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David and Goliath vie for funerals

Family-owned homes must compete with larger chain

By Ian Thal

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Making end-of-life arrangements either for oneself or a loved one is a difficult undertaking, and often put off until the last minute.

“When somebody dies,” said Kenneth Schlossberg of Schlossberg Solomon Memorial Chapel in Canton, “[it’s] a crisis [and their family doesn’t] have time to compare prices.” Schlossberg Solomon was founded in 1928 in Roxbury by his grandfather, Barney Schlossberg. Traditionally, funeral homes have tended to be family businesses with ties to a community spanning generations. In the Boston area, the older Jewish funeral homes were established in the North End and West End neighborhoods that were the center of Jewish life in the late 19th century, like the synagogues, moving with their communities as the Boston area’s Jewish families relocated to Roxbury, Dorchester, Brookline, Newton, and the North and South shores. Often, however,

the name on the door may not reflect the ownership, and ownership may determine not only the price but the quality of service.

While all of the homes do a brisk business, only one of those interviewed for this story, Schlossberg Solomon, wanted to provide numbers in terms of how many funerals they handle annually. Schlossberg Solomon estimated “just over 200” in 2013. At Goldman Funeral Chapel in Malden, whose owner was unavailable for this story, a staff member estimated “140 to 150 funerals per year.” Goldman was founded in 1950 by Murray H. Goldman and is currently run by his son Harvey Goldman and grandson Jay A. Goldman.



The independently owned Schlossberg Solomon Memorial Chapel, located in Canton, was initially founded in Roxbury in 1928.

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In Brookline, both the Levine Chapels and Stanetsky Memorial Chapels (Stanetsky also operates in Salem) are no longer owned by the families that founded them, but by Service Corporation International (SCI), a Houston-based corporation, through its subsidiary, Dignity Memorial. SCI is the largest corporation in the “death-care” industry, with international holdings that only a small portion of which are historically Jewish. SCI’s business model is to purchase already-established funeral homes, retain the individual name, sometimes retaining the former owners as management. The Dignity brand is used extensively, such as in the graphics on their respective websites, as well as in the domain names www.dignitymemorial.com and www.dignitymemorialjewish.com.

Despite Dignity Memorial’s Jewish brand name, SCI has begun to convert some of the historically Jewish facilities it now owns into multi-use sites, allegedly with separate entrances for Jewish and gentile funerals, according to Schlossberg. An SCI employee, speaking on behalf of both Stanetsky and Levine, rebuffed initial inquires and did not reply to subsequent questions for this story, but public records in the state of Florida indicate that the West Palm Beach location of at least one historically Jewish chain of funeral homes, I.J. Morris, now owned by SCI, is now doing business as Quattlebaum, a non-Jewish chain recently acquired by SCI.

“SCI is banking on traditional religion disappearing,” Schlossberg said. “We’re banking on the opposite – on the strength of Judaism – and we’re investing in it. He cited his philanthropic efforts as well.

By contrast, independently owned funeral chapels often stress their personal connection with the communities they serve over those chapels owned by large corporations such as SCI. Indeed, SCI, by keeping the historical name of the facility, trades on the continuity. An Oct. 24, 2013 profile on SCI in Bloomberg Businessweek determined that on average, the services including everything from basic staff services, to vehicles, to facilities (but not including casket or plot) provided by SCI are 42 percent more expensive than those provided by independently owned homes. According to the study, the difference on average was one of \$6,256 to \$4,405 (Bloomberg’s numbers included pricing for embalming, which is discouraged by Jewish law). In short, the numbers seem to back up the sentiment.

By contrast, on its website, Schlossberg Solomon declares, “We are not part of a large publicly traded company with a primary responsibility to meet the quarterly profit expectations of its investors. We do not provide financial incentives to our professional staff to upsell caskets or other prepackaged goods and services.”

“This is the single biggest difference,” said Schlossberg, “They price based on quarterly profit margins. ... A family-owned funeral home can price from the bottom up; we are more connected to the community.” He also noted that “our funeral directors will, if they have to, spend three to four hours with the family,” stating that SCI directors rarely can spend more than an hour with the grieving families.

Stanetsky Memorial Chapels was founded by Jacob Stanetsky, a Lithuanian immigrant. The exact point in which he embarked in his career as an undertaker is unclear, but he was signing death certificates as early as the mid-1880s. Though he served the Jewish community in the South End of Boston, the business moved to Dorchester’s Grove Hall in 1934, later relocating to Brookline and eventually being purchased by SCI.

Jonathan Finstein, a funeral director who has worked at both Stanetsky and Levine before moving to Schlossberg Solomon in 2011, cited the difference between the corporate-owned and family business environments: “I [now] have one boss,” while with SCI, “I had a location manager; a general manager; a

regional manager, who was not Jewish, in Fall River who reported to New York or Atlanta, who then reported to Houston. ... [SCI doesn't] take in account regional or religious differences.” He cited a regional SCI party: “No one at Stanetsky’s showed up due to Simchas Torah,” and the staff were later criticized by their SCI higher-ups for not attending the event, “My understanding,” said Finstein, “is that there are no minor Jewish holidays.”

Finstein said things got worse as the Stanetsky family became less involved in managing the company. Eventually he left for the Levine Chapel in 2007 and stayed until it, too, was sold to SCI in 2011. After working in both environments,

Finstein concluded, “I am more comfortable working for a Jewish family, serving Jewish families.”

The Levine Chapel, now in Brookline, was founded as the Levine Funeral Home in the North End in 1893 by Jacob H. Levine. SCI acquired it in 2011 after owner, Barbara Levine died in 2011. In Schlossberg’s view, SCI “paid an extraordinarily high price, over \$11 million, for Levine’s; [then] they raised the prices to make up the difference.”

In 1992, David Brezniak, who had previously been president of The Levine Chapel, joined with George Rodman to found the Brezniak Rodman Funeral Chapels of West Newton. Brezniak-Rodman Chapels make a selling point of the fact that while they are a relatively new company, they are owned by families that have been in the business for over a century, stating on their website, in an explicit comparison with their SCI-owned local competitors, that “We offer the level of compassionate care that only a family can provide. We are accountable to you and your family – not to stockholders and investors.” In 2004, Brezniak-Rodman purchased Levine-Briss of Randolph, which had been founded by Brezniak’s great-uncle. Brezniak-Rodman is a founding member of Kavod, an association of independently owned and operated Jewish funeral chapels in the United States and Canada.

Amy Torf-Feinberg, whose greatgrandfather and grandfather founded the Torf Funeral Service in Chelsea in 1933, and has been working with her mother since 2003, said that “I came into the business to keep my grandfather’s legacy alive.” Like Schlossberg, Torf-Feinberg cites her business’s philanthropic work in the local Jewish community. Noting that serving the community takes precedence over short-term profits, she mentioned that even in the case of financial hardship, “One thing I learned from my grandfather is that ‘you never leave a Jew unburied.’”