

Schwabian Burial Customs

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In Teplitz, Bessarabia, when a villager died the community came together to carry out age-old rituals and customs that had been brought to South Russia from "Schwabia", the ancestral homeland of the majority of the villagers. On the day of death, the clergy visited the home to pronounce the final blessings for the deceased. The death was then announced by the ringing of the church bells. A printed or hand-written note was passed door to door through the village to announce the time of the funeral.

Only on very rare occasions was a person buried the day of death. We had no funeral home. People washed and dressed their loved one at home, and laid them down in a cool room in the house. Then the immediate family would gather to grieve, to mourn and to wait for the arrival of relatives. In Teplitz there were people in town who, for a fee, would wash and dress the deceased.

On the day of the funeral, the open casket was placed on a stand and then carried outside for viewing. It was customary for people to come and see the body, pay their respects and stay for the funeral. Funerals were usually large, with many villagers in attendance. The funeral was held outside the home, and then the entire group proceeded to the graveyard for the burial. Everyone in Teplitz knew each other, and most of us were related by either blood or marriage. We have been, and always were, a close-knit community.

Funerals for adults or for children were similar, with some differences for an infant. A baby that died was not kept long in the house. The funeral service was performed soon after death and was attended by only a small group of family and very close friends. A newborn that died was usually carried to the graveyard by the midwife.

Singing was a large part of our life in Teplitz. My mother frequently sang at funerals - songs such as ""Verlass mich nicht," "(Don't Leave Me); or ""Dort ueber den Sternen,"" (There Above the Stars).

In Teplitz, the graveyard was out behind the church. The graves were facing toward the church, with the headstone placed on the end of the grave away from the church but facing toward the church. By the 1930's our graveyard at the Teplitz church was divided into four sections. The old graveyard from the pioneer days was closest to the church. For most of these graves, the markers were either missing or so weathered that it was impossible to tell the name of the deceased. For many of these old-timers, there were no relatives left in the village to maintain the graves.

After 1900, the graveyard site was extended further up the slope behind the church. The main section was used only for adults, with a "Kinder Friedhof" along the south-eastern side of the new section. The graveyard was fenced in with a masonry wall. Just inside the north-western wall of the cemetery, space was set aside for "sinners" - people who committed suicide. Such folks were laid to rest without ritual, at sundown, and with only family members in attendance. Usually a church Elder performed a brief grave-side service for these people who

were felt to have died without a soul. I remember so well as a child, walking quickly past the graves of these "sinners" - afraid that devils were present there. Thinking back then, I wonder why we felt they had no soul. Our thinking reflected our ignorance of mental illness.

After the funeral and burial, a dinner was arranged for close friends and relatives. In honor of the deceased, this was an elaborate occasion that in many respects resembled a wedding feast. Relatives helped out by bringing baked goods. The community also stepped in and helped out, especially at the busy harvest time. Food items that were customarily brought to the "Leichentrunk" (funeral dinner) included "Suessbrot", a braided holiday pastry enriched with eggs, cream and sugar. The braided pastry dough was basted with an egg wash prior to baking so that the top became nice and brown in the oven. In connection with a funeral dinner this pastry was referred to as "Leichenbrot." My mother's specialty was to use the same pastry dough, placing it in a shallow round or rectangular baking pan and topping it with lots of "Riebele" or "Streusel" - "rich little balls made of butter, sugar and flour. This version was called "Riebeles-Kuchen".

Funeral dinners were not always sad. Getting together with local friends and relatives and often relatives from out of town created a party atmosphere. The visiting and exchanging of thoughts and memories about the deceased was very helpful in processing our grief. The Pastor or Sexton was generally included in the "Leichentrunk" and was usually the one asked to conclude the event with a closing prayer". "These spiritual men gave us stability and unselfishly stood by everyone in all of life's needs. This was also true of the church Elders. The Elders were often called on to perform an emergency baptism in the home for a newborn that was weak with little or no chance of survival. Such baptisms generally included a reading from the Bible to bless the newborn infant. The most important aspect of such emergency baptisms was the assurance the presence of the Elder represented to the parents that their child was being cared for in the name of the Lord. Standard infant baptisms were performed in the church as soon as the mother was able to walk around. All church baptisms included the presence of the "Doda" and "Dede" - Godfather and Godmother. These spiritual parents played an important part in bringing up a child. I was lucky with my Godparents, from a child's perspective, as they gave me nice gifts at Christmas!

