

Historic Jewish Cemetery in Caribbean Fades Away

Headstones are pockmarked, their inscriptions faded. Stone slabs that have covered tombs for centuries are crumbling. White marble has turned grey, likely from the acrid smoke that spews from a nearby oil refinery.

One of the oldest Jewish cemeteries in the Western Hemisphere, Beth Haim on the island of Curacao, is slowly fading in the Caribbean sun.

Beth Haim was established in the 17th century and is considered an important landmark even on an island so rich in history that its downtown has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The sparsely populated island of nearly 150,000 people just north of Venezuela is known today mostly as a diving destination or for its namesake blue liqueur made from citrus fruit.

With its lavish monuments and multilingual epitaphs, Curacao's cemetery helps tell the little-known history of Jews in the Caribbean who fled Spain and Portugal to escape the Inquisition aimed at ridding the Christian nations of Jews, Muslims and others people deemed heretics. Many of the exiles first found refuge in the Netherlands, with their descendants later settling in this former Dutch colony, now a highly diverse society and a semi-autonomous part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

But the landmark is in danger. The steady erosion, likely intensified by the proximity of the antiquated refinery, is now considered unstoppable, said Rene Maduro, president of the Mikve Israel-Emanuel Synagogue, which owns and maintains the cemetery.

"Believe me, I wish there was something we could do to protect

the cemetery,” said Maduro, whose family came to Curacao in the 1600s and has 75 to 100 ancestors buried in Beth Haim. “It is beyond the point of repair.”

The Curacao cemetery is among several at-risk burial sites that “preserve the cultural, ethnic, biographical and religious history” of Jews in the Caribbean, said Rachel Frankel, a New York architect who has studied and documented historic Jewish sites throughout the Americas, including burial grounds in Jamaica and Suriname.

The Curacao congregation is considering preserving the cemetery electronically by setting up a website with records and photos, Maduro said. The plan for a digital memorial is still in development, but a lower-tech effort has put replicas of 10 of the most ornate headstones on display at the Jewish Historical Museum in the capital of Willemstad.

Besides being sacred sites, Frankel said, the cemeteries help document the Caribbean migration of Sephardic Jews whose forefathers fled or were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula during the Inquisition, and Ashkenazic Jews who later left central and eastern Europe to seek their fortunes in the New World. Along with Curacao and Jamaica, large populations of Jews were once found on the smaller Dutch island of St. Eustatius, as well as in St. Thomas and Barbados.

On some islands, colonial Jews numbered in the hundreds, and other locations in the thousands, said Frankel. By the mid-20th century, most of the congregations had declined, but the cemeteries that in some cases had accepted burials for more than two centuries remained.

The Jewish community in Curacao dates back to the 1650s, with the arrival of Sephardic Jews from Amsterdam who had previously fled Spain and Portugal. At its peak, in the late 1700s, the Jewish community on the island numbered about 2,000.

They established the Mikve Israel-Emanuel Synagogue, which is billed as the oldest continually operating synagogue in the Western Hemisphere, as well as Beth Haim cemetery. The synagogue today has about 350 members, of which only about 200 actually live on Curacao. An orthodox synagogue in another part of Willemstad has a membership of about 60 families.

The cemetery occupies what was once plantation land on about 10 acres on the outskirts of Willemstad. The oldest confirmed inscription is from 1668 on a stone made of potter's clay, according to records maintained by the synagogue. Congregation members have determined more than 5,000 people are buried there, but only a third of the inscriptions are legible in a mix of languages that includes Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and Hebrew. Also vanishing are some of the engravings known as sepulchral illustrations, some of which are considered artworks.

Ivan Becher, president of the Shaarek Tsedek synagogue in Willemstad, said his grandfather was among the last to be buried in Beth Haim nearly 60 years ago.

"My grandfather's grave is pretty well kept, but with the rest of the graves, there is a lot of erosion," he said. "It's too bad."

Experts who have studied the headstones say the deterioration is caused by a combination of factors, including wind, salt air and humidity, said Michael A. Newton, an architect who works with the Curacao Monuments Foundation, a preservation group.

Many on the island also blame the oil refinery that towers over the cemetery and on many days spews sooty clouds that burn the eyes of visitors to Beth Haim as well as those of residents in the poor neighborhoods of the area.

A spokesman for the refinery, which is owned by the Curacao government and operated under contract by Venezuela's state-

owned oil company, did not return calls seeking comment.

The refinery's operators have occasionally helped with the cemetery's maintenance, which has otherwise cost the congregation "many, many thousands" of dollars over the years, Maduro said.

Congregation members have consulted with experts from the Netherlands and the United States on possible solutions to halt erosion, but the options were too expensive and considered long-shots at best.

Jewish law forbids disturbing remains so moving the cemetery to another part of Curacao that would be less threatened by refinery smoke is out of the question, Maduro said.

Frankel, the New York architect, said that preservation has also proved difficult for other historic cemeteries in the Caribbean that no longer receive burials and have dwindling populations of Jewish heirs to care for them.

"In places where pollutants are not a problem, there are other challenges," she said. "Vegetation grows fast and furious in the subtropical climate. Goat herds – which exist even in urban centers – make their way through open cemetery gates. And as Caribbean cities become more densely populated, cemeteries sometimes become garbage dumps where public sanitation is lacking."

But appreciation of the cemeteries as historic sites has grown over the past two decades, Frankel said, with local governments, academics and congregants are working together to document, study, and preserve them while also making them accessible to the public.

The Curacao cemetery is occasionally visited by tourists from the cruise ships stopping at downtown Willemstad.

Maduro hopes future visitors will also be able to view the

cemetery virtually, on the hoped-for website.

“Not that we can preserve it, but we are trying to make it easier for people to know what’s there and who is buried there,” he said.

Associated Press writer Anita Snow contributed to this report from Mexico City.

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