

The Quest for a Proper Burial: How My Family Buried Their Dead

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I have followed with interest my extended family's way of burying its deceased members from the time they lived in Imperial Russia in the revolutionary years and the succeeding period of famine and disease, through the Stalinist years and exile in Siberia, and finally, in Canada and the United States. Where possible the funerals and burials were conducted according to both their religious convictions and folk customs. An unstated goal seems to have been to give the deceased "a proper burial" by whatever means available. My information comes from published and unpublished manuscripts, memoirs, letters, and my own recollections and notes of stories my parents, immigrants to Canada in 1923, told me about life in Ukraine.

Sagradowka, Ukraine, in 1928

The first deaths and burials of close family members to come to my awareness were those of my maternal grandmother, Katharina Boldt Janzen (wife of Franz Janzen), in 1928, and the death of my paternal grandfather, Johann Johann Funk, and three of his close relatives about eight years earlier during the typhus epidemic that followed hard on the heels of the Russian Revolution.

On November 25, 1928 a letter arrived at our home in Blaine Lake, Saskatchewan from my grandfather Franz Janzen in Friedensfeld, Sagradowka, Ukraine. I was five years old. The letter was edged in black, a custom in those days to forewarn the addressee of bad news. The letter starts with a little introductory information about Grandfather's children living at home and then the statement: "I am lonely and I want to write and have to write a difficult letter, namely, our much beloved Mama has died.... That she died a believer I have no doubt." (Letter 12) To have oral proof of the eternal destination of the deceased gave comfort to the family left behind and is the type of statement often found in obituaries, especially of Mennonite Brethren, to this day.

Such an affirmation of faith appears frequently in correspondence my Siberian relatives wrote to my family.

From later letters, however, it becomes clear that my mother's siblings in Russia did not regard their father as a "believer", because letters mention their prayers for him to become *gläubig*, a believer. One clear indication for them that he was not in the "fold" was that he smoked heavily. Shortly before his death in the early 1930s he stopped smoking (in part because he had no money to buy tobacco) and made a "commitment to Jesus Christ," giving the family much joy. In his 1928 black-edged letter to his two Canadian families, Grandfather Janzen gives a long, detailed description of his wife's final illness, death and burial, including all of her last words and actions and of those caring for her. Letters from the older children repeat the same details in almost ritual fashion.

Neta Janzen Block, a daughter, gives further details about her mother's burial, showing what was customary at the time for a proper burial. The body was taken to a neighbor's cellar to keep cool because there was no embalming. Neta and her father drove to find someone to dig the grave, to buy lumber for the coffin and to send telegrams to children living elsewhere. "Papa borrowed money from the women's circle," she writes. Jakob Doerksen and Franz Wiens made the coffin. Two daughters strung a garland of greenery around the coffin and pasted letters on it to form the phrases "*Wiedersehen*" and "*Ruhe Sanft*." The coffin also had a lace edging. The two men who made the coffin also preached at the funeral, following the tradition of a short sermon followed by a longer second sermon. (Letter 10).

After a meal together at a relative's place, the family members had their photograph taken by the open coffin. This picture-taking became an important record of the event and part of the pattern used later on when these same children were exiled in Siberia and had even fewer resources to bury their dead. I have several such pictures. The picture in my hand shows my grandfather sitting somberly behind the coffin surrounded by children, spouses and grandchildren, all dressed in dark clothing. A concern expressed in the letters from his children is whether all those in the picture will be reunited in heaven, a comment often made at the time of a death.

Each Mennonite village in Ukraine had its own burial ground. At the cemetery the grave was covered with boards and a little dirt so that it could be reopened when the children, Tina and Jakob Klassen, who hadn't made it in time for the funeral, arrived. This was also a customary practice. Jakob Klassen, a son-in-law and minister, writes to my parents: "Her short life was very difficult. She had raised twelve children and, in spite of the extreme poverty she had to cope with, she never complained about or bemoaned her lot in life. She bore the cross

she was given in silence.” (Letter 11) Clearly the family was following some unwritten pattern for burial.

