

Congregation Kehilath Jacob Anshe Drohiczen Cemetery  
Aka Beth Jacob Cemetery

Today, the cemetery is owned by the Chicago Jewish Federation, who purchased the property in 2002. The once abandoned cemetery is fully fenced and maintained but not available for public visiting.

The fenced-off area is a strip of land running west-east between Shermer and Waukegan south of Dempster and just north of Main Street. (In landmark terms, south of Classic Bowl, north of Lavitt Animal Hospital (which both have Morton Grove addresses) and west of that nursing home on the peninsula where Caldwell meets Waukegan.) The original entrance was on the Waukegan side

*Posted on the internet by a local resident:*

*Growing up in Niles in the '70s, my friends and I used to play in the "old cemetery." There were overturned headstones among the overgrown weeds and empty beer cans. The inscriptions were mostly in Hebrew, but some of the death dates were pre-1900 if I recall. Many tombstones were broken and a few had swastikas scrawled on them. I know the area had been cleaned up and the headstones re-erected within the newly-named "Shermer Park" in the '90s, but now the entire area, while mowed and maintained, is fenced off with a big locked gate on the Niles side and no point of entry on the Morton Grove side. A way to at least view the cemetery is from the parking lot of Lavitt Animal Hospital at 8450 Waukegan Rd., Morton Grove. The thing is, there might be bodies still buried there. Not much on the web about it, except this entry from jewishgen.org in 1998:*

*\* Beth Jacob: also called Kehilath Jacob Anshe Drohiczen. Names were listed on web 5/98 as they wish to remove the bodies and build something on the grounds. It's thought that local children wrecked the cemetery. Some of the headstones have since been moved to a newly constructed fenced-in area for protection. The bodies are still out in an empty field. At the current time, a developer picked up the property on a tax sale (On the death of the president of the cemetery association, nobody filed for a tax exemption so it went back on the tax role). Source: Jewel Fishkin; e-mail: xjewelx@webtv.net*

*Since discovering historicaerials.com, I compared the empty field north of the current 8450 Waukegan Rd. entry with the 1938 view. The cemetery (which appears to be the only thing around these parts back then) seems to have been subsequently built over by houses and apartments while the entry path off*

*Waukegan Rd. is where the headstones must have been displaced and where the empty field now stands.*

### **Buried By Time, Cemetery In Middle Of New Dispute**

July 13, 1998|By Jodi S. Cohen, Tribune Staff Writer.

The abandoned, two-acre plot, on Waukegan Road south of Dempster Street, is a perfect example of the potential problems a burial ground faces. Even though some people have tried to care for it, much of the unnamed land remains an eyesore.

Congregation Kehilath Jacob was formed on the West Side in 1890 by a small group of Jewish immigrants from a town called Drohitchin, in what is now northeastern Poland. The congregation settled at Douglas Boulevard and Hamlin Avenue facing Independence Square, in the heart of Chicago's Jewish community in Lawndale.

Benny Goodman attended the synagogue's Hebrew school, according to historian Irving Cutler's book "The Jews of Chicago: From Shtetl to Suburbs." An aunt of federal judge Abraham Marovitz was buried among the members of the congregation.

For reasons now unknown, Kehilath Jacob and other congregations either bought or were given the property in Morton Grove. Some people say the land was inexpensive, while others believe it was a gift.

Regardless, it was a trip on the railroad or a horse-and-buggy ride away. At the time, it took a full day to bury somebody.

In 1956, Kehilath Jacob closed, and some of the remaining congregants joined a synagogue called Beth Samuel. It was around this time that many of Chicago's Jews left Lawndale, many for other parts of the city or the suburbs.

Beverly Goldstick of Chicago remembers long-ago trips to Morton Grove--walking down the sidewalk path through the cemetery and washing her hands in the small well, keeping a Jewish custom to cleanse oneself symbolically of impurities when leaving a cemetery. Goldstick recalls comforting her mother as they visited the graves of her grandfather and brother.

But as the cemetery wasted away, relatives stopped visiting their loved ones.

And by the mid-'70s, years after the last burial in 1937, the area began to look more like a jungle than anything else, those familiar with it said. Tombstones had toppled over and started seeping into the ground, or they had been defaced.

"Everybody just sort of forgot about it," said Belle Holman, a member of the Jewish Genealogical Society, whose 11-month-old cousin was buried there.

Goldstick, now 66, concedes she "didn't know who to go to" for help. Last month, Goldstick visited the graves of her relatives at the cemetery for the first time in about 15 years.

The well has since been filled with dirt and the sidewalk bulldozed.

Goldstick found her grandfather's tombstone in the well-kept section of the cemetery--but the word "beloved" is gone and "husband" is fading away. As for her brother's stone, she couldn't find it.

Part of the cemetery actually was restored in 1988, when Scher and the North Suburban Synagogue Council raised \$25,000 to combine the remaining stones into one corner. They righted fallen stones, moved others, fenced in the small, quarter-acre area--and pledged to take care of it.

Over the last decade, though, the council of 14 synagogues disbanded, people again stopped visiting and the synagogues stopped sending money. Occasionally, Scher said, he gets a check in the mail, but not nearly enough to cover the maintenance fees, which total about \$2,000 a year.

Without money or help, Scher said, even the restored cemetery again will have problems.

And, even after the partial renovation, the large overgrown section of the cemetery still remains--with an unknown number of grave sites. Officials with Devco Realty said they found three, but some experts believe there are more.

That has helped spark the recent controversy over the developer's plans to build an assisted-living home for the elderly on the abandoned site. The Jewish Genealogical Society contends that trying to remove and reinter bodies from the unkempt site to the well-kept site would be sacrilegious, especially with the uncertainty over burial locations.

Jeffrey Green of Devco Realty, which bought the abandoned land in 1996 for delinquent taxes, has agreed to start an endowment fund for perpetual maintenance of the restored cemetery, which would be next to his senior citizens home.

But Goldstick doesn't think it is right to build on a cemetery. She admits that an organization--perhaps in Morton Grove or within the Jewish community--has to take responsibility for the property because the descendants have moved on.

"Who am I to say whose responsibility it is," Goldstick said. "But it has to be somebody's.

"A cemetery is a cemetery forever."