



Bringing Uncle Ben to Jerusalem

The journey to bring a beloved relative home for burial from lonely Czestochowa

• DAVID OLIVESTONE

Interest in Jewish genealogy has mushroomed in recent years as increasing information has become easily accessible online. These resources offer multiple pathways to discovering the names, birthplaces, marriages, gravesites, and often even more details about our ancestors. Many families take great pleasure and pride in learning about the generations who lived 100, 200, and even 300-plus years ago. Often, this leads them back to the present day, as they discover family connections around the world and distant relatives whose existence they could not otherwise have known of.

My own fascination with our family history began after my brothers and I had left our native England and I realized that we had no record of where our grandparents were buried. During my next visit to London, as a result of becoming more curious about them and the generations that preceded them, I documented and photographed their graves.

Together with my brother Cedric, I researched all the information I could find about our family history, on both sides. There was not a lot to discover about our mother's family, whose name was Weisrose, apart from the inevitable, sad list of names in a post-Holocaust *yizkor* (remembrance) book from the Polish town of Sierpc, where the family had lived. Cedric also went to visit Sierpc. The Jewish cemetery, destroyed by the Nazis, had been partially restored, but otherwise, there was

hardly a trace of the former community.

We were able to find out a lot more about our father's side, noticing first that the original family name, Oliwstein, appeared in many confusing Polish spellings with multiple consonants in unfamiliar combinations. But there was information to be found in the pages of the rabbinic works of some of our forebears, as well as online. One of these, a work of *hiddushei Torah* (rabbinic insights) entitled *Metzudat Benzion*, was written by our great-great uncle Rabbi Benzion Oliwstein.

In the preface to his book, he relates whatever he knew about the family's ancestry, including a tradition that we are descended from the famous French 11th-12th century biblical and Talmudic commentator Rashi. Charmingly, Rabbi Benzion adds a personal detail, saying that he is "now over 70 years

FAMILY MEMBERS cover the remains with the soil of Jerusalem.

CEDRIC OLIVESTONE scrapes dirt from the fallen tombstone.
(Photos: Olivestone family)



old, and so there would be no value in pursuing falsehoods.”

At some point, Cedric made contact with a distant cousin, a successful European businesswoman and philanthropist, previously unknown to us, whose own deep interest in the family had led her to hire a professional genealogist to investigate and chart the Oliwenstein lineage. We combined and integrated our information with hers, and Cedric committed himself fully to the project.

Cedric traveled to Poland several times to locate and copy birth, marriage, and death certificates that were still on file and open to inspection in various town halls and archives in and around Warsaw, where our father was born and where most of our Polish family lived. Through these and other records, we were able to trace successive generations of our family in Poland back to the 1700s in some detail.

This process culminated in over 70 family members from all around the world, many of whom did not previously know each other, gathering in Warsaw in 2012 for an extraordinary three-day family reunion. We were a diverse group of professionals, physicians, scientists, businesspeople, and people from many other walks of life, some religiously observant, others with less of a connection to their Jewish heritage.

It also resulted in the production of a richly illustrated 750-page book, with over 1,000 profiles of Oliwensteins through the generations to the present day. About 50 of the original birth, marriage, and death certificates from Poland were reproduced there.

Among the many fascinating biographies was that of the Talmudic scholar Rabbi Benzion. As we learned more about him and became more involved with his story, we started referring to him fondly as “Uncle Ben.”

A Hassid of the Gerrer rebbe, Uncle Ben was born around 1830, probably in Warsaw. He was a teacher of Talmud who supplemented his income by working as a trader. He wrote that he was very poor, yet determined to fulfill his mother’s wish that he become a scholar and write books.

According to an account by one of his nephews, Benzion was well known to be a man of great learning, integrity, and humility. In 1892 he moved to the city of Czestochowa (Yiddish: Tchenstochov) in the south of Poland, where he served as a *dayan* (rabbinical judge).

His wife, Leah, and only surviving child, Yitzhak Meir, had passed away before he moved to Czestochowa. Therefore,



when he died in 1908, he was the only one to be buried in the Jewish cemetery there. On one of his trips to Poland, Cedric decided to visit Uncle Ben’s *kever* (grave), the location of which was documented online.