Kronstal, Ukraine, 1920

The death of my paternal grandfather, Johann Jacob Funk, occurred in January, 1920 during the typhus epidemic in Kronstal, Khortitsa Colony. The event, however, did not enter my consciousness until much later when I was in my teens. Possibly the reason is that my father, Jacob Johann Funk, was freer to speak about this difficult event when he had more emotional distance from it. The Funk family had fled from Rosental to Kronstal in the fall of 1919 to escape the Makhno bands and the Red army, which had already once arrested and then released the older Funk because another son had connections with the White army. My father, as the oldest male member of the family living at home, had to arrange for the burial of four members of his immediate family alone. He adhered to traditional burial patterns as much as possible even though the family, church and community infrastructure was broken.

On January 8, 1920 Johann Funk, weakened by his earlier imprisonment, died of typhus at age 52. That same day my father’s grandfather, also a Johann Funk, died and two days later his wife. Three days later my father’s Uncle Peter also succumbed to the disease. Four corpses lay in the home in one week. Burying the dead during the height of the typhus epidemic in the midst of acute hunger was difficult because money – as well as material means and physical and emotional strength – was limited. People were eating horse and dog meat, cats and crows. My father told me about killing gophers for food.

My father, then about 24, was responsible for all the funeral arrangements, including washing the bodies to delay decay, and laying them on boards in the summer house, an unheated room, where bodies sometimes froze stiff in winter. Because he had had typhus as a medic in the Russian Red Cross during World War I, he was immune to the disease.

At the first graveside service, my father asked a church elder to pray over the bodies before he filled in the grave, but the man wanted payment – half a load of manure for fuel, for he had sick family members at home. Who had manure to sell or give away at the time? The deacon, a lesser church dignitary, came instead – free of charge.

After the next death Father asked a relative who still owned some horses to transport the coffin to the graveyard on his wagon. My father had built some simple coffins from slats ripped from the fence, for lumber was unavailable. He had given another man a pail of wheat to

dig the grave. The relative with the horses said he was too busy. But the body had to be buried. So my father placed the roughly built coffin on a homemade wagon using the wheels of an old plow, his younger brothers helping, and pulled the wagon to the graveyard at the edge of Kronstal, fearful each step of the way someone might have buried another body in the grave before he got there. At the graveside he lowered the coffin into the waiting hole, took off his cap and recited Psalm 73: 25-26. Then he filled in the hole dug in the shape of an upside-down T, which now held its full quota of three bodies, and went back to his parental home. He did the same with the fourth body a few days later. (Wiebe, *The Storekeeper's Daughter*, 53-4) In each case there was no meal before the burial and no church service, only a simple blessing. The social structure of the community as well as that of the nation was too shattered by the revolution and famine. That he was unable to do more to give each family member a proper burial troubled my father until he died at the age of 91.

At the height of the typhus epidemic in 1920 the minister in the church service read the list of names of those who had died during the week and gave the reason for the death, either typhus or starvation. Sometimes as many as thirty persons were buried in one week. In 1989 I visited that cemetery at the edge of Kronstal. Weeds had overtaken the area, and here and there, a few gravestones leaned against one another or were disappearing into the earth. I found a few Mennonite names in the back part of the cemetery. I was profoundly moved to see the place where my father had experienced such great trauma.

Siberia, 1957

Some 35 years later, in 1957, in the Kazhakstan area, three maternal aunts and three daughters who had grown up in Sagradowka, Ukraine, lived for a time in one room in an apartment building; later they were able to use a second adjacent room. The people forced into labor in the area had limited freedoms after Stalin's death in 1953 and thereafter. They were among those thousands sentenced to hard labor, developing the forest and mineral resources in Siberia after World War II. My aunt Lena Janzen Bergman died after a four-year illness at the age of 54 in those rooms. She received no hospitalization and had limited medical care. The other sisters and daughters were working or going to school, yet despite limitations of time and money they did their utmost to give their sister a proper burial.

