

New Initiative in Names Recovery: “Zichron Kedoshim”

by Sara Berkowitz

Throughout the generations, the Jewish nation has always commemorated its lost and beloved. But in the case of those who died in the Holocaust—most of whom have no grave or tombstone to bear their memory—the need to remember, *Yizkor*, has become one of acute importance.

The Names Recovery Project, supported by hi-tech entrepreneur Yossie Hollander, began over half a century ago to commemorate and recover the identities of each of the six million *Shoah* victims. While over two million victims have been memorialized on Pages of Testimony, throughout the years many other ways of remembering family members or friends murdered during the Holocaust have been used by individuals: names were written on memorial plaques, scrolls and in *Yizkor* books; monuments for destroyed communities were built; books were written and dedicated to the memory of Holocaust victims; and tombstones were engraved with the names of family members who had lost their lives.

“We realized that many names may be lost forever if they are not retrieved from these various means of commemoration,” explains Cynthia Wroclawski, Outreach Manager of the *Shoah* Victims’ Names Recovery Project. “We therefore decided to launch a new operation to collect names from memorials, religious artifacts, tombstones and books, especially *Sefarim Toraniyim* (religious manuscripts). These names could then be crosschecked on the Central Database of *Shoah* Victims’ Names, and those missing recorded for perpetuity.”

Equipped with digital cameras, a pilot crew went to synagogues and began to photograph the plaques, *Parochet* (Torah Ark curtain), books and various other objects on which dedications to Holocaust victims appeared. The pilot yielded thousands of names, many of which had not been previously recorded in the Names Database. The urgency of the project also became clear: due to renovations in a number of older buildings, many of the memorial plaques had been previously removed. Some of the synagogues had already been closed down, making the danger of losing the names even more critical.

Thus the project developed into a national 11th-hour effort to collect as many names as possible. In order that those working on the project be able to properly decipher the terminology with which the names were written, it was clear that people from a religious scholarly background should be involved. Yad Vashem Directorate member Rabbi Dudi Zilbershlag, prominent businessman, publisher and philanthropist, suggested utilizing the help of “Maftach,” an organization that seeks suitable employment opportunities for the ultra-orthodox population, headed by Rabbi Herschel Klein.

The ten excellent candidates thus recruited began their investigative work in Tel Aviv, Haifa, Bnei B’rak and Jerusalem. With time, they hope to reach every synagogue and cemetery in Israel. “The enthusiasm of so many people we meet is really

encouraging,” said one staff member. “They wish to help us in any way possible, whether it is to hold the artifact so that the names can be clearly photographed, or to run home to find a book or a document to share with us a piece of whatever memory they may have of loved ones who died so tragically.” Furthermore, the earnest cooperation offered by organizations such as “Ginzach Kiddush Hashem,” situated in the religious neighborhood of Bnei B’rak, as well as many other individuals involved with the project is tremendously heartwarming.

So far the campaign has resulted in the retrieval of more than 50,000 names. “Sometimes the work can be physically demanding, whether climbing to get a better shot of a small plaque on the high ceiling of a synagogue chandelier or walking through graveyards in the searing sun checking the tombstones for possible names of Holocaust victims,” said another. “Nevertheless, I feel so privileged to be part of this unique and special national mission to ensure that no Holocaust victim is forgotten”.

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