“I had spent a day exploring the family graves in the great Okopowa cemetery in Warsaw,” Cedric explained, “so I decided to go to Czestochowa to visit the grave of our relative there also.”

The Czestochowa Jewish cemetery, which dates back to the late 18th century, is the third-largest Jewish cemetery in Poland, containing about 5,000 graves, as well as the mass grave of hundreds of Jews executed on the spot by the Nazis in 1943. But on his first visit to the dense, overgrown, and largely neglected cemetery, Cedric was unable to locate the grave, despite having its numbered location.

A few months later, he tried again. While searching in the area where the grave was supposed to be, he recalled that “suddenly I felt the ground beneath me to be harder than the surrounding soil.” With nothing more than a credit card with which to work, he scraped away the soil, revealing a massive tombstone with the name “Benzion Oliwenstein” inscribed on the top.



THE TOMBSTONE is put back on its pedestal.

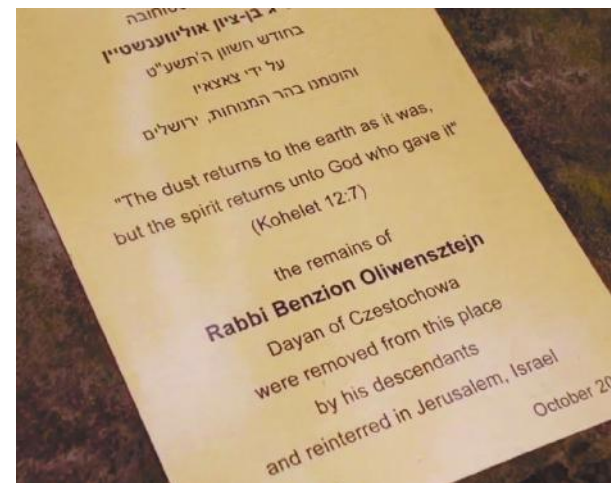
(L TO R) Brothers Cedric, David, and Ellis Olivestone visit the original grave in Czestochowa.

THE FAMILY stands at a respectful distance as the team searches the grave.

RABBI HAIM EDELIS encouraged the reburial.

AFTER THE exhumation, this plaque was attached to the tombstone on the empty grave.

(Below) COMING HOME: Uncle Ben's bundle of remains is brought to the new grave on Jerusalem's Har Hamenuchot.



Apparently, at some point, the stone had become dislodged from its pedestal, and luckily the team that had numbered the graves had turned it face up in order to identify it. Within a short while, and with the involvement and assistance of our newly found cousin who had an office in Warsaw and gave her support to this whole endeavor, the stone was re-erected.

The inscription told us that Rabbi Benzion had been “a righteous teacher for 40 years... his students were innumerable, and his interpretations of Talmud, commentaries, law, and lore were definitive.”

CEDRIC WAS considerably bothered by the fact that while the rest of our Polish ancestors were buried in Warsaw's well-known and well-tended Okopowa cemetery, Uncle Ben was all alone in that forlorn cemetery in Czestochowa.

“I thought about it for a long while,” he said, “and then I sought advice from a young gifted rabbi from Tel Aviv, Rabbi Haim Edelis, whose classes I was attending. He encouraged me to bring Uncle Ben's remains to be reburied in Jerusalem and said it would be a *zechut*, a very meritorious deed, for Uncle Ben and for all involved.”

Moreover, Edelis stressed that if Harav Benzion was a true *tzadik*, truly righteous, then his skeleton would be found intact, even after more than a century in the grave. Cedric discussed the plan with various family members and received their support.

Thus began a seven-year saga of bureaucratic twists and turns that would have deterred anyone less determined than my brother.

“One of the main things I inherited from my father,” he asserted, “was tenacity.”

Returning to Poland, Cedric met with the country's chief rabbi, Michael Shudrich, and obtained his approval for the exhumation and export of the remains. His next meeting was with Polish funeral director Piotr Godlewski, who had many years of experience dealing with the enormous Polish bureaucracy that would need to be navigated.

