

Hebrew Epitaphs As a Unique Source for the Study of Jewish History and Genealogy

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Sometimes, even the most inconspicuous piece of information can turn upside down everything thought of as already settled. Sometimes, a whole chain of thought lacks just one link to become an irrefutable statement. A single number or a word has the ability to reshape the world as we know it. It was for that reason that a fiery discussion broke out over a collection of Hebrew epitaphs published in 1872 in Vilnius by a man otherwise not widely known in the scholarly world, the Karaite religious leader Avraham Firkovich.¹ The debate eventually involved such titans of 19th-century Hebrew scholarship as Abraham Harkavy, Adolf Neubauer, Julius Fürst and Heinrich Graetz, along with many lesser-known writers.

While to some authors the debate has still not been entirely settled, it is certainly not as heated anymore. From a layman's viewpoint, the whole controversy seems to have revolved around a few simple numbers that Abraham Firkovich included in his book. The numbers, however, were part of Hebrew inscriptions copied by the author from Karaite tombstones in the Crimea. They denoted dates that proved the arrival of Karaites in this area not only before the creation of the Talmud, but also before the crucifixion of Jesus. Almost every scholar in the field now agrees, however, that Firkovich had cleverly forged the numbers.² Nevertheless, the book laid the vital foundation for the legal separation of Russian Karaites from Russian Jews, enabling the former to enjoy a considerably higher degree of leniency on the part of the tsar than that given to the Ashkenazi community.³ Not only that, the book started a process of "endogenous dejudaization," an internally motivated process of stripping their culture of any Jewish element.⁴ That process eventually resulted in the profound detachment of Eastern European Karaites from their Jewish heritage.⁵

We cannot always expect information found on Jewish tombstones to exert a similarly powerful geopolitical and historical impact, but undeniably it has the capacity to shake the grounds of our genealogical research. Sometimes, information can cast a new light on the history and culture of a community as well. This potential became clear to 19th-century Jewish scholars, many of them part of the Haskalah movement, who started to record and study Hebrew epigraphy, searching for the roots of European Jewish identity. For that purpose, they looked at places considered to be the earliest Jewish strongholds of Europe: Andalusia,⁶ Italy,⁷ Crimea⁸ and Rhineland;⁹ others followed soon after in Kraków,¹⁰ Lviv,¹¹ Vilnius¹² and Southern France.¹³ Jewish scholars meticulously copied inscriptions letter by letter to discover and publicize historical roots of their communi-

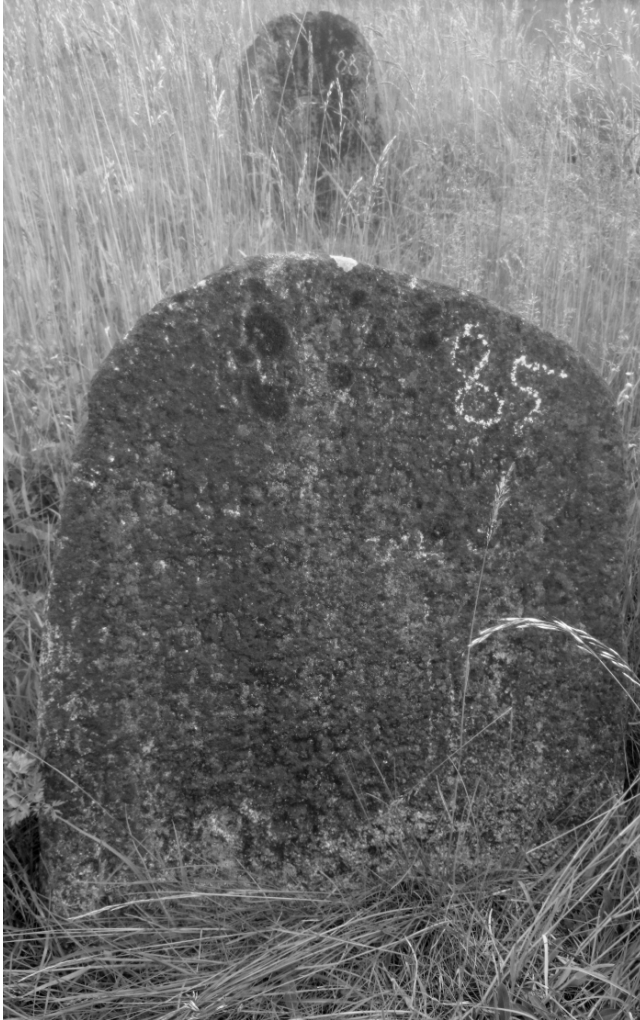
ties and to preserve them in times of increasing assimilation.

