

FRONTLINE

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HISTORY

RECOVERING LOST SOULS

Joe Ferrannini at work in Har Hasetim cemetery, now owned by Beth David Reform Congregation in Gladwyne.

A GLADWYNE CONGREGATION EMBRACES THE EFFORT TO PRESERVE THE FINAL RESTING PLACE FOR HUNDREDS OF EUROPEAN IMMIGRANTS.

BY PAUL JABLOW

He can only be observed during the warmer months, working alone on an isolated six-acre tract just off Conshohocken State Road in Gladwyne. Often the sound of his chisel is all you hear, along with the hammering of pileated woodpeckers and an occasional car engine.

Bit by painstaking bit, Joe Ferrannini is uncovering and preserving history in a project that will outlive him by decades.

Ferrannini restores old gravestones and burial sites, an occupation so rare he estimates that only a few dozen people nationally make it a full-time occupation. "It's such meaningful work," says the

former college history major, who switched careers from transportation management 15 years ago at age 41. "These are people whose memories would otherwise be lost."

Right now, Ferrannini is working at Har Hasetim, a Jewish cemetery founded in the 1890s by two burial societies as the final resting place for hundreds of



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European immigrants. The name in English is "Mount of Olives." No one has been buried there since 1945. The cemetery is now owned by the Beth David Reform Congregation, which took it over in 1999 after it had deteriorated into a jumble of bramble and marble. But the real work started in 2015, as volunteers cleared the ground to prepare for the restoration.

The gravestone Ferrannini is currently working on is badly eroded. After using a chemical wash on the stone to strengthen it, he carefully applies a mortar mix to attach a piece that broke away. There's no name on the stone, though he's pretty sure the deceased was a woman, as the inscription is addressed to a "beloved."

Har Hasetim wasn't a rich folks' cemetery, so the stones are often of poor quality. "These people were first-generation immigrants," Ferrannini says. "Even a modest stone was a luxury."

His current project is braced by a metal tripod. "It's my extra set of hands since I work alone," says Ferrannini, a compact man who moves nimbly about the site. "Even if the stone is only bits and pieces, it can still tell a story."

Though Ferrannini recently helped a woman find the grave of her great-grandfather, it's mostly solitary work. "I couldn't do it every day," he says. On this particular afternoon, leaf-blowing equipment from neighboring properties breaks the silence, but he relishes the times when only the woodpeckers compete with the sounds of his chisel. Since 2018, he's spent about two weeks here in the spring or summer and two in the fall, coming down from his home in upstate New York. So far, he's restored more than 150 gravesites out of at least 1,200. The job will obviously outlive him as long as the congregation and other funders can keep it going. "I thought this was going