The list of the documents, permits, powers of attorney, and affidavits that Godlewski told him would be required was extensive. Those in Hebrew and English would have to be translated into Polish – and vice versa – with the authorities in Poland and in Israel approving each step.

But did Godlewski think that after well over a century, any remains would be found in the grave? On this, he reserved judgment.

The first requirement of the Polish authorities was to show proof that a new grave had been purchased in the destination country.

My brother and I met with the congenial, yet dignified Chananya Shachor, director of Kehilat Yerushalayim, the burial society that is the largest stakeholder in Jerusalem's Har Hamenuhot cemetery. He listened patiently to our proposal to exhume and

rebury the contents of a century-old grave but expressed his doubt that anything would be found.

He speculated that even apart from the natural forces at work, the ground beneath could have shifted due to heavy rains or any other harsh weather conditions. On the other hand, he suggested that perhaps Poland's freezing winters might have helped preserve the remains.

And so, while reserving a grave for Uncle Ben in a prominent location not far from Har Hamenuhot's main entrance, we negotiated for the right to get the down payment returned in the event that we found nothing to rebury.

Over the next year or so, all the necessary forms were completed, and all the affidavits and powers of attorney were submitted. But before agreeing to grant the request to open the grave, the Czestochowa authorities stipulated that they needed approval from the owner of the cemetery, which in theory was the city's Jewish community.

However, it was no secret that the Czestochowa Jewish community had long since ceased to exist.

When alerted to this conundrum, Rabbi Shudrich made a phone call to the leadership of the closest community, in Katowice. Although it was their responsibility to oversee all Jewish matters in the region, they declared that they could not endorse anything regarding the Czestochowa cemetery, as doing so might be indicative of their recognizing responsibility toward it – and thus being required to pay for its upkeep and maintenance – which they made abundantly clear they could not do.

AND SO there the matter stood for four years, during which the Czestochowa authorities refused to budge. Repeated inquiries were met with continued deferrals. Then, in August 2018, with no explanation offered, permission was suddenly granted for the exhumation to proceed. Cedric had to fly back to Poland to sign various additional forms identifying him as next of kin, but now arrangements could be made.

According to Polish law, exhumations are allowed to take place only during the winter months, and so the date was set for Tuesday, October 16, with the reburial in Jerusalem planned for two days later, provided, of course, that sufficient remains were indeed found. Shudrich arranged for two members of the Warsaw burial society to attend; Godlewski, the funeral director, hired some local gravediggers; and the city authorities said they would be sending inspectors from the Czestochowa sanitary department.

Nevertheless, at this point, even though all the local requirements had been met, two permissions that had been expected to come through were still missing.

The Polish government had not yet issued a permit for the remains to be exported, and the Israeli government had not yet granted permission for the remains to be imported. Godlewski was able to arrange



things on the Polish side. Although from the Thursday before the planned exhumation, and even after, at Cedric's request, Shudrich had intervened personally with the Israeli ambassador to Poland, the Israeli consulate in Warsaw was still unresponsive.

On the day before the planned exhumation, still with no permission from Israel in hand, Cedric decided to fly to Poland anyway.

"After all the effort we had already put in," he reckoned, "I couldn't believe it wasn't going to happen."

He arrived in Warsaw early on Monday morning, October 15, and found that a noon appointment at the Israeli consulate had been arranged for him and Magda Braksator (the head of our cousin's Warsaw office), who had been very involved and helpful all through the process.

My brother – who as the head of international relations for Bank Leumi for many years visited numerous Israeli embassies and consulates around the world – said the security procedures in Warsaw were "the most severe I have experienced anywhere."

Eventually, they were ushered to a counter where an unsmiling Israeli clerk sat behind a glass panel. The clerk, whom Cedric described as having "no imagination and no sense of humor," set about examining and reexamining the voluminous file of documents that Cedric had brought.

Then, to Cedric's exasperation, he pronounced there was yet one more form that needed to be filled out, and he started asking him detailed questions about the circumstances of Uncle Ben's death. Giving answers to such questions as the date and place of death, etc., went easily enough. But then he asked for the name of the doctor who signed the death certificate.

