

THE TRUE STORY OF THE CEMETERY IN THE GENERAL MOTORS PARKING LOT!

by Milton Marwil

When Mathilde Brandwine launched the Michigan cemetery project to publish a computerized record of all grave sites in Michigan, enlisting the cooperation of the Jewish Historical Society, I was recruited to collate the graves of the Beth Olem cemetery, the cemetery with the least available records. Securing other stalwart volunteers from the JCC Institute of Retired Professionals, I made the necessary arrangements to pursue this assignment with the Security at the General Motors Cadillac Motor Car plant, the current guardian of the cemetery.

How did General Motors get involved with a Jewish cemetery? How did a quiet Jewish cemetery find itself involved with the world's biggest corporation? Beth Olem is certainly unique in that General Motors is its guardian and it lies within the property of the Cadillac Motor Car plant in Hamtramck~ locally known as "Poletown."



Beth Olem Cemetery with GM in the background

The Beth Olem Cemetery had its beginning in 1862, a year after the Detroit Jewish community split on theological grounds, half accepting the new German Reform and half remaining Orthodox. The latter established Shaarey Zedek, rented a building for prayer, hired a teacher, and sought their own burial ground. Two

congregants, Sam Fleishman and Isaac Parchelsky, drove their buggy three miles from the center of population which hugged the shores of the Detroit River out into the country – to buy an acre of land for the Shaarey Zedek cemetery. Perhaps fearing that the German farmers might object to a synagogue or a graveyard, they made the purchase in their own names. Over the years, several other Jewish religious groups bought land around the original piece, giving the cemetery its present shape of a 2.2 acre oblong.

Like any good burghers seeking a burial ground, they calculated that a distance of several miles from the Jewish section of town would remain a bucolic graveyard for generations to come. By the turn of the century, however, industry was already gravitating near this area, known as Milwaukee Junction, because two main railroad lines crossed there. In 1910 Dodge Brothers built the Dodge Main Factory near the yards and spurs of the train tracks. It was natural for other automobile companies and suppliers also to locate near there. As the city expanded, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Jewish population pushed north and west, skirting by miles the industrialized Milwaukee Junction and distancing itself from its Beth Olem Cemetery.

In its earliest years, the Beth Olem or Smith Street Cemetery served the small Jewish community as the only all-Jewish memorial park in Detroit. It was a long journey by

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horse-drawn hearse to the gates where the coffin was then carried by the pallbearers to the plot. To visit a relatives grave was quite a trek by horse, later by street car, and only made briefer by the advent of the automobile. The halcyon years of being a country graveyard came to an end with the surrounding industrialization and development of housing. Hemmed in on all sides, this small urban park was enclosed and protected by a brick wall and its own sanctity.

The growing Jewish community sought new burial grounds. The little cemetery aged; fewer burials took place there. Tombstones thinned by weather toppled over or were pushed by vandals; the wall deteriorated and crumbled; a small chapel built in the 1880's fell into disrepair; animals and stranger roved the grounds. The last body was interred in 1948.

In 1966, Chrysler, the successor to Dodge Brothers, purchased two adjacent city blocks, including the one with the Beth Olem or Smith Street Cemetery, to build a parking lot for the Dodge Main plant. The cemetery was engulfed and Smith Street itself was absorbed, leaving the grounds without an entry. Chrysler consequently constructed a new 90-foot-long entrance from the next block, Clay Avenue. They also paid \$10,000 to the Jewish organizations involved in the ownership for property rights to the closed-off streets contingent with it. This money was expended on much needed repair. When Chrysler razed the surrounding properties, it left the cemetery a green island in a vast sea of a concrete parking lot.

Around 1980, General Motors acquired a parcel of land encompassing much more than the old Chrysler possession, for a Cadillac Motor assembly plant. Even Clay Avenue was swallowed up, leaving the cemetery imprisoned within the vast holdings of the auto company. GM had to deal with two owner synagogues located in another county. Halachic law and Michigan law both prohibited moving the graves of the Beth Olem Cemetery. In the General Motors Environmental Impact Statement, the name was translated as "House of Eternity," leading the writer to the droll comment: "The Eternal nature of the cemetery is well founded, since it seems destined to outlast the industrial complex which now surrounds it.

Mandell Berman worked out a three-way agreement between the City of Detroit, very anxious to win the assembly plant; General Motors, unwilling to nullify the whole project for such a minimal matter; and Shaarey Zedek, only one of the owners but assuming full responsibility. The city rebuilt the brick wall. GM constructed a quarter-mile access road from its truck gate to the cemetery gate, with an apron for visitor parking, and extended a water line to the graveyard. Shaarey Zedek assumed responsibility for grave care, sending its ground crew to tend the grass.

A nearly hundred-year-old small chapel graced the center of the graveyard, but it was on the verge of collapsing. When the insurance company threatened the loss of liability insurance on the whole cemetery unless it was torn down, it was razed in 1982.

It is believed that Beth Olem contains around eleven hundred graves since the first burial in 1868 until 1948 when the last body was interred. However, the earliest records of grave locations are no longer available. Congregation Shaarey Zedek made a count in 1975 of 733 legible names. Our present census will also show the location of tombstones even if they are illegible. Many of the stones are too weathered or broken up to be

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deciphered, and wooden markers have disappeared, which may account for the discrepancy of figures. The relatively poor early families only could afford wooden markers, only one of which remains. This is propped up on a stone, splintered at both ends, so worn that the letters look like bird feet in the sand, the wood washed pale from the elements - one sample of many similar grave markers of the past.

General Motors opens the Beth Olem Cemetery for visitations between 10 A.M. and 2 P.M. on the Sunday before Passover and the Sunday before Rosh Hashonah, when, during this down time, cars can enter the truck gate and proceed directly to the cemetery gate. The old cemetery is also a highlight on the Jewish Historical Society tours of sites of Jewish Detroit, where many people have been very excited to unexpectedly find graves of relatives and early Jewish Detroiters.

In order to complete our mission for the Cemetery Index, special arrangements were made with GM Security for our eight I.R.P. volunteers to be escorted from the Truck Gate to the gates of the cemetery amidst the workday bustle of huge trucks, drivers, and security guards. Each team of two volunteers had at least one who could read the Hebrew



Left to right: Sheldon Kaplan, Maurice Shapiro, Harvey Lipsitt, Sydney Krause, Milton Marwil and Joseph Ostrovich. Not present: Louis Greenberg and Dr. Oscar Schwartz.

inscriptions, each team taking a row at a time until the twenty or so rows on each side of the cemetery were finished. Some of the surnames were familiar to a few of us; I found a great uncle and aunt whom I had known as a child. Two visits during the summer did the job; ethnic lunches at nearby Polish restaurants helped us to complete this unusual and

rewarding task.

Beth Olem Cemetery, located in Hamtramck, tucked in one corner of the 362 acre GM site, at least a quarter mile from the stacks of the main plant, sits like a walled oasis. The network of GM Security is ever-present to protect the sanctity of the tombstones. The cemetery is on General Motors property, and they have taken a benign attitude towards its welfare. In the words of one officer of the Security Department: "We are proud of our cemetery."

References:

Draft Environmental Impact Statement, City of Detroit, Oct. 15; 1900. Central Industrial Park Project, Beth Olem Cemetery, Nov. 23, 1902.

Interview: Andrew Phythian, Sup't., Clover Hill Park Cemetery, May 20, 1905.

Interview: GM Security, May 20, 1985

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