After the initial excitement subsided, however, it became clear that, rather than reveal exactly what one wanted to find, tombstone inscriptions provide tidbits of fragmented data that require serious intellectual effort. Important indexing projects still were being undertaken in the early 20th century, but by the 1930s the appetite of the scholarly world had been satisfied to a large degree. With the drop of interest, economics became a factor, as academic centers were no longer motivated to fund costly journeys that resulted in a dozen or two inscriptions of unpredictable scholarly importance. Then, the catastrophic events of World War II demolished European Jewry. Thus, when we look at the bibliography for the study of Hebrew tombstone inscriptions, we see clearly a huge gap in publications on Jewish cemetery inscriptions between the 1950s and the middle of the 1980s.

The anti-systemic, contentious attitude that emerged in Communist countries in the 1980s and pushed people to refuse to partake in social activities recommended either by the rulers or by the opposition, sparked a sudden revival in the study of Jewish cemeteries in Poland.¹⁴ This time, however, the focus was broader and the published results were often interdisciplinary. Cemeteries were studied by heritage conservation specialists, artists, anthropologists, historians and philologists. Dozens of books and articles appeared all over Eastern Europe. Although the vast majority of these works did not meet the standards of a scientific publication, an important academic center formed around Professor Leszek Hońdo of the Kraków University Jewish Cultural Studies Department.

With his students, Professor Hońdo has continued the legacy of the 19th-century scholars and tried to record and translate full inscriptions from Galician Jewish cemeteries. Although the Western world was not initially quick to follow, 1989 saw a drastic change with the fall of Communism and the end of the Cold War. It was now possible for descendants of Eastern European Jews to embark on heritage tours and explore their roots, often shrouded in mystery after the traumas of the 20th century. The resulting Jewish genealogy boom and the realization of the value of even the smallest pieces of preserved information created a new type of interest in Jewish tombstones. For genealogists, tombstones also could be perceived as unique data repositories. Scholarly indexing methods proved obsolete for the new task, as they were too time-consuming and not sufficiently focused on pure genealogical data.

Dozens of independent indexing projects were started all over the world to collect personal information from Jewish



tombstone inscriptions. Some involved people who knew what they were doing; others were amateurish and ill conceived. No universal set of rules for indexers has been published since researchers cherished every piece of data. Hundreds of those projects have been gathered under the umbrella of the JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Registry (JOWBR), and their results taken as a whole provide an impressive mass of information. Upon closer inspection, however, one finds that the quality of data varies greatly and the completeness of many indexes leaves much to be desired.

Warsaw Cemetery Project

I have participated in one such project.¹⁵ It began in 2006 with the indexing of the Warsaw Jewish cemetery, which reportedly holds 133,000 tombstones. The sheer size of the task forced the four of us who responded to the job listing, and had never worked together before, to create rules from scratch. The rules tell us which pieces of information to collect, how to transcribe what we see, how to ensure that our database will be useful to visitors and how not to lose track of what we have done.

We have worked together for four years, collecting in-



Many tombstones are barely readable

formation in the warm months and putting records online in the winter. The first winter we entered ten thousand records in the database, but one thousand turned out to have either the wrong photographs or incorrect numbering. We corrected everything the following spring and adjusted our methods. The next winter, we not only entered many more records, but our error rate dropped by a factor of ten. Now, after nine years, we recently indexed a few cemeteries without the need for any corrections after the first approach. Such an experience is rare, however, and much hard work and experience was needed to reach that point. For these reasons, I tend to have reservations about the usefulness of volunteer-driven indexing projects.