A Mrs. Voht washed the body with the help of another sister living nearby. The coffin was made by a government association to which sister Truda Koop belonged. "It was quite simple," she writes. "I

didn't have to pay anything." Usually coffins were painted red but she preferred black, so she found some black paint and brought it to the carpenters, who got paid by the government. She purchased the wreath and flowers from a flower shop to decorate the coffin. A relative did the printing on the cross and memorial. She and her sister Marta did all the baking at the kitchen where Truda worked. When sister Tina and granddaughter Suse came home from work, they and Trudel, daughter of the deceased, brought along a small hand sled to bring everything to their rooms "in that terrible frost." Sisters Suschen and Tina prepared everything there. Suschen cooked the dinner for the funeral and Tina made the pillow and edging for the coffin.

Usually there were ready graves, but because of the extreme cold none had been dug and so this also had to be arranged. "We ate in Suschen's room and put the beds in our room, where the guests also laid their heavy outerwear and waited for their turn to eat. During the time that the body was taken to the cemetery, Suschen and Tinchin cooked coffee and set the table. They used their own dishes and some borrowed from friends. The vehicle carrying the coffin stood in front of their building, but they couldn't see it because their windows were on the other side." (Letter 107)

At the service there were three preachers, Jacob Neufeld, Jacob Esau and David Klassen, who spoke. The group sang many hymns. "Even though it was cold, there were many guests," she writes. "After coming from the graveyard we served Faspas: coffee and crumb cake and Sunday cookies." About 70 people were present in this crowded place. In the evening there were four short sermons and she lists the Scripture texts: John 6:37-40, Job 8:8-9, Isaiah 40:5-7, 2 Corinthians 5:1, John 14:18 and Rev. 7:14-17. It is not clear how they fed the 70 people in two rooms. A church building is not mentioned.

In this letter Truda Koop also details the events of the final days of illness and mentions the deceased sister's frequent wish that her daughter would become a child of God and her appreciation for the loving support of friends with gifts of food and encouragement. (Letter 91)

Strange Events in pre-World War Rosental, Ukraine

It was always difficult in an age when medical help was unavailable to determine if the patient was really dead. People agonized when an ill person remained in a coma for a long time. My father told me how a family member would hold a feather under the dying person's nose to check for even a slight movement of air or bring a mirror close to the mouth to look for air condensation. People had great fear of burying

someone alive. Folk tales abounded of later digging up a grave to find the person had grown hair and beard and nails and even scratched himself in a vain attempt to get out of the dark prison.

Folk tales about ghosts were passed on from generation to generation in the Khortitsa area where the Mennonites lived close to the Ukrainians, but possibly also in other areas. Some of these stories crossed the ocean with the Mennonites to Canada. Ghost stories were part of my early childhood living in a mostly Slavic community of Blaine Lake, Saskatchewan and closely connected to my thoughts about death and burial. We children hesitated to walk in a graveyard when it was dark and didn't dare step on a grave, even accidentally. I trembled when I heard dogs barking at night, a sure sign that ghosts were walking the streets.

The strange story of the events surrounding the death of Helena Hoepfner, daughter of Jakob Hoepfner, a Mennonite agent with the Russian government, was one I heard as a child from my father and then later on again when I was an adult and recorded it on paper. The main characters were not relatives, but the story was our family's story. My father's version is very similar to that of David G. Rempel in *A Mennonite Family in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union 1789-1923*. Rempel and my father both lived in Rosental. As in stories about dying, this ghost story had certain details that were mentioned every time it was told. It shows how folklore sometimes superseded belief.

My father worked as a clerk in Rosental in a store owned by Corny Pauls, who told my father the story of his grandmother, the daughter of Jakob Hoepfner. As an agent for the Mennonites with the Russian government, Hoepfner had even received a visit from the Tsar regarding the status of the Mennonites who had recently arrived in Russia from Prussia. One day, along with other visiting dignitaries, came a Russian prince who fell in love with the Hoepfners' beautiful daughter Helena. Marriage was out of the question. Both sets of parents opposed the marriage, so the young couple met in secret. To stop the romance the Hoepfners directed their daughter to marry the son of the Peter Hildebrandts. The young couple seemed to live happily with their children and the prince was soon forgotten by the villagers, although from time to time rumors floated through the community that he had committed suicide because of a broken heart.

