

Secrets of the Tomb

Jewish cemeteries in Turkey are saved—on computer disc

Gravestones seem unlikely candidates for computerization, but that's exactly what was needed in order to preserve a vital source of information on Turkish Jewry in the Ottoman period. Starting in 1987, over 60,000 stones from Jewish cemeteries all over the country have been catalogued, photographed, and their inscriptions fed into a database, in an epic research project headed by Prof. Minna Rozen, director of TAU's Diaspora Research Institute.

The story began in 1981, tells Prof. Rozen, when Prof. Bernard Lewis, Princeton historian and member

of TAU's Sackler Institute of Advanced Studies, was visiting Istanbul. As usual, Lewis met with his good friend Nuri Arlasez, an art collector, who told him that the old Jewish cemeteries in Istanbul were being built on or paved over under the crush of migration to the city. Arlasez added that he had tried to get the local Jewish community to save the graveyards from destruction, but they did not take action.

A visit to the Jewish cemetery in Kuzguncuk, on the Asian shore of the Bosphorus, convinced Lewis of the importance of the matter, and over the

next six years he tried to organize the salvage of these testimonies to the local Jewish past.



An 18th century marble tombstone from the cemetery in Istanbul's Haskoy neighborhood

Rescue mission

Upon Prof. Lewis's appointment to the directorship of Philadelphia's Annenberg Institute in 1987, he proposed the project to TAU's Minna Rozen. "As odd as it sounds," says Prof. Rozen, "the conversation between Arlasez and Prof. Lewis forged in the latter an uncompromising commitment. It is odd, because Arlasez is not Jewish, and Prof. Lewis is an orientalist, whose particular area of expertise is not Jewish history. The common thread between them was a love of beauty and an awareness of the importance of preserving the past."

Prof. Rozen also points out that, in early 1987, relations between Israel and Turkey were far from what they are today. Very few Israelis obtained research visas or access to Ottoman archives. During the course of her Turkish stay, however, there was a marked warming in relations between the two countries, making possible the outstanding help she received from the Turkish authorities. It was also at that time that preparations for the commemoration of 500 years of Spanish-Jewish settlement in the Ottoman Empire commenced, and the "Quincentennial Foundation," which helped finance Prof. Rozen's field work, was established. Additional funding for the project came from the Annenberg Institute and TAU.

60,000 photos

From 1987-90, Prof. Rozen's team surveyed Turkey's surviving Jewish cemeteries, as well as other vestiges of Jewish settlement during the Ottoman period, such as archives, libraries, buildings, and religious art. The most arduous task was photographing and classifying the tens of thousands of Jewish tombstones. Thus far, about one-third of the raw data on the stones has been computerized. Categories in the database include the stone type and size; name of the deceased; cause of death; sex, age and profession of the deceased; and the language of the inscription.



The pictures of the tombstones will also be scanned into the database, using software designed specifically for the project. Researchers will thus be able to see images relevant to the requested information.

When the project is completed, scholars will gain a broader picture of the social and cultural history of Turkish Jewry in the Ottoman period, and will be able to apply this computerized research tool to any other major survey of

Clusters of fruit symbolize femininity on this late 18th century fragment from a woman's tomb.

physical artifacts. In addition, any Jew of Turkish descent will be able to trace his family tree and even see a picture of the graves of his forefathers.

Prof. Rozen plans to expand the project to include all the countries of the Ottoman Empire. Under survey currently are the Jewish cemeteries of Bulgaria, and it is hoped that Greece and Albania will be documented next. ■



A burial cave from the 17th century