

*TIJS Graduate Research & Travel Grants
Academic Year 2013-2014*

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Advisor: D. Seeman (GDR)
Purpose: Travel to Cape Verde to interview individuals involved in the preservation and restoration of Jewish cemeteries

I journeyed to Praia, Cape Verde, from February 14 to February 23 with the support of a Tam Institute Grant. I was able to visit the Varsea cemetery which has recently been restored by a collaboration between the Cape Verdean government, the Moroccan government, and a non-governmental organization called The Cape Verde Jewish Heritage Project. I interviewed the three cemetery keepers as well as a few people who lived near the cemetery.

Initially, I was quite disappointed. The Jewish cemetery, contrary to the indications by the Cape Verdean Jewish Heritage Project's press information, is really only a section of a few graves within a much larger Christian cemetery. Also, as I was told repeatedly during the week, Cape Verdeans think that it is bad luck to discuss graveyards or cemeteries, and several potential interviewees were quite reluctant or simply refused to talk to me about the subject.

That being said, the silences that I met in several instances spoke volumes. One my first of several trips to the graveyard, I spoke to one of the cemetery keepers who was carting around rubble – possibly broken gravestones – and asked him in Spanish and then Portuguese where the Jewish section of the graveyard was. He indicated by pointing his arm and speaking in French that it was up the hill and on the other side of the graveyard. I would later find out that when I asked him the question, we were in fact standing less than 20 feet away from the Jewish section. I assume that he simply had no idea, despite the working there.

After becoming lost following the instructions of the first worker, I met a young man who also spoke in French. When I asked where the Jewish cemetery was, he switched to broken English and asked me if I were American. He said that everyone who came looking for the Jewish section was American, and that there were many American visitors come, but just once or twice a year. They had been coming for 12 years. He walked directly to where the Jewish section was, but said that he did not know anything about it other than where it was, and left. Finally, the head cemetery keeper came to talk to me, in Portuguese. He wanted to show me the other sections of the cemetery, and kept telling me about the other graves' histories. I told him that I had come to see the Jewish section and then he gave me a thumbs up (a ubiquitous gesture in Cape Verde) and then wished me a good day.

The Jewish section of the cemetery was in *much* better shape than the rest of the graves. Instead of weeds and broken tombstones, the graves were surrounded by gravel. The inscriptions on the gravestones were in Hebrew, Portuguese or both. There was a sign in front of the Jewish section written in Portuguese and English which told about the restoration project in 2013.

When I spoke to tourism professionals and the staff of the ethnographic museum in town, I was greeted by a sense of surprise - "There's a Jewish section of the cemetery?" - or disinterest - "You're in Cape Verde. Why don't you study something about Cape Verde, like birds?" or "You should study the cemetery in Fogo. There's no Jews there, because it is a famous 'Whites-only' graveyard that only the colonial VIPs were buried in." I thought it was very interesting that in the mind of at least the one respondent that Jews were not understood as white or members of the colonial hierarchy.

My next steps for research are to follow up with the Cape Verdian Jewish Heritage Project and discuss some of my findings with them, as well as to learn whether they have plans for any other restoration projects in the future. Also, I would like to contact a lead given to me by Prof. Hary. Prof. Marlyse Baptista studies the reciprocal impacts of Jews and the wider Cape Verdean society on language and culture. The research trip made possible by the generous Tam Institute grant promises to provide a fruitful foundation for continued research on non-Jewish keepers of Jewish cemeteries.



