

THE NOVO CEMETERY

This seventeenth century burial ground was a liminal space, far from the City. It was in use from 1733 until the twentieth century.

The Novo Cemetery is notable for its horizontal stones. Sephardi gravestones are flat to make the point that we are all equal in death.

During the twentieth century, as London's Sephardi community diminished, a large section of the burial ground was sold to Queen Mary College, now Queen Mary, University of London. In 1973, over 7,000 graves were removed to a smaller Queen Mary site in Brentwood, Essex. Here, remains were buried, not in individual plots, but collectively in a pit. This has provoked problems when those from scattered Sephardi communities, all over the world, have come to the Novo Cemetery to find their ancestors, only to be told that they are no longer there.

The Jewish Chronicle evidences opposition to this disinterment. In her booklet *The Sephardic Jewish Cemeteries at Queen Mary, University of London*, Dr Caron Lipman was commissioned to write about the importance of the original burial ground. She notes that 'The cemetery allowed the community to feel rooted, literally its dead being placed in the ground. It represented continuity, spiritually as well as physically.' She observes that 'many bought plots in advance, seeing their future place within the community already at rest.' From the first burials in 1733, graves were purchased so that the body would remain in the earth until perpetuity.

We now have no access to these original stones, neither do we know where they are. Cultural identity and heritage lives on in the iconography and written motifs, within the physical presence of the cemeteries, and the stones which honour each person's life. What happens when these life-in-death stones vanish? Where is the grave of the boxer Daniel Mendoza? Was it smashed when the bulldozers arrived in the Novo Cemetery? Are his bones in the pit in Brentwood with thousands of others? Some eminent members of the community were not consigned to Brentwood pit but were exempted and buried in the Golders Green Sephardi cemetery. *Why were there were exceptions to the displacement and mass reburial of ancient bones?*

GRAVEYARD STORIES SCANDAL, SURVIVAL AND SILENCE

Moving on to the personal stories of those buried in the Novo, we come across a dramatic incident publicised in William Jackson's 1795 *The New and Complete Newgate Calendar*.

Aaron Fernandes Da Sylva

In 1793, Aaron Fernandes da Sylva was murdered with his servant. On January 16th, five or six men entered his house in Green's Row, Chelsea, where they murdered his housekeeper, and beat and wounded Aaron so severely, that he died. The thieves stripped the house of its

valuables. The Jury found, murder by 'persons unknown' but, when suspicion fell on Silva's nephew, the young man was found dead in his bed with almost half a pint of arsenic in his belly.

The histories of ordinary lives reveal how the wealthy elite were soon superseded by poor Sephardim living very tough lives.

By the nineteenth century it became clear from documentation that the Sephardi community was composed of a great number of poor. Records from 1872 show there were 76 interments at the Novo and over half were 'charity funerals'. Some of the legible gravestones reveal the names of charitable societies paying sick relief, funeral expenses and death endowments.

Here are stories of those poor whose graves remain in the Novo Cemetery.

Abraham Alvarez

Died 29 January 1883

Abraham lived with his family and his wife Abigail in Spitalfields in 1841. The census shows he is 25 years old and a quill pen cutter. In 1851 he lives in Petticoat Square, Aldgate. In the same street there are tailoresses, hawkers, a butcher, general dealers, a cigar maker, confectioner, and 'Indian servants'. By 1861 Abraham Alvarez had moved to White Street, Aldgate and appears to have changed his trade, now he's a rag merchant, as is his oldest son. In the same street there is a hawker, two cloth cap makers, a boot and shoe dealer, dock labourer, charwomen, ginger beer maker and general dealer. By 1871 he had moved to Whitechapel with his children and appeared to be widowed. In 1881 he moved again to 4 Heneage Lane, next to the Synagogue and, at 65, Abraham remarries Sarah, who is a year younger.

Benjamin Moses Pezaro

Died 10 March 1900.

Benjamin, a tailor from Amsterdam who, according to the census records, between 1861 and 1891, lived at the same address for at least thirty years - 27 Shepherd Street, Now Toynbee Street, Whitechapel. Benjamin's children are all cigar makers and tailors. In the same street are quite a few other Dutch families. There are many tailors and cigar makers, a dressmaker, slipper maker, hawker, cook, book-folder, cap maker, shoe binder, and a dock labourer.

Betsy Anidjah

Died aged 31, in 1883.

Her epitaph is poignantly embellished 'How noble, good and pure she was, mere words do not convey'. In 1871 she was living at 9 Pitfield Street in Hoxton, one of ten children. Her father is a fruit salesman, and there are two further salesmen living in the house, from Hackney and Whitechapel, who may well be employees - and two servants. Four of his children, including Betsy, are described as assistants to their father. She married Lewis Anidjah in 1876 and by 1881 they were living in Buckingham Palace Road. Five years before the marriage we find Lewis lodging in Mill Hill, Leeds, near the city's business district, at the Trevelyan Hotel. At the hotel there are 16 lodgers altogether, and the hotel is run by one

Charlotte Pratt, who has two assistants and 13 servants. The Lodgers, from all over the country, are aged from their 20s to 50s and are mostly described as commercial travellers, including a watch manufacturer, a photographer and a print seller. There is also an 'artiste'. Betsey died before her husband. Her gravestone inscription is interesting because it includes her father's full address, even though she had left home and been married for seven years when she died.

Hannah Genese

Died 31 January 1894

Her gravestone inscription tells us that she 'died after a long and painful illness'. The 1861 census shows Hannah Genese living in Shoreditch with her father, a furniture dealer. Her mother, also called Hannah, is an upholsterer. She is one of six children, the eldest son is a tailor. At 18, Hannah Genese is working as a feather maker. She now lives with her mother and two siblings in London Fields. Her twin brother Moss is a warehouseman and her elder sister Rachel is a telegraph clerk. They are all living at the Pacifico Almshouses, named after their wealthy benefactor, Emanuel Pacifico, a Jewish Physician. The 1881 census documents that the Genese family are still in the almshouse but there is no trace of Hannah.

Hannah was one of many unskilled or semi-skilled Sephardi workers within the ostrich feather industry. Small workshops were concentrated in a mile radius between the City of London and the East End. Preparing ostrich feathers was a dangerous trade conducted for long hours, by women, in workshops where dust and feathers filled the air. Particles lodged in throats and lungs. It is probable that Hannah Genese's long illness and early death was a result of her work.

RACHEL TORRES

In 1832, nineteen-year old Rachel Torres committed suicide. She was not buried in the part section of the cemetery but in an area that was part of the garden ground. Why did this young woman kill herself? What are the hidden stories of the dispossessed, the marginalised, and those in poverty? We can only guess.

reference:

Lipman, Caron, *The Sephardic Jewish Cemeteries at Queen Mary*, University of London QMUL Publications 2012