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### **Gravestones vandalized in Jewish cemetery**

JTA (16.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2FOSt0X> - Dozens of gravestones were toppled and broken in a Jewish cemetery in Eritrea.

The damage at the cemetery located in the capital of Asmara is believed to have happened in recent days, according to two Jewish news outlets that received photos of the vandalism.

The Israel-based Haaretz [published photos](#) of the smashed gravestones, reported to be the first time that the Jewish cemetery has been targeted.

"The cemetery suffered vandalism and a large number of graves were defaced," Danny Goldschmidt, from the Aden Jewish Heritage Museum located in Tel Aviv, told Haaretz. He said that the police have not made any arrests in the incident.

The London-based Jewish Chronicle also was sent photos of the [damage](#) by an unnamed reader in London of Eritrean descent, who did not want his name published for fear of retribution against family members who remain in Eritrea.

In addition to cemetery, the site in Asmara site is home to a now-defunct synagogue. The last Jewish family left Eritrea more than ten years ago. There reportedly is one permanent Jewish resident left in the city, who has been identified as Sami Cohen and who reportedly takes care of the cemetery and the synagogue.

The last grave was dug in the cemetery in 1996, Ynet reported in 2006. There are about 150 people buried in the cemetery.

The Jewish Photo Library blog featured a visit and an [interview](#) with Sami Cohen in 2015, when he was 67. Cohen, often called "the last Jew of Eritrea," said he maintains the synagogue, including caring for its two Torah scrolls and Jewish books in the hopes that the Eritrean market will open up, bringing Israeli and Jewish businessmen to the area.

Asmara's Jewish community numbered as many 500 people in the 1950s, made up of Jews who came from Yemen in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century due to Italian colonial expansion, and by Jews who fled Europe before and during World War II. Some Jews left Eritrea when Israel became a state, and others left when Eritrea's 30-year-long fight for independence from Ethiopia reached Asmara. By 1975 the community had shrunk to 150 and by 1993 when Eritrea gained independence Cohen was one of the only Jews left.

Cohen's wife and children left in the late 1990s. He divides his time between Rome, Tel Aviv and Asmara, according to the blog. Though he was born in Eritrea, Cohen also retains British citizenship.

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