Death In Venice:
Seeking the Katzenellenbogen Tombstones
by Chaim Freedman

Having recently discovered my descent from the Katzenellenbogen family, I decided to trace the graves of members of the early generations while I was in Italy in May 2008.

My wife and I were staying in Venice for a week in a conveniently located pension in the Ghetto Nuovo, the oldest part of the ghetto, founded in 1516. We visited the adjacent Jewish museum and asked one of the curators, Daniela, if she knew of Katzenellenbogens who might be buried in the ancient Jewish cemetery of Venice, located on Lido Island. Daniela looked up several books in the museum library which included lists of the burials in the Lido cemetery. No Katzenellenbogens were listed under that surname, nor were any of the deceased listed without surnames of suitable personal names.

I was aware that the two Katzenellenbogens who had held the official position of Rabbi of Venice were buried in Padua, but it was not clear where the wife of one of them was buried. I suspected she might be buried in Venice, but I was wrong.

The earliest member of the family to be known by the surname Katzenellenbogen was Rabbi Meir, son of Yitskhak. His family apparently came from Katzenellenbogen, the small village overlooking the Rhine. Meir’s father, Yitskhak, moved to Padua in Italy, a rich center of Jewish and secular scholarship. Yitskhak’s wife was believed by many rabbinic genealogists to have been a daughter of Yekhiel Luria (died 1470), whose family held a tradition of descent from Rashi (1040–1105), himself a reputed descendant of King David.

Meir Katzenellenbogen was born in Germany in 1482 and was known by an acrostic of his name as the “Maharam Padua.” His wife, Khanah, was a daughter of Rabbi Avraham Mintz, a son of Rabbi Yehudah ben Eliezer Halevy Mintz (ca.1405–1508). The Mintz family came from Maintz, Germany, and Rabbi Yehudah established the yeshiva in Padua which was attended by prominent scholars. On his death, his son, Rabbi Avraham, succeeded as head of the yeshiva and Rabbi of Padua. On Avraham’s death, in about 1535,1 his son-in-law, Rabbi Meir Katzenellenbogen, became rabbi both of Padua and Venice. He lived in Padua and only visited Venice periodically.

On the death of the Maharam Padua in 1565, his son, Rabbi Shmuel-Yehudah, became Rabbi of Venice where he resided. His wife’s name was Avigayil (her father’s name is not known). She died in 1594 in Venice, followed by Rabbi Shmuel-Yehudah in 1597, also in Venice. Rabbi Shmuel-Yehudah, however, was taken to Padua for burial next to his father and mother.

According to Rosenstein,2 “Over the centuries, the tombstone of the Maharam began to crumble, being made of soft stone, and its inscription was becoming illegible. In 1966, four hundred years after his death, the community of Padua replaced the tombstone with a new one on the original site. The old stone now stands in the new cemetery of Padua. This was witnessed by the present writer on a visit to Padua in 1968.”

During my vacation in Italy, I was eager to visit the Katzenellenbogen graves, both out of sentiment for my ancient ancestors (I am an 18th-generation descendant of the Maharam Padua through the Vilna Gaon) but also to ascertain the burial place of Avigayil and perhaps her father’s name, which I expected to appear on the inscription on her tombstone.

Padua has several old cemeteries, and I consulted JewishGen’s cemetery project <www.JewishGen.org/cemetery/> to determine which housed the Katzenellenbogen tombstones. JewishGen indicated that Venice has two ancient cemeteries. I then consulted a site for Jewish Padua <www.kosherdelight.com/ItalyVenetoPaduaSynagogue.htm> which stated that “the Jewish cemeteries in the city make a separate itinerary; there are seven in all, and some can be visited by arrangement with the community offices. The first cemetery is at San Leonardo and dates from before 1348. Among the tombs is that of the famous Rabbi Meir Katzenellenbogen (1482–1565) with its carving of a cat (Katze in German).”

I posted on the JewishGen Forum a request for information about the accessibility of the cemetery, and I received several replies including one from Israeli genealogist Schelly Talalay-Dardashti who referred me to an expert on Italian Jewry, Nardo Bonomi. Bonomi lives in Florence and is the coordinator of the site <www.italian-family-history.com/jewish/genealogy.html>. He kindly telephoned the Jewish Community Center in Padua and made inquiries for me. Likewise, I was informed by Elieser Rosenfield of Jerusalem that he had visited the cemetery, and he provided the contact details of the person who guided him, an official of the Padua Jewish community, Raffaele D’Angeli.

I e-mailed D’Angeli and we set a date for my visit, since the cemetery is not readily open to the public other than by prior arrangement.

Meanwhile, in Venice, we arranged to visit the cemetery on the Lido in the hope of finding the grave of Avigayil Katzenellenbogen. The one weekly tour available, led by Daniela of the Jewish museum, was cancelled because of heavy rain.
On the day before we were due to leave Italy, we set off by train on a 30-minute journey to Padua. We met Raffaele (Rafi) as arranged outside the Plaza Hotel. A 20-minute walk through the old cobbled streets of Padua led us to the locked gate set in the high brick wall surrounding the cemetery. Rafi unlocked the gate and took us to the back row of the cemetery. The grounds are well tended, and there is an ongoing project to restore and identify the tombstones.

The Katzenellenbogen tombstones stand in a row against the rear wall of the cemetery. According to Rafi, this is their original site. Confronting tombstones of ancestors from 450 years ago was exceedingly moving.

From left to right, the five stones are:

Rabbi Shmuel Yehudah, 1521–97, son of Rabbi Meir Katzenellenbogen; Rabbi Meir the “Maharam Padua” 1482–1565; Khanah, died in 1564, the daughter of Rabbi Avraham Halevy Mintz and wife of Meir Katzenellenbogen; the bottom fragment of a tombstone, most of the inscription illegible; and Avigayil, the wife of Shmuel Yehudah, who died in 1594. This last stone cleared up the mystery in relation to the fragmented stone.

As to the fragmented stone between Khanah and Avigayil, I believe it can be identified from the wording on Khanah’s tombstone, which states that she was buried to the right of her father, Avraham Mintz. That indeed is the location in relation to the fragmented stone.

A personal note: our daughter’s name is Avigayil Khanah, like the two female Katzenellenbogens, a coincidence I only realized when standing by the tombstones.

I was interested in seeing the tombstone of Rabbi Yehudah Mintz, the grandfather of the Maharam’s wife, but Rafi informed me that he had been buried in another cemetery next to Rabbi Yitskhak Abarbanel, and the stone had been destroyed. This is confirmed in Elef Margaliot which states that the stone was destroyed during a war a year after the burial, in 1509.5

The Hebrew inscriptions on the tombstones match those cited by Endelman6 and the English translation can be found in Rosenstein7 with the exception of that of Avigayil.

Sources

5. The Venetian Ghetto, Sullam and Calimani, Milan 2005

Notes

* It appears to me that the stone which was restored was that of Shmuel Yehudah and not of his father, the Maharam. Shmuel Yehudah’s stone is white with a clearly etched inscription. The adjacent stones of his relatives are of uniform condition and apparent age. I have asked Rafi for clarification.

I am awaiting the arrival of Rosenstein’s new book on Shaul Wahl, a son of Shmuel Yehudah Katzenellenbogen to ascertain whether he has included an updated reference to the tombstones.

Notes

1. Elef Margaliot, Meir Wunder, Jerusalem 1993, p.186
5. Elef Margaliot, p. 190.
6. Gedulat Shaul, introduction, pp. xii–xiv

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