

## **“I Have Two Homes Now”: A New York Graver Goes Global**

It was an unseasonably warm weekday afternoon, but Holy Cross Cemetery was almost deserted. The tombstones cast long shadows in the late afternoon light, the only sounds the chirping of birds and rustling of the wind.

Just one person broke the stillness – a slender, dark-haired man in a white t-shirt and jeans, weaving briskly through the rows of headstones. Every few minutes, he would stop to check the contents of a thin blue folder; now and then he changed direction, squinted through his Ray Bans at the text engraved on a stone, and wheeled around.

Anthony Casalaspro, 33, a law clerk from Midwood, was in pursuit of his relatives' graves. The Frissones immigrated to New York from southern Italy in the early twentieth century and are buried in Catholic cemeteries like this one.

More often, he can be found at Washington Cemetery, an enormous, mostly Jewish burial ground two blocks from his apartment. He spends part of almost every day there, photographing tombstones for relatives of the deceased. He posts his findings on the popular website FindAGrave.com, where researchers can request photos and volunteers who live nearby can fulfill them.

Casalaspro has been photographing graves since he was as a law student at the Touro Law Center on Long Island, where he helped lead the school's efforts to restore a Jewish cemetery. A longtime genealogist, he has since photographed his own family's tombstones across New York and New Jersey.

But until this fall, he hadn't taken requests. It was the coronavirus pandemic that inspired him – with COVID-19 spiking in his neighborhood, the graveyard turned out to be the safest place to pass the time. “Not a lot of people are in the cemetery, so I can walk around and get exercise for an hour or two,” he said.

Casalaspro portrays his interest in graving as a lark, but it's far from casual. Washington Cemetery has hundreds of thousands of graves. In less than two months, he has acquired such detailed knowledge of the place that he can identify errors in the cemetery's own files. A meticulous, almost obsessive record-keeper, he maintains a database of every grave he photographs. What really drives him isn't exercise, but a desire to honor and preserve the past of his Brooklyn community.

“He’s a big history person,” said his friend Dan Aliotta, a finance and compliance manager at Columbia University. “If you go to his house, he has history books everywhere, family history posters everywhere.”

Casalapro attributes his interest to a desire to learn more about his ancestors. But over time, he has accumulated a personal library that covers everything from the Greeks and Etruscans to colonial New York. Besides graving and genealogy, he collects historic coins and stamps, and visits sites around New York. If he can’t find a book on whatever he’s researching, he’ll print out articles and file them in a binder.

He is equally organized when it comes to his graving expeditions. For his trip to Holy Cross, he arrived equipped with a cemetery map and a table of all the ancestors he was looking for, plus their burial information.

Without this preparation, he says, he would never find anything. The cemeteries are massive, each with a different layout. Fortunately, there is some method to the madness. Holy Cross, like Washington Cemetery, is divided into sections, then rows, then plots. Each stone, therefore, has its own “address” – an inconspicuous number engraved into the bottom corner.

Casalapro calls cemeteries in advance to obtain these numbers, but says he often receives confusing or incorrect information. At Holy Cross, for instance, he realized almost immediately that the staff had gotten the plot numbers backwards. “The cemeteries confuse me more than help me,” he said. He’s become self-reliant instead, working out each cemetery’s idiosyncrasies.

Still, at Holy Cross, the first grave on his list was nowhere to be found; he found a gap between two stones where the memorial should have been. He sighed. “We’re shit outta luck with this one,” he said.

Does anyone find his hobby creepy? “My whole family,” he said dryly. Born on Staten Island, he grew up in Monmouth County, New Jersey. A grandmother interested in family history introduced him to genealogy, but most of his relatives aren’t interested in the dead. “It baffles me,” said Casalapro.

But through graving, he has found people equally passionate about history and genealogy. David Kurlander, a computer scientist from Seattle, has roots in the New York area but little time to visit, so he posted a FindAGrave request for a photograph of

his great-grandmother's stone in Washington Cemetery. "She died very young and I knew very little about her," said Kurlander.

An image of an ancestor's headstone is vital in Jewish genealogy, said Steve Stein, president of the Jewish Genealogical Society of New York. In addition to an English name, many Jewish headstones also have the deceased's Yiddish name engraved in its native Hebrew alphabet, plus patronymics (the name of the deceased's father), epitaphs and, in rare cases, a tribal affiliation or the name of the deceased's mother.

Last month, Kurlander learned that someone had posted a "beautiful picture" of his great-grandmother's headstone on FindAGrave. From the Hebrew inscription, he could confirm the identity of his great-grandmother's father, thereby extending his family tree back one more generation.

But there was more. The photographer – Casalaspro -- had also photographed the gate to the burial plot, which proved significant. Many Jewish graves in the New York area are organized into plots affiliated with immigrant societies formed by those from the same town in eastern Europe. From the gate, Jewish genealogists can learn the name of the burial society and identify an ancestral town – the "holy grail" for many researchers.

Kurlander was able to discover an ancestral town in modern Poland, thanks to Casalaspro's thoughtfulness. "I lucked out with Anthony," said Kurlander.

Those who know Casalaspro personally are unsurprised by his generosity. "He's happy to help people and is especially happy when they're appreciative," Aliotta said. Lately, he said, his friend has spent more time helping others with their research than he has on his own.

But Casalaspro says he's happy to do it. He's worked with researchers across the country, plus a person who began every message with "Hi from France," all connected by a passion for history and deep roots in Brooklyn. "I practically live there," he said of Washington Cemetery, laughing a little. "I have two homes now."