

Keeper of the Graves

Until just a few months ago, no one knew about the burning passion that consumed every waking moment of Angelika Brosig. This German woman, with no family or children of her own, has devoted her life and savings to the upkeep and restoration of an abandoned Jewish cemetery. It was only when Rabbi Dovid Shapiro began piecing together the fragments of genealogical information about his German-born family, that he stumbled across the amazing work of Angelika. And though he'd never dreamed that his genealogical search would culminate in a trip to Berlin, the discovery of this selfless German woman prompted the Shapiros to undertake a trip that was at once dark and heartening, tragic yet moving

Debbie Shapiro

“It all started out when my nearly deaf uncle, Karl Shapiro, learned how to use e-mail. It opened up a whole new world to him — and to me.” I was sitting across the supper table from my husband, Dovid Shapiro, listening to him describe the amazing chain of events that was to culminate in our traveling to Berlin, where we were to attend an official reception to honor five German non-Jews.

My husband Dovid is, among many other things, an amateur genealogist. He has succeeded in tracing one branch of his family tree back to the year 1620. Whereas other people relax with the latest copy of **Mishpacha**, Dovid unwinds by piecing together the many different puzzles of his family history.

Dovid continued, “Although my paternal grandmother, Henrietta née Shulman, was a third-generation American, she was extremely proud of her German-Jewish roots. She spoke fluent German and stayed in close contact with her extended family in Germany. After the Nazis rose to power, she succeeded in bringing several distant cousins to the United States, and they were much more familiar with our family history. Many years later, a distant cousin informed me that the names of my grandmother’s great-grandparents (my great-great-great-grandparents) were Yosef Loeb and Pessl (daughter of Bessl) Shulman (née Winter).

“But that’s as much as I knew, until nearly-deaf Uncle Karl informed me (via e-mail, of course) that the Shulmans had lived in Wassertruedingen.”

Wassertruedingen is a town in Middle Franconia, which, for those of us not familiar with German geography, is a section of northern Bavaria. It occupies a prominent spot on the Jewish map: known by the Jews as Wassertrilling, it was mentioned by the Chida in some of his books.

Although the puzzle was beginning to take form, huge chunks were still missing. “Several years later,” Dovid continued, “I saw a notice that the Nuremberg Genealogical Society had prepared a CD of the Jewish metrical (census) records of Middle Franconia. Although there was no resident by the name of Yosef Loeb in the census listing for Wassertruedingen, that name did appear in the listing for the nearby village of Moenchsroth. (I later learned that his wife was born in Wassertruedingen).

“All the pieces fit; the Yosef Loeb listed on the census record was the approximate age of my great-great-great grandfather. Not only that; he had two sons, Heinlein and Lazarus, who immigrated to America. Those names were very familiar to me — albeit in their American incarnations. Heinlein, my great-great-grandfather, Americanized his name to Henry, and Lazarus, my great-great-uncle, used the name Louis.

“With more research, I learned that the Jews of Moenchsroth, together with the Jews of Wittelschhofen, Feuchtwangen, and Dinkelsbuehl, all buried their dead in the Schopfloch cemetery.”

It seemed, at first, to be the end of the story — a story that ended, for most of the Jews on that census, with a peaceful rest in the Schopfloch cemetery. But the story had really just begun.

Germany’s gravestones tell a story many would rather ignore; Angelika Brosig listened to their silent call

Photos: A.P. Ruetters