

Special Feature: BETH JACOB TURNS 80!—Part 2

by Alan Kaufman

Cemetery Mystery Laid To Rest 86 Years Later

For the last 86 years there has been an unmarked grave in row 7 number 7 at the Jewish Cemetery in Burlington, Vermont. All that was shown in the cemetery records was that adjacent to other graves dating from 1907 was buried someone who was "Unknown. Said to be an actor who died while on the stage of a Burlington theatre." It also assumed that whoever was buried in Row 7 number 7 was from Montpelier.

This intrigued George Solomon of Burlington who travelled to Montpelier, researched the death certificates for 1907 and located a record for a Philip Kornreich who died on Nov. 17, 1907, at Heaton Hospital in Montpelier and was buried in the Jewish Cemetery in Burlington. There was no record of a Philip Kornreich in the cemetery records, but George thought "maybe he was that actor."

George related the story to me and I located the following data in the local newspapers of the day. The first one presented here is his obituary in the Montpelier *Evening Argus* for Nov. 19, 1907.

Died In Hospital.

Philip Kornreich died at 9 o'clock Sunday morning (November 17th 1907) at Heaton Hospital where he has been since a week ago Tuesday. He represented the "Hottest Coon In Dixie" and was taken ill in Barre. While connected with that company he was employed under the name 'Philip Harris.' He has been suffering from liver trouble for nearly a year and although ill several days before reaching Barre he thought he could finish his work in Vermont and get back to Massachusetts, where he would be nearer his home.

His relatives were notified Sunday but early this morning no reply had been received from them. Harris Yett was called to the Hospital and is looking after funeral arrangements. The regulations of the Hebrew religion which is his faith require that the body shall be interred before sundown of the day on which the death occurs,

but in order to hear from the relatives of the deceased this was set aside and the body was taken to the undertaking rooms of Johannott & Hall where it rests.

Harris Yett sent a message this morning to New York where an uncle, Dr. C. Kornreich of the deceased lives and also one to J. Kornreich another uncle. They were also communicated with by telephone but neither of the men are in a circumstance to stand the expense of having the body sent to New York so it was taken by the 3:55 train this afternoon to Burlington where the funeral will be held. These uncles are the nearest relatives of the deceased. The funeral will be held from the Hebrew Synagogue in Burlington and the burial will be in the Hebrew cemetery. The body was accompanied to Burlington by Harris Yett who has looked after arrangements in this city since the death of Mr. Kornreich. Although Mr. Yett and others who have helped in the arrangements here had never seen the man until after his death, yet they expect to stand the expense of the funeral in this city, while the Hebrew Society will stand the expense in Burlington, if relatives do not.

The Barre *Daily Times* had the following to say about Philip Kornreich in their obituary of Nov. 18, 1907.

Theatrical Man Dead

Phillip Kornreich, Advance Agent of: 'The Hottest Coon In Dixie'

Philip Kornreich (better known as Harris) who has taken from this city to the Heaton Hospital in Montpelier 10 days ago by Manager Hoban, died in that institution Sunday morning in spite of the best care that could be afforded him. Death was due to enlargement of the liver. Mr. Kornreich was advance agent for a musical which played in town a short while ago. He leaves no relatives so far as known except an Uncle in New York state whose financial condition is such that it will not permit the carrying of the body there. So the Jewish people hereabout subscribed enough money to carry the body to Burlington where it will be interred tomorrow morning in the Jewish Cemetery. Mr. Kornreich was of that nationality. He was middle-aged and unmarried.

We now know that Phillip Kornreich was buried in Burlington, and that he was not from Montpelier, he was only passing through. He was not an actor, but was associated with, and probably the manager of, a theater company. He didn't die on the stage in Burlington, but was taken sick in Barre and transported from the Barre Opera House to Heaton Hospital in Montpelier by the general manager of the Opera House, a Mr. J. E. Hoban. We know that he died 12 days later and had his burial attended to with great care by members of Jewish Community of Montpelier whom he had never met.

What I have attempted to present historically in this piece is the performance of a very special mitzvah by some of the early Jewish settlers of Montpelier (and founders of Beth Jacob).

Maurice Lamm in *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, states that "When no other Jews are available to care for the deceased, the dead person is considered a *meyt mitzvah*, an abandoned corpse, which places the obligation for burial upon the first Jew who finds it. Even the High Priest in ancient times who was not otherwise permitted to handle a strange corpse, was under full obligation to bury the deserted dead. Thus, when no other Jews are available, one must sacrifice even very important work, or the study of Torah and the performance of other religious duties, and certainly other pleasurable activities, to help prepare the body for burial, and also to accompany the deceased to the grave and bury it. There is no difference as to whether or not one is related to or acquainted with the departed."

It is clear from the above that Harris Yett and other founding members of our Jewish community took the concept of *meyt mitzvah* very seriously. They saw to it that Phillip Kornreich was buried according to Jewish Law and with dignity. The only thing lacking was a stone. There was no headstone marking his grave. This oversight was corrected at Beth Jacob Synagogue board meeting on Nov. 9, 1993, 86 years after the fact, when the board unanimously voted to place a simple stone on the grave of Phillip Kornreich. May he now rest in peace.

The above article was also printed in the *Times Argus* Thursday, Dec. 2, 1993, in the Commentary Section.—Ed.

Kornreich Update

In November, I mailed the above article and a cover letter to 20 Kornreichs that I located in the Brooklyn, New York and Manhattan telephone directories. A Sam Kornreich of NY replied:

Dear Mr. Kaufman,

We have relatives who have received your note concerning Philip Kornreich and forwarded it to me since I am the keeper of the family genealogy. I had retained a professional genealogist some years ago to do a family tree and he did develop an extensive one, dating back to Eliezer Kornreich, who was born in 1790, and all his numerous descendents, of which I am one.

I checked the chart and found no references to a Philip Kornreich, so that the likelihood is that he was not related. The references in the paper of November 1907 speaks of uncles of the deceased, Dr. C. Kornreich and a J. Kornreich. The former could have been a Dr. Carl Kornreich, a distant cousin, and the J. Kornreich could have been Joseph, my Grandfather. However, neither one of them had a nephew named Philip.

Since I have long been involved in Jewish affairs (former National Chairman of the United Jewish Appeal, American Jewish Committee, etc.) I was fascinated by your, and the Jewish Community's observance of respect for the Jewish dead, (particularly one dating back to 1907,) and extend my deep respect and admiration for that concern.

Very truly yours,

Sam Kornreich

Dec. 14, I was called by a Jacques Kane of Massachusetts. I had mailed a letter to Adolph Kornreich, Jacques' father. I learned from Jacques that, although his father died 2 years ago, his mother left the telephone directory listing in his father's name. When she died 2 months ago, her mail was forwarded to Jacques, an art dealer in the Boston area. He read the letter that I had sent Adolph and immediately called me. Philip Kornreich was Jacques' grandfather's brother. His full name was Philip Harris Kornreich. He did indeed have two uncles living in NY. One was a Dr. Cahn Kornreich. The story that was handed down to Jacques was that Philip disappeared from home (Germany) at the age of 13 and somehow made his way to America. The only other information that was known about him was that he was "some sort of traveling secretary for the Barnum and Bailey Circus."

Jacques said that he hopes to be present at the unveiling of the Kornreich gravestone in the Burlington Jewish cemetery in spring of 1994.