
Solomons of Cooktown, Australia and the Internet

by Valerie Miller Fox

I never realized the effectiveness of the Internet until I stood in front of the grave of Lewis Solomon in Cooktown, Australia. He is not related to my husband or me and in fact to anybody that I know. As a Jewish genealogist, I am interested in knowing where Jewish graves or cemeteries are located. For example, for five years I have been searching for the graves of my two great-uncles who died in 1913 and 1914, in their teens, in Hawkesbury, Ontario, not far from the Canadian capital, Ottawa. On the other hand, I have located and have taken more than 40 photos of my relatives' tombstones, including my four great-grandparents, four grandparents, and numerous other relatives in Montreal, Canada (my birthplace). From the late-1970s until the mid-1980s I lived in Sarnia, Ontario (which looks onto Lake Huron), with a population of 50,000 people, of which 35 were Jewish families; but it has no Jewish cemetery. The Jewish Sarnians are buried in nearby London (a one-hour car ride) or in Toronto (a three-hour car ride). So just imagine my amazement when I learned that Cooktown (15 28/145 15), Australia, a town of 1300 people¹ on the Great Barrier Reef had a consecrated Jewish cemetery. It was there that I stood in front of the graves of Lewis Solomon and his wife, Esther.

A decade ago my husband and I decided to visit Australia. As Canadians, we were both fascinated with the island-continent, which we consider to be "on the other side of the world," where the seasons are opposite to ours, the home of kangaroos and wallabies; famous for its Outback, the Flying Doctor Service Stations, and the Great Barrier Reef. We saw the grey kangaroos in their natural environment; but we opted for a cruise on the Great Barrier Reef in favour of Ayres Rock and the Flying Doctor Station. We were not disappointed. Australians are rightly proud of their country.

During our cruise the ship docked at Cooktown, Queensland, in northern Australia. This was the place where Captain James Cook repaired his ship, *Endeavour*, when it ran aground on the coral reef. We took a bus tour of Cooktown and our guide told us about another person who figures prominently in the history of the region. Her name was Mary Watson. While

her husband was away, Mary Watson with her infant son and her Chinese houseboy set off in a "large, square ship's tank" to escape the invading Aborigines. Unfortunately, they drifted for five days (October 2-7, 1881) but died of thirst because they could not find fresh drinking water. According to Rosemary Oram (rjoram@dynamite.com.au), Mary's diary of her ordeal did much to make the story part of the history of North Queensland.² She died at the age of 21.

Our tour guide drove us to Cooktown's desolate-looking cemetery to show us Mary Watson's grave. It was the beginning of Australia's summer. It was hot and humid. There was barely any grass in that section of the cemetery. As the guide was giving his talk, I asked if the different religious denominations were buried together in the cemetery. "No," he replied, pointing, "This is the Catholic, over there is the Protestant, there is a Chinese and there is a Jewish section." A Jewish section! I was intrigued. I never imagined Jewish people living in this remote place. I had flown 20 hours by plane from Toronto, Canada to Sydney, New South Wales; I had flown from Melbourne, home of the famous Melbourne Cup, to Cairns; I had cruised up the Great Barrier Reef and docked in Cooktown, made famous by Captain James Cook. I was definitely going to trek a bit further to the edge of the cemetery to locate the Jewish burial grounds!

Quietly I left the group standing in front of Mary Watson's grave and headed in the direction of the Jewish cemetery. I saw a wooden pointer with the words: "Jewish cemetery 800 meters." It pointed in the direction of a "forest of trees" along a narrow path. At the end of the path in a small shaded tree clearing, I came across two tombstones that I could recognize as Jewish ones. The graves were that of Lewis Solomon and his wife, Esther. I later learned that Esther was not Jewish but Protestant.

As I stood in front of their graves situated in the shaded bush, I was overwhelmed with the thought that there I was, a Canadian, in a remote spot facing the Great Barrier Reef, standing in front of Jewish graves. I wondered who lay there, when they came to Australia, what was Lewis Solomon's occupation and

why did they choose such a remote place to live. Did Lewis Solomon have descendants who were trying to locate his final resting-place? According to ancient Jewish custom, I placed stones on their tombstones. It was then that I decided to find out more about Lewis Solomon and his wife, Esther. Perhaps someone out there in cyberspace was related to them!

We genealogists are a group of inquisitive, dogged, determined detectives. I am positive you can come up with adjectives of your own to describe yourself. But by what means are you pursuing your leads or hunches? Are you using conventional methods such as snapping pictures to put them in albums, are you visiting government institutions and libraries to look at microfiche, view microfilm, scan newspapers for birth and obituary notices? Or are you taking advantage of the newer technological methods in genealogical research? I found that both methods can complement each other.

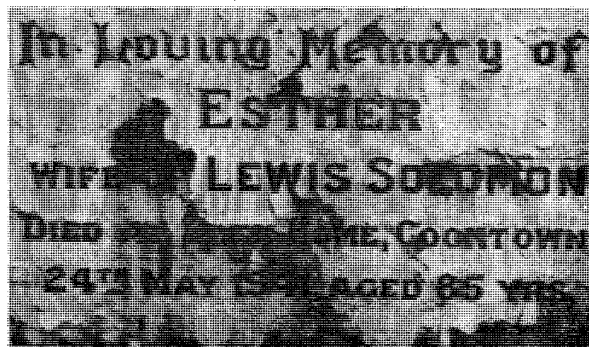
As I stood at the foot of Lewis and Esther Solomon's graves, I remembered that the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS) is in the process of documenting all existing Jewish cemeteries throughout the world. The project is known as the International Jewish Cemetery Project (www.jewishgen.org/cemetery). I decided when I returned home, I would email the JewishGen Discussion group: (www.jewishgen.org) to find out if Cooktown's graves were entered in the database. So I snapped a few pictures of their tombstones with my non-digital 35 mm. camera. I felt that if I located the descendants of Lewis and Esther, then perhaps they would like a picture of the Solomons' tombstones.