Another novelty that appeared with the renewed interest in cemeteries is the idea of creating cemetery databases from photographs. Two big websites, BillionGraves and MyHeritage, recently organized an event in which volunteers were given cameras and told to photograph tens of thousands of tombstones in Holon, Israel. This might have been an appropriate approach, given that the cemetery in question is quite new, well kept and composed largely of limestone *matzevot* (tombstones) with black inscriptions. However, more and more projects appear that wish to do the same in other Jewish cemeteries, including those in Eastern Europe. Some already have taken place. As photography indeed is faster and easier than recording inscriptions

in the field, last year members of our foundation conducted an experiment for the sake of our project. We photographed 700 tombstones in Radomsko, Poland, and indexed them meticulously from photographs. We chose Radomsko because the tombstones there are big, relatively new and only lightly damaged by time and weather. After nine years of work, we are quite experienced not only in reading data but also in photographing a tombstone the best possible way for indexing. Three months later, we returned to Radomsko with a printout of our database and indexed the same 700 tombstones again, this time in the field. Surprisingly, even to us, working onsite, we gained about 30 percent more personal data. Knowing this, I am concerned about the loss of data that is bound to occur if Eastern European cemeteries are indexed from photographs, especially from photographs taken by inexperienced volunteers.

That said, let us look more closely at what that 30 percent means. The most basic tombstone inscription includes given name, father's given name and date of death. The most complex ones may also include the surname; maiden surname; given name of the husband; age or date of birth; place of origin; occupation; names of illustrious ancestors, sometimes going back to King David and an additional inscription in another language. The typical composition in Central and Eastern Poland starts with the Hebrew letters פ"י ט"ו פ"י,¹⁶ sometimes accompanied by אלוֹן בְּכוֹת¹⁷ or other Biblical references. Then, there usually is a eulogy, which can take the form of an acrostic, a rhymed poem, a collection of quotes from religious books or a few simple adjectives. The eulogy sometimes also includes information about the age, occupation or relations of the deceased. After the eulogy comes the part that is important from the genealogical viewpoint, that is names, dates, places and other data. The formula "Let his/her soul be bound in the bond of life," abbreviated to five letters, תנצב"ה, always follows the date of death.¹⁸

Inscriptions usually are rife with abbreviations that can serve as landmarks for the indexer. For example, when an indexer finds the phrase נפטר for נפטר, he knows that he is between the date of death and the surname (or father's given name, if the surname is not there). If we encounter וי"ל,¹⁹ we will typically find a given name just preceding it. The same applies to גי"י.²⁰ After מ"י,²¹ כ"י,²² or ה"ה,²³ usually is a given name; ב"ר stands for *ben-rav* or *bat-rav* and precedes the father's given name; ל"פ'²⁵ is always written after the year, often in an ornamental way. Among the atypical information encountered in inscriptions are such phrases as שהי' מגדולי מעבילי הענדלער בעיר ווארשא לערך כ',²⁶ *in dankbarer Erinnerung an 31-jähriges treubewährtes Wirken in und mit dem Hause Rappaport*²⁷ or *Prezes Związku Tragarzy w Warszawie, zginął z ręki zbrodniarza, swoje młode życie poświęcił sprawie robotniczej*.²⁸

A tombstone indexed in Białystok in June 2015 was covered with moss and lichen, and the bottom of it had sunk into the soil. Under the moss and lichen, we deciphered the

Foundation for the Documentation of Jewish Cemeteries

The Foundation for the Documentation of Jewish Cemeteries was founded in Warsaw as the result of a successful project to index the Jewish cemetery on Okopowa Street in Warsaw, one of the largest Jewish cemeteries in Europe. Between August 2006 and April 2010, more than 82,000 tombstone inscriptions were photographed, transcribed and made available in an Internet database, www.cemetery.jewish.org.pl.

