

*The primary sources will last forever! (Shlomo Simonsohn z"l)*

I am delighted to share with you the exciting news which just reached me:

**The Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center at Tel Aviv University is pleased to present the Digitized Database of Jewish Cemeteries in Turkey, in Memory of Prof. Bernard Lewis z"l. The database is the culmination of many years of dedicated research by Prof. Minna Rozen, and it provides access to a truly unique collection which combines digital images and textual content of over 61,000 Jewish gravestones from a variety of communities in Turkey from 1583 until 1990. The website offers a sophisticated research platform that enables a very broad range of search options, including the epigraphical content of the gravestones, the materials used, and their ornamental elements. This website is unique in the academic world both for its sheer size and for the research opportunities it opens up to its users.**

**The beta version of the computerized database is available now:**

**[A WORLD BEYOND: JEWISH CEMETERIES IN TURKEY 1583-1990](#)**

**[A Digitized Database in Memory of Prof. Bernard Lewis](#)**

**We are doing our best to correct errors and improve the database. Suggestions and comments by users are welcomed.**

The origins of the database lay in a conversation that took place during the mid-1980s, between Prof. Bernard Lewis z"l, one of the great historians of the Ottoman Empire and Muslim world, and a Turkish friend named Nuri Arlasız, an avid collector of Ottoman art. Nuri Bey, to whom no beauty in the world was alien, urged Prof. Lewis to help save the Jewish cemeteries of Istanbul and prevent their treasures from being plundered or destroyed by natural causes. Then in 1987, a group of

Istanbuli Jews got together and organized a series of events marking the 500th anniversary of Spanish Jewish settlement in the Ottoman Empire, to be held in 1992. Sanctioned by the Turkish Republic, the enterprise was headed by the businessman Jak Kamhi.

Rather than seeking to preserve and restore the Jewish cemeteries, Prof. Lewis – whose vision and support defined this project – proposed that they should be documented, understanding that they would have little chance of surviving in the absence of a live Jewish community and in a culture in which tombs are generally not venerated.

In consequence of this initiative, I was sent to Istanbul in the summer of 1987 to examine the feasibility of the project. After I created a work plan for the project, an agreement was reached between the Quincentennial Foundation (500 Yil Vakfi)—established by Turkish Jewry to mark the 500th jubilee of Spanish Jewish settlement in the Ottoman Empire —and the Annenberg Institute in Philadelphia, then directed by Prof. Lewis, for the implementation of the work.

I took an extended sabbatical from Tel Aviv University, spending two years (1988–1990) documenting the Jewish cemeteries across Turkey. During this time, a team of two photographers, twenty workers, and three research assistants cleaned up, mapped, photographed, and arranged over 100,000 photos of 61,022 Jewish tombstones. Not all the cemeteries in the country were documented, an emphasis being placed on the most ancient and those under threat of disappearance due to urban expansion or neglect. Unfortunately, by the time I returned to Israel with the fruit of our research, the resources available at the the Annenberg Institute dried out.

At this point, we were most fortunate that Prof. Lewis stepped in personally, through Tel Aviv University, with a very generous gift, which enabled the deciphering of the inscriptions and the digitalization of the photos. The Israel Science Foundation awarded us a very generous grant for the same purpose. The deciphering and scanning of the inscriptions,

carried out under my supervision and guidance, continued until 1999. At the same time, I worked with Mr. Jacob Feigerson to design a research software to extract the greatest possible amount of historical information from the material. This formed the basis for the website that is now being launched, which was also built by Mr. Feigerson. Over the years, I have continued to correct and improve the content of the database. I am now delighted to present you with the beta version of this monumental project, which we are continually laboring to improve and perfect. Since the creation of the very first version of the program, the database has served as the bedrock for numerous studies published by me and my students.

The Diaspora Research Institute, which has since become the Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center, served throughout all the years as a solid anchor, ensuring the completion of this immense project. Prof. Shlomo Simonsohn ז"ל – who was my teacher and mentor, the Director of the Institute until 1992, and the head of the Department of Jewish History at Tel Aviv University during the period in which I conducted the fieldwork for the project – encouraged me to undertake this adventure. When I approached him to request unpaid leave for two years, not something recommended for a young lecturer who had hopes of keeping her job, he firmly declared: "Of course. You should go! Primary sources – their importance cannot be contravened. They will always stay with us. Historiography has a tendency to change with each passing breeze, but the primary sources will remain as they are, true to themselves, for the reader!" Today I doubt even that, at the same time, the kind of primary material provided by this website, when used in huge numbers, is truly a historical source that cannot be distorted. Prof. Simonsohn aided me with sage advice before my trip, and after my return – when, upon his retirement, I was appointed Director of the Institute – he continued to guide me. Two years ago, funding was obtained to expand the initial research database into the current website, making it openly available to the general public, scholars and students, and all those interested in

genealogical research, and it is no coincidence that this was accomplished at the initiative of the Center's current Director, Prof. Simha Goldin, himself another student of Prof. Simonsohn.

Please dig in and explore the website thoroughly! If you have any questions or comments, please send them to [diaspora@taux.tau.ac.il](mailto:diaspora@taux.tau.ac.il).