I had firsthand knowledge of trying to document graves. Last summer, after five years of patient, methodical, conscientious work, my society, the JGS of Canada (Toronto) had finally completed recording Toronto's Roselawn cemetery. There are countless stacks of notebooks as a testament to the members' hard work. However, in the last year of recording the stones, the members opted to photograph the stones instead of recording them with "pencil and pad." In the last year of phase one of the project, I volunteered to photograph a section of the cemetery. I used my 1970's camera. Our society preferred black-and-white film. Nobody in our society suggested that we use digital cameras or scan the photographs into digital images.

Digital cameras and digital images are among the newer methods for genealogical researchers. Photofinishers can develop the film and then transform them into digital images. They can put these images onto floppy disks or special CD-ROMs or on the Web. Also, those using scanners can have their photographs developed, scanned, edited, and put their digital images to a range of uses. Another option is to use digital cameras. By turning your photographs into digital images, you can then share your favourite "photos" with other people over the Internet.

Elliott Terman and I had hoped that his Davidofsky family from Nesvizh and my Davidovsky family from Novya Mysh (53 08/25 54) near Baranovici, Belarus were related as the towns are so close to one another. He used newer technology by sending me digital images of his relatives as an email attachment. I had no scanner at the time, so I mailed him a copy of a family picture which included my great-grandmother, Raizel Davidovsky Gallay. He edited the photo I sent him and emailed me a digital "photo" portrait of my "alta bubba." Newer technological devices do have their advantages.

JewishGen or posting to newsgroups makes sleuthing much simpler than conventional methods. I emailed the JewishGen Discussion Group (jewishgen@lyris.jewishgen.org) on November 19, 1998 under the subject heading: SOLOMON, Cooktown, Queensland, and Australia. I wrote: "If you believe you are a relative of this SOLOMON I would love to hear from you. I am interested to know how this couple came to live in Cooktown, and what they did for a living. I will gladly send you a copy of the photo if you wish. Hope to hear from you."



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Within three days I had emails from England, Toronto, and Australia! Gary Luke of the Australian Jewish Genealogical Society (the Australian Jewish Genealogical Society's website is: <http://www.zeta.org.au/~feraltek/genealogy/>) answered my email. He offered to "check the set of AJ Historical Soc [sic] Journals."³ True to his word, a month later by mail I received a photocopy of a six-page article from The Journal of the Australian Jewish Historical Society about the Jews of Cooktown. The author, Morris S. Ochert, writes: "In many cases the only reminder today of the existence of these small Jewish communities is the Jewish gravestone in the local cemeteries. One such country town is Cooktown, situated in northern Queensland, where a few Jews lived at the turn of the century. The cemetery retains to the present day a consecrated Jewish section."⁴ Ochert goes on to say "the details of the Jewish people buried in the Cooktown Cemetery...have been taken from the Cemetery Register and from the meagre data in the Shire Library."⁵ The article points out that Lewis Solomon was a Commission Agent. At one time he was the Mayor of Cooktown. His wife, Esther, who is buried alongside him, was not Jewish. The electoral rolls for the Cooktown Municipality [does not indicate the year of the electoral roll]. The article states the following: Solomon, Lewis: Commission Agent: Bailiff Cottage, Palmer Rd. Solomon, Esther: Protestant, Dressmaker's Shop, Charlotte St.⁶

Nobody has yet claimed to be related to Lewis Solomon. I have not dug deeper. I have not discovered why Lewis Solomon, a Jew, had come to live in such a remote part of northern Australia where there were not ten Jewish souls to form a minyan. Yet he remembered his roots and was buried in consecrated Jewish ground.

Beverly Davis, Honorary Archivist and Research Officer of the Australian Jewish Historical Society, Victoria, Melbourne (bdavis@interconnect.com.au) emailed me on November 26, 1998. She informed me that "there are four other Jewish burials in this area, but only one other remaining gravestone."⁷

We genealogists still rely on records, whether they are first-hand, second-hand, or in this case third-hand. The information mentioned above about Lewis and Esther Solomon

was taken from the Cooktown's Cemetery Register and from the town's electoral roll. Tombstones are another conventional method of finding information; albeit occasionally the information is incorrect. Until the time comes when we can sit at our computers and scan the databases for census records, tombstone records, vital statistics, Holocaust records, etc., we will have to turn to our government's institutions and its archives and to our libraries to locate the correct microfiche or microfilm.

In spite of advancements in technology, the most conventional method of all is the most basic one. People have always had a desire to forge bonds with like-minded individuals. We connect at some level with others we never met, probably never will meet; yet we help each other by exchanging knowledge and information. Technology is fascinating, but the human desire to impart knowledge surpasses technology in every way. ☆

Sources:

- ¹ Baedeker, *Australia* (New York: Macmillan Travel Inc., 1995), p 277.
- ² Rosemary Oram, email, November 25, 1998
- ³ Gary Luke, email, November 22, 1998
- ⁴ Morris S. Ochert, *Jewish People of Cooktown*, in *The Journal of the Australian Jewish Historical Society*, Volume XI, Part 6 (Sydney: 1993), p 950.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 951.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 954.
- ⁷ Beverly Davis, email, November 26, 1998.

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