Cedric, of course, had no way of knowing and began to try explaining that to the clerk, who kept insisting on an answer. Cedric suggested that perhaps he was called Dr. Cohen.

"And what was the cause of death?" the clerk demanded.

"I tried again to tell him this happened in 1908," Cedric recounted, "but he just kept repeating that the form had to be completed in full with no blanks. So I decided that Uncle Ben had died of a heart attack, which seemed to satisfy him."

And so it went on and on, until the consul himself, who must have been alerted to the situation, appeared in the office and told the clerk to just get it done. Not to be outmaneuvered so easily, the clerk said he could not sign the import permission form until he saw a copy of the export permit granted by the Polish government.

"But when the consul heard that Mr. Godlewski was handling that," Cedric recalled, "he told the clerk to sign and stamp the form without any more delay, as he knew Mr. Godlewski was always true to his word."

SO NOW the only question was whether any remains would be found of a body buried 110 years previously.

On that Tuesday morning, a dozen people gathered around Uncle Ben's grave: Cedric with his wife, Liz, and his son Rabbi Yuval Olivestone, who had traveled with him in order to witness the event; Braksator; two members of the Warsaw *hevra kadisha* (burial society); Godlewski and his three gravediggers; and two inspectors from the Czeszochowa sanitary department. They were there for nearly six hours.

Once the heavy tombstone was removed, Cedric noted, "One of the young men from the burial society asked us to step away and to stand at a distance of 10 meters or so from the grave, out of respect for what was about to take place. What he meant was that it wasn't a show. I was very impressed by that and by the care and dignity, and the exemplary manner in which they carried out their work."

After the gravediggers had dug out and cleared away



CEDRIC RECOUNTS the saga of bringing the remains to Jerusalem.

most of the soil from the grave, the members of the *hevra kadisha* took over. They soon called out that they had found some bones. In fact, very close to 100% of Uncle Ben's entire skeleton was recovered.

Cedric immediately recalled Rabbi Edelis's prediction that Harav Benzion was a true *tzadik*. "All the tension which had built up in me over the previous years suddenly dissipated," he remembered, "and I broke down and cried for several minutes."

The bones were carefully wrapped in a cloth bundle, then in a *tallit* that Cedric had brought from Israel, and were finally placed into a small coffin that Godlewski had prepared. After it was sealed, the coffin was taken to Warsaw, where it would be brought to the airport the next day for the flight to Israel.

Before they all left that bleak cemetery for the last time, the empty grave was refilled with earth and the stone was re-erected. A plaque was attached to the stone, recording, in both Hebrew and English, that the remains of the *dayan* of Czeszochowa had been removed by his descendants, to be re-interred in Israel.

TWO DAYS later, we gathered at Har Hamenuhot in Jerusalem, together with family members and friends we had previously invited to attend the ceremony. It's not often that you can give people a week's notice to come to a funeral! The members of the Jerusalem burial society were fascinated by the unusual event and treated it with great solemnity. One of them told me they had never seen bones so well preserved after such a long time.

The small bundle was reverently placed in the new grave, and those present took turns covering it with the soil of Jerusalem. Psalms and the *Kel Maleh Rachamim* (prayer for the soul of the departed) were said for the *neshama* (soul) of Harav Benzion ben Harav Eliyahu. Both my brothers, a cousin who was visiting from England, and I said *Kaddish*.

It was a unique experience – not at all sad, but rather a moving and even celebratory ceremony. Cedric briefly related what it had taken "to bring Uncle Ben on *aliyah*," as he put it, and spoke of his feelings now that the goal of his lengthy and hard-won struggle had been achieved.

His son Yuval gave a eulogy, quoting from Uncle Ben's book and what had been written about him.

Rabbi Edelis spoke of the spiritual meaning of the event.

"You have brought Reb Benzion to Zion and Jerusalem," he said, "as if he had been destined for this all his life, which I believe he was."

For most people who make *aliyah*, it is a new beginning. For Uncle Ben, it was a new ending. For us, his family, it was a tangible link to our forebears and to the proud history that brought us to where we are today.



THE INSCRIPTION on the new tombstone in Jerusalem includes all the text from the original stone in Czeszochowa.