The original idea came from Emile Karafiol of Chicago, who together with the Warsaw Jewish community helped finance all work, equipment and digitization. After having indexed the Warsaw cemetery, the team decided to continue on its own and in 2010 has indexed all Jewish cemeteries of the province of Mazovia with the support of the Polish Ministry of Culture. In 2012, while planning further projects, the team registered its own foundation and went on to index the remaining Jewish cemeteries in Poland.

Members of the team are Alicja Mroczkowska, an anthropologist and heritage conservation specialist, Remigiusz Sosnowski, minority policies specialist and a member of the Jewish community of Warsaw and Witold Wrzosinski, genealogy specialist with an MA in Hebrew studies. The database now includes more than 100,000 inscriptions from almost 90 cemeteries and is still growing. The foundation was awarded an IAJGS Stern Grant Award at the 2015 IAJGS Conference in Jerusalem for its work as the first Polish organization in the history of IAJGS.

given name of the deceased, Avraham Shlomo, and his father's given name, Leib Fishel. Without further digging, we might have assumed that Fishel was the decedant's surname. Beneath the soil, however, we found the true surname, which was Goldman. At that point, most genealogists would have begun to search for Avraham Shlomo ben Leib Fishel Goldman, born in Białystok. If so, the genealogist would be disappointed, because additional digging revealed the phrase מילידי טיקטין,²⁹ "tikin" being a Yiddish name for Tykocin, a town west of Białystok. In the next lower line of the inscription, we found the exact date of death (1910), but we did not stop there; below that, an even lower line gave Avraham Shlomo Goldman's age as 78. When completely uncovered, tombstone information enabled a potential researcher to find the birth record, as there is, indeed, a birth record for Abram Goldman, son of Lejbuś, registered in Tykocin in 1833, facts we easily established at the JRI-Poland website. This example illustrates the benefit of our "onsite" approach. Once we had the full inscription, research could continue beyond what would have been possible had we not knelt down and dug, if we had simply taken a photograph. Admittedly, on some volunteer projects, participants do clean up tombstones before photographing them, but without knowledge of Hebrew and of the typical composition

of an inscription, they have no idea what to clean up exactly, where to dig and what to leave as is. Furthermore, even with that knowledge, there is no way to prepare some tombstones to be indexed from photographs. Another tombstone from Białystok is made of unpolished granite. From it we were able to extract the given name, father's name and the date of death, but only because we were there. Looking at the photograph, one cannot see a single letter.

The majority of Polish Jewish tombstones look like the two just described. Since few archival collections in Poland remain complete, many inscriptions hold information unavailable from other sources. They may provide a missing link or resolve a confusion that prevented further research. All of the tombstones are in bad condition, and no matter what we do, they will deteriorate and disappear in the coming years. This is why we cannot afford to allow any loss of data when organizing an indexing project.

One may ask what is wrong with incomplete indexing if researchers can always organize yet another project. The answer is simple; as difficult as it already is to raise funds for proper indexing of Jewish cemeteries, it becomes next to impossible if a given cemetery is already registered as indexed or partially indexed. Therefore, if you intend to transcribe a cemetery, keep your eyes open, your hands ready to dig and your mind prepared to do a full indexing in the field.

We should always remember how the idea of indexing tombstone inscriptions emerged. It arose from the need to explore and preserve Jewish culture, identity and history. One can never foresee if the uncovered data affects one's genealogy research, the history of the whole community or even geopolitical processes—as we described at the beginning of this article with the Karaite, Avraham Firkovich. In this context, let us discuss a simple tombstone from 1887 found covered in vegetation among the thousands of other tombstones in the Warsaw Jewish cemetery. Closer inspection proved it to be not only the oldest Karaite tombstone in Poland, but the only one with a Hebrew inscription. No physical division had been erected between this tombstone and typical Ashkenazi graves around it. In addition, a death record registered in Vilnius confirmed the identity of this man and noted the Karaite burial ceremony in the Warsaw Jewish cemetery. This find clearly contradicts the dejudaised identity constructed by Eastern European Karaite leaders at the beginning of the 20th century and proves close ties between the traditional Jewish community and Eastern European Karaite community as late as 1887.³⁰ One can only wonder what further finds, lost somewhere in the world's Jewish cemeteries, await uncovering and careful indexing.