For several weeks after a funeral, it was customary for the clergy and close friends to stop by the house to visit the grieving family. The family time of mourning extended for months. Older widows wore black dresses "forever," it seemed. Even beyond the period of mourning, the gravesites were maintained by family members. Love and dedication was shown by placing flowers and greenery on the grave. Visiting the graveyard gave a feeling of family togetherness as feelings of love and devotion were recalled. Such visitation was similar to a home-coming and showed how dearly our folks loved each other. Sometimes a grieving relative would go to the grave to cry or pray.

Religious holidays and special occasions always included a visit to the cemetery. Examples of such days would be the deceased's birthday, the anniversary of the day of death, Easter, Christmas*,* and New Years*.* The dead were included in all memorable occasions. Year-round, the graves were kept clean and freshly decorated with plants. Many graves were surrounded by a wrought-iron fence with a gate that locked. Many grave stones included a picture of the deceased framed with carved palm branches and texts of Scripture. Easter was a particularly special time to spend moments visiting the graves of loved ones. We were brought up to show gratitude to our parents, to show them love and respect as long as we should live.

As a refugee in 1945, I was 15 years old and a year short of being conscripted into the army. When we were fleeing to Germany from Poland, an old man died on our train out in the middle of nowhere as we rode in a cattle car. The next time the train stopped, we removed the man's body from the car and laid him down beside the railroad tracks. Someone covered him up with a blanket and we collected stones to hold the blanket down. Another young man and I asked some ladies to come over and join us while we had prayer for this man. I prayed a simple prayer, although I don't recall exactly what I said. Then we sang ""So nimm denn meine Haende und fuehre mich," "(Take me by the hand and lead me on). To end our service we sang ""Jesu geh voran," "(Jesus walk ahead of us). The singing was so heart-felt, so emotional, that we all cried. What a needed release that was for us! In that moment of our despair we reached out for hope and freedom. Our crying released our pent-up emotional load. We all felt that Jesus was standing there beside us. I felt an intensity of emotion that I had not experience before nor since.

After we had arrived in East Germany, there was an 8-year old girl who died. Although I was just 15, I was the one who conducted her funeral - a service that was* *brief and simple*. *Her body was laid to rest in a proper* *grave. The girl's mother was so grateful to me and thanked me for giving her daughter the dignity of a Christian funeral.

When my infant brother was stillborn in 1945, I went to the local pastor to report the death. He couldn't or wouldn't do a thing for us, and suggested that I go see the gravedigger. A baby born dead had no soul. The pastor was not willing to comfort us in our need by assisting us, so it was my job to bury my baby brother. Since I worked for the farmer-gravedigger, I was able to arrange for a place in the cemetery to bury my brother's remains. Again, I held a simple grave-side service to give dignity to the deceased. That simple service was so special to me and gave me peace. Giving dignity to my brother helped me realize that my life also had dignity.

When we eventually reached West Germany and were settled in the Wuerttemberg region, the home of our ancestors, we found that the funeral customs in Teplitz were the same as in Wuerttemberg. It was as though we had never left! In Wuerttemberg as in Teplitz, the people would sing by the house of the deceased, and then there was more singing on stops before the cemetery was reached. One difference was that in Wuerttemberg the casket was closed at the house and then transported with a fancy carriage and team of horses to the graveyard. The funeral dinner, the "Leichentrunk", was held in a restaurant rather than at the home.

To cremate a body was unheard of - to even mention such a thing would have been an insult. To this day our people will have no part in it even though space in Germany is getting scarce and expensive. In Germany today, cemeteries are maintained as a park-like setting, a place for peaceful remembrance of life with one's loved ones and a reflection on all one's memories.

The love and respect that was instilled in us toward our family in life and in death has been a foundational bedrock of our community. It remains with us still, and gives our lives a sense of the importance of carrying on our traditions with pride and dignity.