**JGSI of Illinois explores mystery of gravestone portrait photo cache**

**By Martin Fischer**

The Jewish Genealogical Society of Illinois website has posted photos of a mysterious collection of gravestone portraits believed to be from a Chicago-area Jewish cemetery. The oval ceramic or porcelain images were discovered late last year in Kentucky as part of the liquidation of the estate of an unidentified Kentucky man. JGSI hopes to reunite the portrait photos with living family members of those depicted in the images.

To see the 39 portraits, go to [https://jgsi.org/mysteryphotos](about:blank).

Family members of the deceased who recognize the photos are invited to email JGSI at [info@jgsi.org](about:blank) with information about them.

The portraits were discovered stashed in a bucket on a train caboose on the property of a man who died last year in Kentucky, according to Jessica Armstead, an employee of Hudson Estate Buyers, an estate liquidator service based in Louisville, Kentucky.

The deceased man’s identity cannot be shared because of a confidentiality agreement between Hudson Estate Buyers and the man’s family, she said. The man was an avid collector of vintage collectible items. How he obtained the gravestone photo images is not known, Armstead said. However, she indicated that the deceased man, whom she characterized as a “vintage hoarder,” was not from Illinois.

On Dec. 12, 2019, several of the portrait photos were posted to the Junkin Johnny Facebook page, which is managed by John Hudson, owner of Hudson Estate Buyers. The post, at [https://www.facebook.com/582166895137135/posts/2825447780809024](about:blank), received 34 likes and more than 20 comments, and was shared 54 times. It was clear from the names on the backs of some of the photos that most or all of them were likely Jewish. Several of the Facebook commenters offered specific suggestions about the deceased people’s identities.

Many of the photos had inked stamps on the backs indicating they had been created by the J.A. Dedouch Co., which was located on Harrison Street in Oak Park, Illinois, from 1893 to 2004, according to the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest. At least one of the portraits had a reference on the back to Soroka Bros., a monument company that was located on Roosevelt Road in Forest Park, Illinois.

Due to the proximity of both the Oak Park-based gravestone photo business and the Forest Park-based monument company to Waldheim Cemetery in Forest Park, Illinois, it was considered likely that most of the portraits came from gravestones at Waldheim. But some may have come from other locations since the Dedouch Co. is known to have had a clientele beyond the local area.

After being made aware of the Junkin Johnny Facebook post, Jewish Genealogical Society of Illinois president Debbie Kroopkin contacted Hudson about JGSI taking over the task of trying to find living survivors of the people whose portraits were found in Kentucky.

At the Jan. 13, 2020, JGSI monthly board meeting, several board members took cellphone photos of the fronts and backs of all 39 portrait photos that had been carefully packed in bubble wrap and shipped to Debbie Kroopkin by Hudson Estate Buyers.

It was truly the start of a team effort by JGSI board members. Recording secretary Scott Meyer took on the task of learning about the company that created the portrait photos. Membership vice president Terry Taylor and president Debbie Kroopkin volunteered to work on getting the photos posted on jgsi.org. Treasurer Debbie Soren agreed to explore whether the photos should also be posted elsewhere online to get exposure beyond JGSI. Past president Mike Karsen volunteered to begin doing genealogical research about the few people whose names appeared on the backs of the portraits. Publicity vice president Martin Fischer agreed to call Hudson Estate Buyers for background information about how the photos were discovered and to prepare a press release.

If you know the identities of any of the people shown in these gravestone photos, please email [info@jgsi.org](about:blank).

**Temple bulletin item or social media post:** You might be able to help identify the deceased people in a mysterious collection of gravestone portrait photos now displayed on the Jewish Genealogical Society of Illinois website at [https://jgsi.org/mysteryphotos](about:blank). If you know the identities of any of the people shown in these photos, please email [info@jgsi.org](about:blank). The oval ceramic or porcelain images, believed to be from a Chicago-area Jewish cemetery, were discovered in late 2019 in Kentucky as part of the liquidation of an estate. They were found stashed in a bucket in a train caboose on an unidentified Kentucky man’s property.