One day Helena took sick and died. The body was washed and swabbed with alcohol and laid out in the summer kitchen, an unheated room, while the family waited for the children, now adults and away from home, to come for the funeral. The next day, when the children went to view the body, to their amazement they found she had come to life. She was sitting up, and asked for help to get down from the table, saying, "I am cold." They quickly took her inside the house, offered

some hot coffee and placed hot water bottles and a warm blanket on her. She lived another eight years, but never joked or smiled again and never discussed her return to life.

One morning her husband woke up and noticed that his wife was not beside him in bed. Rempel places the date as June 18, 1833. He waited for her to show up thinking she had possibly gone to the outhouse, but she didn't return. The whole village was alerted to begin the search for her, but to no avail.

In the meantime, a fisherman friend who lived about ten miles away and was related to Helena's father, reported that two Russian fishermen had told him they had seen a body on the riverbank downstream. Father Hoepfner, unaware that his daughter was missing, went to the Hildebrandts only to hear the sad news about his missing daughter. Suspecting that the body the fishermen had found might be Helena's, they all went looking. Sure enough, the body lying on the riverbank was that of Helena, dressed only in a nightgown, four miles from home. Rempel has her wearing a black nightcap, which had made the fishermen think she was a Jew. Footprints along the shore proved that she had walked there alone.

Funeral services were held the same day the body was found because it was already decomposing. That evening Helena's brother-in-law was horseback riding looking for lost horses. As he went past the cemetery, close to the new grave, his horse reared suddenly. Two figures in white were standing by the mound.

These and other apparitions like them could never be explained. The night Helena disappeared Mrs. B. Dueck stayed up late. A dog's furious barking caused her to look outside, where she saw two figures in white standing under the trees. She called her husband, but by the time he arrived they were gone. The same evening P. Wiens, on his way back from fishing, saw a boat on the river with two figures in white in it. Both he and his wife saw the apparitions and talked to them, but received no reply. The next morning as a neighboring woman was milking her cow, the animal moved restlessly. She looked up to see two figures in white. (Wiebe, "Into the Twilight Zone") Rempel, closer to the main characters of this strange story than my father, places the Hoepfner family on the Milashevskii estate near Belenkoe and adds many more details. He also relates a number of strange appearances after Helena's death similar to those my father told me. He cites his uncle as seeing this story as similar to the region's Ukrainian folklore and superstitions, which the Chortitzer Mennonites accepted and carried with them to their new homeland of Canada. Rempel states that some of the more conservative Mennonites believed the event was God's retribution for some imagined misdeed of the husband. Others ascribed the drowning to God's punishment of Helena's father, and still

others to Helena's unhappiness with a husband 23 years older, resulting in her suicide. Such stories were hushed up as much as possible and never spoken about until the deaths of those close to the victim. Rempel heard the story in 1920 from his grandmother's daughters after her death. My father probably heard it at the same time, but by then it had already gone through some variations.

Burial for "Strangers" and Suicides in Russia and Canada

When Mennonites had their own cemeteries, they continued the general practice of restricting "strangers" from being buried in "holy" ground. They judged the eternal destiny of a dead person and whether they merited a proper burial. Suicides, or "self-murderers," were buried outside the cemetery in undedicated ground in "the potter's field" where Judas was buried, or in a corner by themselves. Suicide was considered a sin. The church body needed assurance that the deceased was a member of the company of the redeemed.

Instances of suicide were kept as secret as possible within a family group. To have to state death was self-imposed in an obituary laid a heavy stigma on a family, as did mental illness, or criminal offenses. My husband's grandmother, Helena Wiebe Wiebe took her own life by hanging on Oct. 26, 1908 in Ukraine. Her husband had died about three years earlier, leaving her with nine living children. The reason for her suicide is not clear: widowed, with financial concerns and a large family to care for, she became depressed. Her son Heinrich (Henry), then nearly 16, found his mother and cut her down. The manner of her death was suppressed.

