Remains of Jacob Weinthal are laid to rest—after a 100-year delay

BY ROBERT A. COHN
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Monday afternoon at New Mount Sinai Cemetery, 15 people gathered for the funeral of a man they had never met. In fact, the man died decades before anyone attending was born.

One hundred years after his death, Jacob Weinthal’s remains were laid to rest during a service led by Rabbi Susan Talve and attended by a minyan of strangers who could recite Kaddish.

I have written hundreds of obituary stories for the St. Louis Jewish Light over the past four decades, but this one, about Mr. Weinthal’s burial, is by far the most unusual.

Mr. Weinthal, a native of Germany, immigrated to St. Louis in 1892; he was 52 at the time. He entered the U.S. in 1895, according to Pat Weinthal, his distant cousin, who resides just outside of Boston.

Mr. Weinthal was a bachelor with no known survivors. He was an upholsterer and saddle maker in what was probably a one-person operation. Later Mr. Weinthal became a resident of the Home for Aged and Infirm Israelites, one of the two original facilities for frail elderly members of the local Jewish community.

On Jan. 2, 1916, Mr. Weinthal executed a will, leaving everything to the care of the Aged and Infirm Israelites. Mr. Weinthal died on April 9, 1917, at the age of 77. His cause of death was listed as anemia and arteriosclerosis, a term often associated with dementia in the early part of the 20th century. Since Mr. Weinthal had no local family to claim his body, and was apparently indigent, his remains were cremated and were stored initially at the Hillcrest Abbey Crematory. Around 1998, they were transferred to the Valhalla Cemetery in North County, which has thousands of unclaimed sets of remains.

The box containing Mr. Weinthal’s remains was stored at Valhalla for decades until Pat Weinthal set in motion through emails and phone calls a search to locate the remains and then plan a proper Jewish funeral in a Jewish cemetery.

The president turned to the families at the ceremony and said: “Dear bereaved parents, the living that privilege. You paid the price. The price of our liberty purchased in blood.”

Rivlin also called for continued efforts to bring home the bodies of two soldiers that remain held by Hamas in Gaza since the 2014 war.

There are 9,157 bereaved parents, 4,881 widows, and 1,843 orphans under the age of 30 of killed Israeli soldiers and security officers, according to the Defense Ministry.

A second siren, lasting two minutes, for Memorial Day ended at 8 p.m. Monday. Following that siren, the national ceremony for the fallen soldiers was held at the national cemetery at Mount Herzl, and ceremonies were held at military cemeteries throughout Israel. Two hours later, a ceremony in remembrance of terror victims also was held at Mount Herzl.

During Memorial Day, regular television programming and entertainment is suspended. The names and ranks of every killed soldier are shown on a 24-hour television broadcast, each flashed on the screen for several seconds. Memorial Day ended at 8 p.m. Monday with a ceremony on Mount Herzl, including the lighting of 12 torches that heralds the start of Independence Day.
Burial: Jacob Weinthal’s remains laid to rest 100 years after his death

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“It felt uneasily and unjust that the remains of this citizen of St. Louis were treated ignominiously. Now at last he will get the decent Jewish burial he deserves,” Pat Weinthal said.

In early March, Pat Weinthal reached out by email to me to enlist my help in tracking down her relative’s remains. I connected her with Diane Everman, director of the St. Louis Jewish Community Archives at the Brodsky Library, and Daniel Brodsky, executive director of New Mt. Sinai Cemetery.

With Everman and Brodsky’s help, the remains were found and transferred to New Mt. Sinai. Brodsky got approval from the cemetery’s board to provide a grave space for Mr. Weinthal’s remains to be interred.

Rabbi Talve of Central Reform Congregation joined in the effort and organized a minyan to attend out of respect for Mr. Weinthal.

At the service Monday, Talve addressed remarks to the open grave for Jacob Weinthal in a moving, conversational tone.

“Well, Jacob, I guess you did not expect a woman rabbi would be addressing you at your funeral,” she said, before paying tribute to the life and work of Mr. Weinthal. She also praised the work of his distant cousin, Pat Weinthal, who was unable to attend the service.

Also offering remarks at the service were Rabbi James Stone Goodman of Neve Shalom and Rav Shulamit Cenker. Leslie Caplan chanted “El Maleh Neve Shalom and Rav Shulamit Cenker. Were Rabbi James Stone Goodman of New Mt. Sinai Cemetery.

After Kaddish was recited, those in attendance gently shoveled the earth into Jacob Weinthal’s grave to bring a literal “closure” to the century-long journey from his death to his burial.

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“May Jacob Weinthal find perfect rest in the shadow of God’s wings, and may his memory be for a blessing.

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