

A Good Day to Die

Max Levin died on August 25, 1892, one month before Rose Hill Cemetery began keeping records. Although the details of what killed Max have faded from memory, it's easy to imagine what happened immediately after he died. The *chevra kaddisha*, the sacred society of Jewish men who consider preparation of the dead to be the ultimate mitzvah, would have arrived to wash his body, dress him in plain linen shrouds and his prayer shawl and place him in a plain pine coffin. Then Max would have been taken by horse-drawn hearse into the countryside now known as Commerce City. If this trip was made after dark, lanterns would have swung from the hearse as it traversed the sandy roads from west Denver, where, as a Jew, Max probably had lived.

When he was laid to rest, Max may have joined a few other Jews, their graves marked and otherwise — but 107 years later, his grave is the earliest anyone can point to. Six thousand graves have been dug and filled there since Max arrived, and every month or so, someone knocks on the caretaker's door, asking to buy a plot. But since the odds that this person is Jewish are small, most are sent away, often to Riverside Cemetery, which is not far.

There are no roses at Rose Hill. Grass has replaced the dirt and pebbles that once stretched wall-to-wall between the headstones. The graveyard boundaries are marked by a rusting chain-link fence whose gate bears a discreet Star of David. A cattle guard still marks the north entrance, where weeds grow; there are no cattle to speak of in the neighborhood. What are there: low-slung brick houses, several mega truck stops, places where you can buy a single cold beer in a hurry, a *gleaming new housing* development that will look tired before five years have passed, an elementary school, a celebrated dog track.

Most of the people who have lived their entire lives in the Commerce City neighborhood that is known as Rose Hill have never been inside the gates of the cemetery, and its few modern-day updates have gone largely unnoticed. In the past year, for instance, Rose Hill's board of directors authorized the construction of a new brick building designed to house the cemetery office and an annex for *tahara* — ritual washing and preparing of the dead — as well as a *shomer* room, in which someone sits adjacent to the deceased all night, reciting psalms. The *shomer* room resembles a dentist's waiting room as much as anything else, and the annex in which it sits looks exactly like the other buildings at Rose Hill, though it's fifty years newer. It is not the kind of building that inspires curiosity.

In a way, that's just as well. What goes on at Rose Hill is what has always gone on at this unprepossessing place, which exists only to perform the final service for anyone who is a Jew — by birth or by Orthodox conversion. Whether that Jew led a religious life or not is immaterial, because at Rose Hill, he is guaranteed a religious death.

Mr. Saliman and Mr. Goldstein, Members of the Board
Richard Saliman and David Goldstein are walking through the cemetery on an unseasonably warm fall day, looking for the graves of their mothers and fathers.

"Wasn't it just a few weeks ago I was doing this?" Mr. Saliman asks himself. "It took me half an hour. By now, I should know."

It was probably six weeks ago, during the High

Holy Days, one of the many times each year that Jews honor their ancestors. Mr. Saliman's father and grandfather, and just about all of his Denver-born forebears, are buried here; he has a "reservation" at Rose Hill himself. He is a third-generation volunteer boardmember of the nonprofit cemetery, as well as a past president, like his grandfather and father before him.

Mr. Goldstein shares every one of these distinctions.

"My grandfather came here in 1888 from Poland. He came to Galveston, then Denver," Mr. Goldstein says, puffing a little to keep up with Mr. Saliman's pace. "In a covered wagon, so I'm told. And he settled in the ghetto called West Colfax. My grandma started a bakery. My grandfather never worked. He stayed busy studying Talmud and Torah."

"You and I grew up in the same terrace," Mr. Saliman recalls. "How old were we when we first met?"

"Excuse me? I don't hear so good."

"We must have been babies. Babies."

"Do you know how old we are?" Mr. Goldstein asks. "Both of us are 84."

Mr. Saliman and Mr. Goldstein have known each other forever, and their memories are sharp even if their hearing isn't. Indisputably, they are both pillars of the Jewish community — but their effect, at least when they are wandering around outside, is more like that of a couple of eleven-year-old boys.

"We both went to Cheltenham Elementary School," Mr. Saliman says.



"Let me tell you, that's where every teacher in Denver wanted to work," says Mr. Goldstein. "It was 99 percent Jewish, so you had the smartest kids in the city. Plus you got all the Jewish holidays off, which made ten more days of vacation."

"Remember him?" Mr. Saliman asks, as they walk past a well-worn headstone. "Didn't he wrestle? Or was it softball?"

"Remember him? Look what they put on his stone."

The two men stop before a slab of granite engraved with a man's name and dates — in English and Hebrew — as well as his nickname.

"Shloy," reads Mr. Goldstein. "You ever know that was his Jew name?"

"Sure."