Henry's daughter, poet Jean Wiebe Janzen of Fresno, Calif., writes about that event in a poem, "These Words Are for You, Grandmother." "After you hanged yourself/ they buried you outside the gate/ without songs, just a prayer in the harsh life..." The poem continues that Henry never spoke about his mother's death. His lips were "sealed" as were the lips of other family members, including my husband's father, Peter P. Wiebe III, an older son. In my father-in-law's memoirs a page has been removed which the family assumes was about the tragic death of his mother, an event too terrible to talk about or to leave recorded on paper for someone to find. No one knows who tore it out. This death by suicide was not spoken of in family gatherings until after Jean Janzen published her poem and read it in public readings.

Church records are not clear as to why the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren (KMB) Church of Gnadenu, near Hillsboro, Kansas, which I and my children attended for some time, buried some young children and a few adults in a graveyard apart from the official church cemetery.

The early KMBs were builders of homes, schools, churches and other institutions. Among them was the Industrial School and Hygiene Home for Friendless Persons, or simply stated, an orphanage. As many as 60 to 80 children lived in this home at one time, receiving good care. But when they died, they were buried as “strangers,” not as members of the KMB Church meriting proper burial in the church cemetery across the road.

I and my children often visited this graveyard in the years following my husband’s death in 1962, about seven weeks after we had moved to Hillsboro from Ontario. New to the community and lonely, we visited cemeteries in the area, read gravestones, especially those of children. I was troubled when I drove past that unkempt roadside cemetery about two miles southeast of Hillsboro where a large spreading evergreen tree shelters a group of little graves known colloquially as the orphan’s graveyard: Norman Avery died in 1903, age 3; Lester E. Pfeiffer died in 1899 at 3 months; Martha Justina Hall died in 1899, age 7 months; an unnamed son of E. Dannenfelder died at age 10; Webster McClellan died in 1899 at 8 months. Other grave markers show that a few adults were buried here as well

The mind-set that made it necessary for the living to know the eternal destination of loved ones was and is important even to this day. I have heard people tell of hearing their loved one speak a few brief faith-related words, which they clung to as evidence of eternal salvation. When my husband, Walter William Wiebe, was a young pastor in Hepburn, Saskatchewan of a Mennonite Brethren Church, his first burial was that of a man who had been out of fellowship with the church for decades. At his death his family wanted the full blessing of the church, but some members were determined that he did not deserve such honorable rites because of his unsavory business dealings. They threatened my husband that if he called the man “brother,” indicating he was in fellowship with the church, there would be trouble. However, all acknowledged he deserved a proper burial in the church cemetery. When my husband came home after the funeral, I asked him what he had called the deceased. He thought for a moment and replied he had not called him anything. He had been too nervous. But they had buried the man of dubious salvation in the churchyard.

Unknown Burial Sites

A “proper” burial, whatever that means, has always been important to Mennonites, but sometimes it took decades to accomplish the final task of erecting a memorial stone in some symbolic spot to honor the deceased who were not honored at their death. A proper burial seems

to include a gathering of family and friends, often with a meal if possible, showing respect for the body of the deceased by using a coffin if possible with banners and flowers if available and simple words of hope – all in recognition of God’s role in life as “giver and taker of life.” A specially designated resting place was also important. This designated resting place to which one can come and pay respect to the dead is important to people.

Suicide victims buried outside the cemetery fence, victims of the Russian Revolution and those exiled to Siberia during the Stalinist years and later after World War II, often had no designated burial place at all. En route freight cars used for transporting people in wartime were bombed by German aircraft, killing and wounding passengers. Aaron Toews in *Mennonite Martyrs* writes that a grave was dug alongside the railway, and the bodies and limbs of the victims gathered together. “A sister in the Lord, Mrs. Peter Reimer, led in a song and prayed.” The grave was covered with earth. The survivors were again loaded on the train and transported to Siberian exile. That was as close to a “proper” burial as these family members could come under those unfavorable circumstances.