Notes

1. Firkovich A., אבני זכרון לבני ישראל [Avne Zikaron livne Yisrael], Vilnius 1872
2. Nosonovsky M., *Hebrew Inscriptions from Ukraine and Former Soviet Union*, Washington 2006, pp. 163–164, also Shapira D., *Yitshaq Sangari Sangarit, Bezalel Stern, and Avraham Firkowicz: Notes on Two Forged Inscriptions*, Archivum Eurasii Medii Aevi 12 (2002–2003), pp. 223–260, and Kizilov M., *Karaites through the Travelers' Eyes*, New York 2003, pp. 244–

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3. Miller Ph., *Karaite Separatism in Nineteenth-century Russia*, Cincinnati 1993
4. Freund R., *Karaites and Dejudaization*, ACTA Universitas Stockholmiensis 30 (1991)
5. Freund R., *Karaites and Dejudaization*, ACTA Universitas Stockholmiensis 30 (1991)
6. Almanzi G., Pardo J. H., Luzzato S. D., אבני זכרון [Avne Zikaron], Prague 1841
7. Ascoli G. J., *Inscrizioni inedite o mal mote greche, latine, ebraiche, di antichi sepolchri giudaici del Napolitano*, Torino e Roma, 1880
8. Chwolson D., *Corpus Inscriptionum Hebraicarum*, S. Petersburg 1882
9. Lewysohn L., נפשות צדיקים [Nafshot Tsadikim], Frankfurt-on-the-Main 1855
10. Buber S., אנשי שם [Anshe Shem], Cracow 1895
11. Bałaban M., *Dzielnica żydowska. Jej dzieje i zabytki*, Lwów 1909
12. Finn Sh., קריה נאמנה [Kirya Ne'emanah], Vilnius 1860
13. Schwab M., *Inscriptions hébraïques de la France*, Paris 1898
14. Nosonovsky M., *Hebrew Inscriptions from Ukraine and Former Soviet Union*, Washington 2006, p. 17
15. www.cemetery.jewish.org.pl
16. פה נשמן, פה טמון “here is buried”
17. “oak of crying”, Genesis 35:8
18. תהי נשמתי/נשמתי צרורה בצרור ההיים, a reference to Samuel 25:29
19. זכרון לברכה, “of blessed memory”
20. גרו יאיר, “may his candle burn” for fathers who lived through their childrens' death
21. מורה והרב, literally “the teacher and rabbi”, often used as a synonym of “the respected”
22. כבוד מר, “the respected”
23. הרב הגדול, literally “the great rabbi”, often used as a synonym of “the respected”
24. בת רב or בן רב
25. לפרט קתן, “in the abbreviated system”
26. “for twenty years, he was one of the greatest furniture traders of Warsaw”
27. “with grateful memory of 31 years of trustworthy work in and with the house of Rappaport”
28. “Chairman of the Porters Association, died from the hand of a criminal and gave away his young life to the working people's cause”
29. “born in Tykocin”
30. Wrzosiński W., *Der älteste karäische Grabstein in Polen und seine hebräische Inschrift [w:] Judaica, Beiträge zum Verstehen des Judentums*, Stiftung Zürcher Lehrhaus 2014, s. 198–219.

Witold Wrzosiński was born in 1980 in Warsaw, Poland, where he still lives, and graduated in Hebrew Studies in 2006. He runs Avanim, a genealogy research center, as well as the Foundation for Documentation of Jewish Cemeteries, which has indexed almost 100,000 tombstone inscriptions and received a Stern Grant from IAJGS in 2015. Wrzosiński created the Hebrew transcription system for the Polin Museum in Warsaw.