"There's Perlmutter. You know he used to lay bricks for his father-in-law? He became a millionaire, and my father-in-law, I hate to say it, was broke most of his life."

The men strike a vein of Saliman relatives, prompting Mr. Saliman to remember the way his father fulfilled his obligation to Rose Hill — coming by every Sunday just to make sure "everything was still here. It was what he did for the community. I don't come as often myself," he offers. "I don't particularly like it here. I don't like death; I'm not sentimental. But it's something you do."



A grave situation: Rose Hill is the final resting place for more than 6,000 Jews.

"It's a mitzvah," Mr. Goldstein agrees. "It's not something you publicize. In the old days, because you wanted to protect the graves. Now, because, well, you don't call attention to it."

Realizing that he has crossed into an area of philosophy he was born understanding — that good deeds are lessened exponentially every time you congratulate yourself for doing them — Mr. Goldstein backs away from the subject, disheartened at the prospect of explaining it to an outsider. Not looking where he is going, he lands in a discussion of the afterlife.

"As far as Jewish law is concerned," he says patiently, "the dead are equal. At death, no one is smarter, richer, anything — we're all the same. So we use the same service, the same type of casket, and no one who is poor feels bad for having less. As far as the soul...the idea is that someday there'll be a messiah, which you may or may not believe."

"There's always debate," Mr. Saliman agrees. "I've heard it said, 'The body is gone, but there is a soul that lives on.'"

Mr. Goldstein is okay with that, but a slight confusion seems to remain: Why are we talking about these private things? These things that every good Jew either knows to be true, or will debate for all eternity?

Suddenly Mr. Saliman calls his attention to a familiar grave. "He had four wives, remember? An ambitious man. Ethel is here with him. The rest are spread around the cemetery, aren't they?"

"Here's my family!" Mr. Goldstein says, a little surprised. "We just walked right into it! Look, there's my spot. Someday, maybe you'll come by and say hello."

The Caretaker

In the 107 years of its existence, Rose Hill has had just five caretakers. It is a position that inspires permanence. The current caretaker will have been here 25 years this coming May. Along

with a seasonal crew, he serves as night watchman, grave digger, raiser of bedding plants and flowers, custodian of two large lazy dogs who live here, interference runner for the various boardmembers and casket builder. A lapsed Protestant, he now describes everyday situations in terms of shleppiness or relative mitzvah.

"When I started, people wondered at the effect it would have on my kids, having to tell people their father ran a cemetery," he says. "But they loved it here. They grew up running around outside."

The caretaker came to the job indirectly. A career salesman, he was sitting in a nearby bar one day ruining his life when someone came by to ask if anyone wanted to earn a quick buck by digging a grave. He did, and he stayed, for reasons he'd just as soon not discuss, although he will say he eventually stopped drinking.

"My story is nothing," he says flatly. "I like working outside — that's why I'm here. Also, the men I work for treat me like a king. They stuck with me when I was at a low ebb. They had faith that I would help them out, and after a while, I wanted to."

Enough of that. He moves on to more important observations.

For example, Jews have a staggering devotion to their ancestors. The simplicity of their funerals grows on you. The mysteries never cease — what do those symbols really mean on the grave of a Kohen or a Levi, and why can't the trees be allowed to grow so that they cross over a cemetery road? What happened to the horny toads and lizards that used to populate

the graveyard? They're gone, but other than that, very little has changed over the decades. And the very worst thing has remained a constant: watching a parent bury a child, no matter how old either of them happens to be.

Tahara

"My name cannot be mentioned," the woman says. "No one's supposed to know who you are. You're doing it out of kindness and anonymity. It would be like vanity to announce yourself."

In the early morning, the woman has already been awake half the night. Like a doctor on call, she was summoned hours ago to perform a *tahara* for a woman who will be buried sometime today, during the first snowfall of the season, with the ground frozen for the first time since early spring. Having assembled the requisite crew of two other women, she spent about an hour on the job, dressed in gloves and a surgical gown. The dead woman's body was kept covered at all times for the sake of modesty and respect, she explains, and she never saw the face of the deceased, even when brushing her hair.

Still, the woman always gets a sense of the recently dead person — whether she is afraid, or at peace, or just moving by.

"It's hard for me to explain," she says, "but it gives us a good feeling, as if we've helped them go on. I had been quite religious for a long time before I was even aware that there were people who carried on this tradition. And it is the biggest mitzvah. There really is nothing the person can do for you in return at this point."

She has already decided who will do this service for her, if possible, and in what way. Where is still up in the air. "I would like my *tahara* done at home, but the question is how my family would feel. I still have to think about that," she says. "The rest is clear to me. Plain linen shrouds, hand-sewn, and a simple pine box. At Rose Hill, they have the most plain. To me, that's the best."

By Robin Chotzinoff