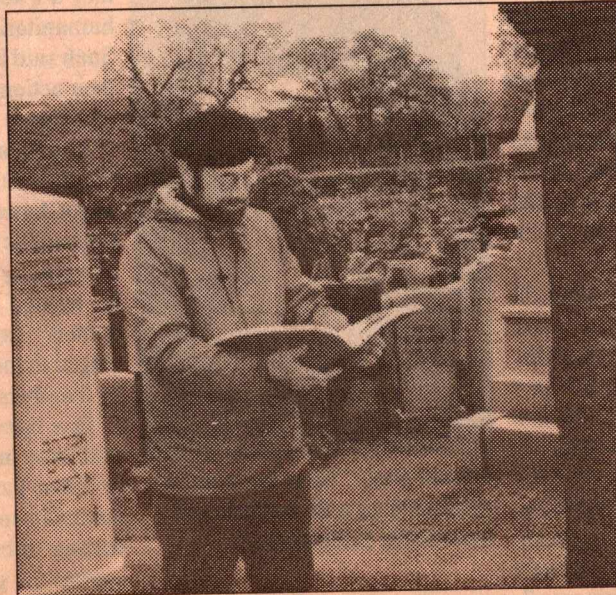
NEW YORK SCENE
JULIE GRUENBAUM FAX
STAFF WRITER

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Roskies, barely containing a skip past the chiseled tributes.

He rests his backpack against a nearby tomb, balances his notebook on the scraggly tip of a headstone. Halpern died a pauper, his grave now overrun with ivy and shorter than the rest. Roskies, a professor of literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary, reads a poem in the *mama loshen*, and his students listen as the throaty, nasal syllables turn into a soft eulogy. Roskies sings a Halpern poem put to music, the students humming softly along, an audience of marble and granite standing at respectful attention in the still and vast amphitheater.

No one in this Workmen's Circle plot in the Old Mount Carmel Cemetery in Glendale, Queens, was born in America. They were all transplants from another time and place, but didn't take long to write their own page as shapers of the American Jewish imagination. They saved these spots for themselves in this exclusive eternal neighborhood — “the pantheon of Yiddish secular culture,” Roskies says — with an “honor row” up



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grave, covered in rocks by pilgrims who visited on his *yahrzeit* the week before. Roskies reads part of Aleichem's dying testament, where he asks that on his *yahrzeit* his happiest stories be read, to “let my name be recalled by them with laughter rather than not be remembered at all.”

Students circle the brown granite tomb, a turreted slab surrounded by obelisks with engraved candles — a far cry from the resting place he imagined, where “the simple graves will adorn my tombstone, even as the plain people have, during my

author and journalist, founder of the Yiddish Daily Forvertz. “The czar of Yiddish American culture,” says Roskies. With his pen in three worlds, he was a bridge between the Russian Socialists, the Jews' America, America's America. He died last of all those resting in this plot of greatness, in 1951, but they saved his place, “imperious in death as in life,” Roskies says.

There are no Jewish stars or menorahs on the graves of these men, all ardent secularists. There are no Hebrew names — no Shlomo Ben David — only pen names; sometimes even family names are omitted in favor of how the world knew them. Sholom Aleichem is buried with his wife, Olga Rabinovitch, the only sign that that was once his name, too.

Their markers tell as much as biographies, this one engraved with the globe of the Arbiter's Ring (Workmen's Circle), another heralding the Bundist's progressive arrows, most giving some final bit of profundity. Later ones have epitaphs not to themselves but to the millions denied graves by the European *churban* (destruction).

Here is the stone of David Herman, director of “The Dybbuk,” with a scene from the movie emblazoned on his grave. As if in a banquet program, the stones list titles and accomplishments — “der pioner fun yidishn sotsyalizm,” “Mitgild fun tsentral-komitet fun Bund in Poyln.”

The road in this cemetery is a path through time. There, crouching on the side of the road, is Mendel Beilis, object of the Russian Jewish blood libel in 1911. World Jewry rallied for him, Bernard Malamud wrote “The Fixer” about him, JTS students huddle around his grave, picking the grass and weeds growing on his epitaph — “Jewish Martyr, 1862-1934.”

