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Genealogy startup aims to log all 200,000 gravestones in Israel's largest cemetery

120 volunteers descend on Holon cemetery with smartphones in hand, aiming to create massive database to help genealogists and historians.

By [Ofar Aderet](#) | Dec. 19, 2014 | 12:39 AM

The 120 people who gathered in the Holon Cemetery two weeks ago were in a good mood, despite the venue. They had not come to inter a relative or to visit a grave. Rather, equipped with smartphones and a purpose-built app, they had come to take part in a first-of-its-kind project in Israel.

Holon Cemetery, the largest in the country with more than 200,000 graves, was established in 1964. Historians and genealogists can learn volumes from the names of the deceased, their birth and death dates, their titles and family ties. But so far this information has not been documented anywhere.



A participant in the documentation project photographing gravestones in a Holon cemetery recently.

The task the group at the cemetery had undertaken was simple yet revolutionary: to document every grave on their mobile phones. The app retains the details of each headstone's location and transmits the images to a global database, where they will be processed by other volunteers.

One of the participants, the "genealogy detective" [Gidi Poraz](#), says: "Sometimes the tombstones have a whole life story of previous generations, and an entire family tree can be created." Poraz, who is an expert at locating lost relatives in Israel and abroad, says that sometimes the solution to a decades-old family mystery is right there on a forgotten grave marker. "We, the genealogists, benefit from every word inscribed in marble. In some cases, included in some of the life stories carved in stone are full details, which are recorded nowhere else, about relatives who died in the Holocaust," Poraz says.

The documentation project was initiated, organized and funded by the Israeli genealogy startup [MyHeritage](#). Gilad Japhet, 45, a technology professional and history buff, founded the company in 2003. Japhet is the Jerusalem-born son of 2004 Israel Prize laureate in Biblical Studies Prof. Sara Japhet.

Japhet set himself a formidable challenge, "to map the family tree of humanity and allow everyone to discover and share their family roots." According to Japhet, from his company's offices in Or Yehuda he has access to 25 million family trees documenting the lives of 1.6 billion people and posted on the site by 75 million people in 40 countries around the world. The site allows users to cross-

reference information, find distant relatives on other family trees and add branches to their family trees using technology that was not available until recently.

Japhet says the MyHeritage database has 6 billion documents and counting. “Every day we add five million documents and a million people to the family trees. We aspire to build rich historical databases so that we can come to anyone and say, ‘We found your grandfather, here is his grave, and from the headstone we learned the name of his father.’”

The 120 volunteers who came to the Holon Cemetery — half are MyHeritage employees, half are amateur genealogists — photographed 150,000 grave markers, two-thirds of the total, within a few hours. The remaining headstones will be photographed soon. One volunteer took no less than 4,400 pictures of tombstones. Another team of volunteers is uploading the information from the images.

In two months, when the work is done, the details of about 500,000 individuals will be added to the database.

The documentation project in the Holon Cemetery is the local aspect of the American startup BillionGraves, which has documented 11 million headstones to date in more than 15,000 cemeteries worldwide, photographed by some 130,000 people.

“There’s something exciting about combining young people with their smartphones and cemeteries. The most sophisticated technology in the service of the historical cemetery, that’s the beauty of it,” Japhet says.

The company is trying to document the graves quickly “because the gravestones erode and the inscriptions fade,” Japhet says, adding that in quite a few Jewish cemeteries in Europe, markers have been destroyed or stolen and used as building materials.

The project is a good example of crowdsourcing.

“When people understand the value of the information, they love to help,” Japhet says, adding that he’d like to develop and expand this type of collaboration between a commercial entity like his startup and ordinary volunteers elsewhere in the world.

In March Japhet conducted a pilot program in a smaller, older cemetery, Segula in Petah Tikva, where interment began at the end of the 19th century. In under two days MyHeritage employees photographed all 75,000 graves. When the information was uploaded, Japhet got a surprise: The system cross-referenced the new information with his family tree and alerted him that the grave of his maternal great-great-grandfather had been found: Shimon Braz, who was born in 1883 and came to Palestine from Lithuania.

Japhet wants to expand the project to all the cemeteries in Israel. He is planning to charter buses that will bring volunteers to about 100 cemeteries throughout the country to document the graves.

[Poraz](#) has a more personal project, one that he will begin near his home in Moshav Bitzaron. “I want to document all the cemeteries in the moshavim, with the help of young people who will record the information and collect the life stories of the people who are buried there.”