Not knowing where a loved one was buried was especially problematic for some of my relatives. My aunt Martha Janzen Isaak wrote to my parents in Canada in 1947: “We have already lost two of our brothers and don’t know where they have been buried. The pain is great not knowing where they have been buried.” (Letter 22) Like my uncles, conscripted into the Russian army or imprisoned in a concentration camp, many people simply disappeared. An infant born to my aunt Suschen Janzen in 1943 while being shipped to Siberia following World War II died and was handed out the door to a Russian woman for disposal.

My mother was never able to visit the gravesite of her parents or any of her relatives left behind in Russia. Who knew where they were buried – from Ukraine to northern Siberia to Tashkent and the war zones of Europe? How many of her loved ones had been sacrificed to tyranny and buried without a proper burial, possibly left to rot outside some concentration camp? Why is it important to know where a loved one is buried? As a place to visit and remember? Mennonites have not ritually remembered their dead, although in modern times some, like other Americans, routinely decorate and visit graves on Memorial Day, as evidenced by the masses of flowers in cemeteries in heavily Mennonite populated areas here in Kansas.

New Traditions and Revived Traditions

One morning in 1986 my phone rang. My mother, then about 90 years of age, was on the phone. My father was ill and dying. What would I think if she had Father's body cremated? I had always assumed she would choose a traditional burial. I never fully understood her request but agreed to her wishes. Was it because her parents, most of her siblings and other relatives had no designated burial spots? Somehow, she had worked her way through the prevailing view that the future resurrection of the dead required a whole body, complete with all body parts, to await the resurrection, or the commonly held idea that cremation was a pagan custom. We siblings all agreed to her wishes. When he died, the family had my father's body embalmed for a public viewing before cremation. The cremains were buried in my brother Jack Funk's acreage near Battleford, Saskatchewan, and a tree was planted on the spot to memorialize the site. When Mother died the family did the same with her ashes.

When I was faced with burying my daughter Christine Ruth Wiebe in 2000, I had the opportunity to discuss her funeral with her before she died. She wanted to be buried in a plain pine casket, which at first seemed impossible. Then I learned that the Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church (LAMC) in Wichita, Kansas, where she was a member, was prepared for such requests. A member, Willard Ebersole, prepared lumber ahead of time for a casket that could be quickly put together. As a family we decided to accept that offer. Some of the elements of her great-grandmother's burial were reintroduced by Christine's house church at LAMC, where the casket was nailed together. About 20 to 25 friends stained it a natural color – not the black of her great-grandmother's coffin – in the church parking lot the night before the burial. Each person added a few brush strokes. They also held a wake with prayers and time for reminiscing. To commemorate her life they planted a tree in the churchyard.

Some friends took the dress we had chosen for Christine to a fabric store and bought matching cloth to line the casket, beautifully draping the lining. We covered the lower portion of her body with a quilt made by her sister Susan. Viewing of the body took place the evening before the funeral.

The Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church has a special arrangement with a mortuary that allows patrons to use such homebuilt caskets. The director cooperated with us fully as we discussed the funeral. We dispensed with limousine service and the large hearse, using instead a simpler funeral van. We decided against artificial grass, canopy and other trappings of commercialized funerals. The land for the cemetery had been donated by a church member, and because it is

about ten miles outside Wichita the grave did not require a cement liner.

The funeral was simple, beautiful and away from a huge city cemetery. The meadowlarks sang and an egret flew overhead as we said our final farewells. The family members lowered the coffin into the grave. The church sexton filled it in. The memorial service which followed was also simple but upbeat. Sharing of memories about Christine was done during the service. We concluded with one other event that would have made Christine happy – a tea party not far removed from the traditional Faspas – to allow guests to mingle freely. The funeral director told us he favored what we had done, having the church and family participate in all aspects of the burial and funeral. We opted for intimacy and were satisfied with our decisions to arrange a proper burial for our Christine.

Conclusion

This account is far from complete, but it shows that although the Mennonite church has never stipulated precise forms of burial, in my family over the years the bereaved have followed certain patterns again and again as they were possible at the time: respect for the body of the deceased, a gathering of the family around a meal to mourn and remember the dead. The funeral and burial provided opportunity to witness to faith in a redeemer God through songs, Scripture reading and prayer. Whatever they were able to do at the time became for them a proper burial.

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