We get back on the bus, our shoes wet and grassy with the graves' moisture, and move on to the New Mount Carmel, passing about a half-mile up the road through Glendale. “Real Archie Bunker territory,” someone remarks.

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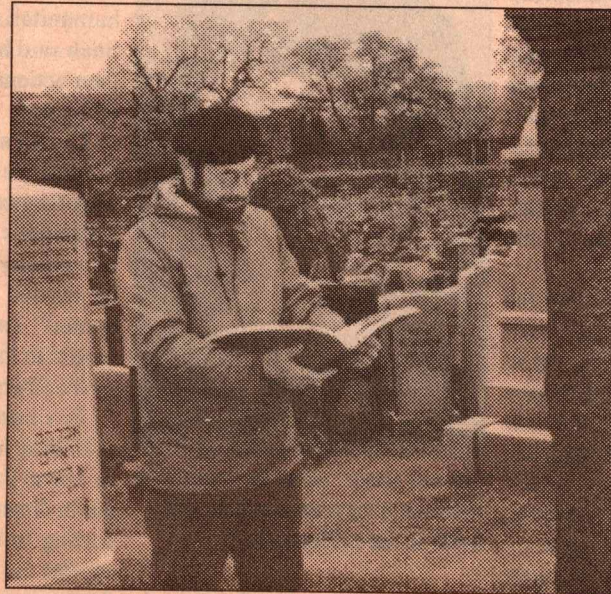
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The students pose for a picture in front of Sholom Aleichem’s



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“Last night,” says one student, “when I was writing a paper about Sholom Aleichem, he was very much alive.”

The most coveted spot in the honor row — to the right of the archway, front and center — is occupied by Abraham Cahan,

author and journalist, founder of the Yiddish Daily Forvertz. “The czar of Yiddish American culture,” says Roskies. With his pen in three worlds, he was a bridge between the Russian Socialists, the Jews’ America, America’s America. He died last of all those resting in this plot of greatness, in 1951, but they saved his place, “imperious in death as in life,” Roskies says.

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We get back on the bus, our shoes wet and grassy with the graves’ moisture, and move on to the New Mount Carmel, passing about a half-mile up the road through Glendale. “Real Archie Bunker territory,” someone remarks.

No one brought a map of the new section and the gatehouse is closed, so we wander along the paths, the gardeners and gravediggers automatically sobering up when they see us. (Is that a skull tossed in the air, do I hear “alas, poor Yorick?”)

We pass a field of Russian immigrants, and the Muscovite students leave the road to wander among the immigrants, perhaps looking for someone they know.

As if by radar we find the Workmen’s Circle plot in the new cemetery. Someone spots the grave of H. Leivik, and then Mani Leib. The students are excited; they have done so much work on both of these poets, and here they are in flesh and blood — sort of.

Soon, the hunt is back on for Anna Margolin, the one woman



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Soon, the hunt is back on for Anna Margolin, the one woman in the bunch, the one students hope can dull the great sense of anachronistic injustice that most of those honored with a plot are men. She is angry, angry that her one solace in life — writing poetry — eluded her for so long. She penned her epitaph 20 years before she died, her last words of poetry:

"She wasted her life/ On trash, on nothing ... Passerby, pity her and be still./ *Zug gurnisht*, Say nothing."

But Roskies and his class like to think she didn't mean it. She knew, after all, there would be passers-by. Maybe she didn't know they wouldn't consider her life trash, her love nothing. She didn't know the students would be asking for her the moment they stepped foot into this graveyard.

Standing watch at the corner of the plot is the pentagonal marker of Artur Zygelboim. It is a Holocaust memorial, appropriate for the man who escaped Warsaw in 1940, refusing to serve on the Judenrat. He became the Bund representative in the Polish government in exile in London, where he worked to save the Jews. In a 1942 meeting with Jan Karski, who brought word to the West of the concentration camps, Zygelboim asked what he can do. If nothing else, Karski said, take your own life.

On May 11, 1943, soon after the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto, Zygelboim gave up his futile efforts and killed himself.

On May 11, 1995, 15 young Americans stand at his grave and say Kaddish.

They say Kaddish, but then softly move on. There's more room in this place, they know, for poetry than tears. □