

THE HONG KONG JEWISH CEMETERY

Hong Kong's Jewish Cemetery is an oasis of peace and tranquillity. Located in Happy Valley, it is surrounded by high rise apartment blocks, with the entrance flanked on either side by a Buddhist temple and its school. It is laid out on five levels and has its own chapel and tahara (ritual purity) room.

The island of Hong Kong became a British colony in 1842. By the 1850s with the Jewish population of the territory growing thanks to an influx of foreign traders from places like Iraq and India, there was a pressing need for a Jewish cemetery. A 10,750 square feet plot of farmland with a 999-year lease was purchased by David Sassoon from the British Crown to be used solely as a burial ground and, in 1855, the cemetery was officially opened by David's son, Reuben David Sassoon.



Dedication plaque

Set into the cemetery's back wall is a dedication plaque in Hebrew, which translates as:

For the souls who have departed this life for their Master in the holy community of Hong Kong, may G-d protect it. And this (land) is a gift of our mistress the Queen (Victoria), may G-d bless her, given with payment in full a sum of money that was necessary by David Sassoon in the year [615]. May he see offspring and have a long life. In 1904, an adjoining piece of land was acquired from the Crown for the chapel, tahara room and other small buildings.

The earliest burial, dated 1857, is of Leon Bin Baruel. The Chevra Kadisha's (Burial Society) records show that most of those who died in the early years were single men, as it was not the custom to bring wives and families to live in Hong Kong which was still plague-ridden and considered quite dangerous. The Community was mostly without an official functionary and witness to the fact that the population was a transient one, sixteen of the oldest graves bear only a small, numbered marker, with no name.

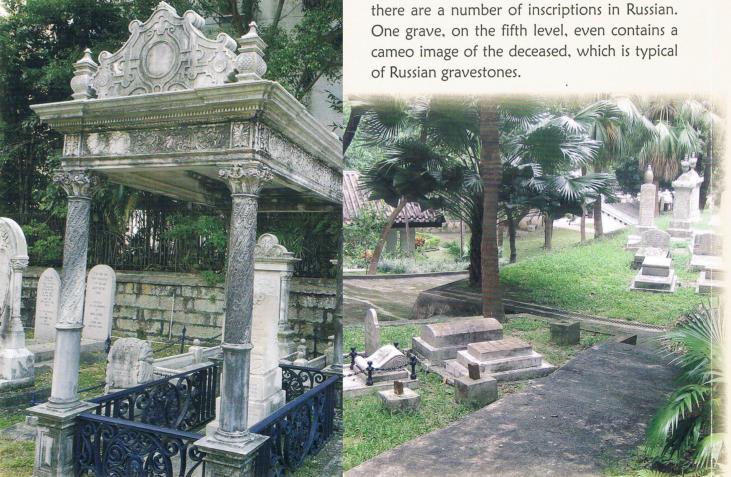


Old Sephardi area



As the Community prospered, the massive yet simple granite sarcophagi that mark most of the first burials gave way to a variety of styles including ornate, plain, modern and white marble with lonic style canopies. Sprays of flowers, scrolled tops, garlanded columns and leafy branches are the most frequently seen ornamentations on the headstones, with one gravestone bearing a broken column, indicating a premature death.

In the original section of the cemetery – behind the Chapel – Sephardi graves predominate. This is representative of the population of the Community at that time. Some of the inscriptions on these graves include Arabic numerals, as many of these people originated from Iraq and they no doubt kept up their traditions.



A marble canopy adorns David Belilios' grave

The cemetery is laid out on five levels

Toward the end of the 19th century and up

to 1917, White Russians began migrating to

China. Many Russian Jews fled to the Chinese

cities of Harbin, Dalian and Shanghai. Some

of these people ultimately moved to Hong

Kong in 1949, which resulted in a shift in

the Community's demographics. This is

reflected in the next group of graves, which

are Ashkenazi in style. In this area, which is

located along the east side of the cemetery,

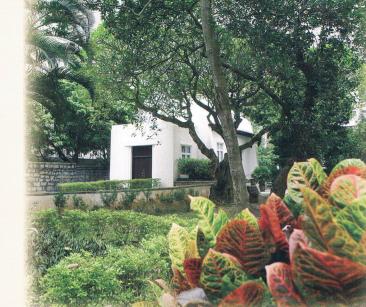
As Hong Kong continued to grow as the trading gateway to China, the face of the Community changed again. People arrived from all over the world in hopes of doing business here. Gravestones of this group, which are scattered throughout the cemetery, include inscriptions in Dutch, French, German and, of course, English.



Abraham Moseh Alvares Vegas' gravestone

"Show me the manner in which a nation or community cares for its dead and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender mercies of its people, their respect for laws of the land, and their loyalty to high ideals."

William Ewart Gladstone (unverified)



The chapel and tahara room

The Jewish Historical Society maintains a database of all the cemetery records and is always looking to add information to it. If you know someone who is related to one of the deceased members of our Community, please ask them to contact us.

Hong Kong Jewish Cemetery

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