

POLISH FUNERAL CUSTOMS

Source: PolishForums.com (2009)

Death

Many people nowadays -- in Poland, America and elsewhere -- say they would prefer to 'go' quickly: die instantly in an accident or drift away peacefully in their sleep. Such an attitude runs counter to traditional values. Our immigrant ancestors used to pray: 'Od powietrza, głodu, ognia, wojny i naglej, niespodziewanej śmierci -- zachowaj nas Panie!' ('From pestilence, famine, fire, war and sudden, unexpected death, preserve us, o Lord'). The worst thing that could happen to one was to meet death unprepared -- away from home, lacking funds for a proper burial or, above all, in a state of sin. People planned ahead for their death. The poor would save up for years for a coffin and decent clothes to be buried in. To be on the safe side, some even stored their coffin in the loft of their cottage for years, using it as a kind of storage bin until the time came.

Harbingers of death

A variety of folk beliefs were associated with death, although many of them were only half-believed or treated tongue in cheek. The even person at Wigilia supper was thought not likely to see another Christmas. The girl who picked the pot containing a clump of sod on St Andrew's Eve was said to have chosen death. The ominous hooting of an owl, the family dog howling and tugging at his chain, a mole hill just beyond the threshold, a mysteriously tapping on the window -- were all regarded as signs of impending death in the household. Nowadays many people die in hospitals: drugged, plugged and surrounded by strangers. The goal of most everyone was once to die in their own bed, after having received the Sacraments, with family and neighbors in attendance.

As we can see in Władysław Reymont's 'The Peasants' ('Chłopi'), even homeless beggars, who rarely had a roof over their heads and slept wherever they could, hoped to have a bed to die in. There was nothing more demeaning and undignified than to breathe one's last 'pod płotem' (next to a fence), like a dog, forsaken by God and man. The priest would be called to the deathbed, and as he made his way through the village, villagers would kneel and make the Sign of the Cross as the Blessed Sacrament he was carrying passed. Everyone would leave the room to enable the priest to hear the dying person's last confession, administer Holy Communion and Ostatnie Namaszczenie (Extreme Unction -- (now called the Anointing of the Sick -Namaszczenie Chorych). Relatives would then return and pray for the one not long for this world. A lighted gromnica (candle) would be placed in the dying person's hand to light his or her way to the afterlife.

Funeral preparations

When death finally came, the women round the deathbed would give out a plaintive wail and begin praying more fervently than before. Doors and windows would be flung open to allow the soul of the deceased to leave for eternity. Mirrors would be covered and clocks would be

stopped. A woman known to perform such services was called in to wash and dress the corpse. In the peasant cottages of yore, the deceased would be laid on a board between two chairs or tables flanked by tall candles and would be placed in a coffin only on the day of the funeral. (This is reflected by the humorous, albeit death-related drinking song in Mazurian dialect which goes: 'Umarł Maciek umarł i leży na desce; gdyby mu zagrali podskoczyłby jesse...' 'Matty's dead, he is, and he's lying on a board; he'd jump up again if he heard a lively chord). Among the upper classes, the deceased was displayed in a coffin, and eventually that custom trickled down to the peasantry as well. The body was never left unattended. Most of the day the elderly women of the village would sing and pray, recite rosaries and litanies, but family members and neighbors would keep a vigil all night long. Traditionally, the body was kept in the home for three days, the funeral usually being held on the third day after the person's death.

Funeral, burial

On the day of the funeral, the lid (which had been standing in a corner of the room or elsewhere out of sight) was placed on the coffin and it was carried out feet first. The threshold of the house was struck with the coffin three times before being placed in a horse-drawn vehicle and taken to church. Following the Requiem Mass, the coffin was carried at shoulder height to graveside, if the cemetery was adjacent to or very near the church, or placed back into the vehicle if it was some distance away. This could be a rude farm cart drawn by an old nag or ox or, among the nobility, a magnificent glass-sided hearse drawn by four to six elegant horses draped with black mourning cloths with black plumes protruding from their heads. The deceased in his/her coffin was led along this final road by a crucifer and a black religious banner of mourning, with mourners following behind the coffin on foot. The prayers at graveside included the supplication: 'Wieczny odpoczynek (or the more modern form: wieczne odpoczywanie) racz mu/jej dać, Panie,' to which the mourners replied: 'A światłość wiekuista niechaj mu/jej świeci na wieki wieków. Amen.' ('Eternal rest grant unto him/her, o Lord -- And may the perpetual light shine upon him/her. Amen.') After the burial, mourners were invited to a *stypa* (post-funeral banquet) or *konsolacja* (meal of consolation), whose sumptuousness depended on the family's financial means.

Contemporary Polish funeral customs

Here are some features of traditional Polish funeral customs that have survived down to our times. There are both similarities and differences between those prevalent in Poland and among Polonia. Each reader should decide for himself which Polish customs deserve wider exposure on the Polish-American scene.

- The initials Ś.P. (Świętej Pamięci -- literally: of sacred memory), often separated by a cross preface the name of the deceased in obituaries and funeral notices. For example, 'Ś.+P. Andrzej Kowalski' could be translated as 'the late lamented Andrzej Kowalski'.

- In addition to the obituaries published in the press, copies of a funeral notice known as a *klepsydra* (literally: hour-glass -- a symbol of the passage of time) are posted outside the deceased's place of residence and employment as well as parish church. The press obituary and

funeral notice are similar in content if not identical, except that the latter is larger -- roughly the size of a standard sheet of typewriter/copy paper. A typical obituary/funeral notice might run as follows:

Z głębokim smutkiem zawiadamiamy,
że w dniu 6 listopada 2008 roku zmarł w wieku 79 lat

Ś. + P.

Tadeusz Adamczyk
wieloletni działacz Stow. Aptekarzy Polsko-Amerykańskich
oraz Związku Narodowego Polskiego

Nabożeństwo żałobne odbędzie się 10 listopada 2008 r. o godz. 10.00 w kościele pw. Św. Stanisława Kostki, po którym nastąpi wyprowadzenie na cmentarz miejscowy

O czym zawiadamiają pogrążeni w głębokim żalu żona Krystyna, syn Jacek, synowa Beata, córka Małgorzata, zięć Tomasz Pawlak oraz wnuczęta Marek, Ania i Piotruś

TRANSLATION: In deep bereavement we wish to inform that on November 6th, 2008, the late lamented Tadeusz Adamczyk, a long-standing activist of the Polish-American Pharmacists' Association and the Polish National Alliance, died at the age of 79. A funeral mass will be celebrated on November 10th, 2008, at St Stanislaus Kostka Church, after which the transfer to the local cemetery will take place. This information has been provided by the deeply bereaved wife Krystyna, son Jacek, daughter-in-law Beata, daughter Małgorzata, son-in-law Tomasz Pawlak and grandchildren Marek, Ania i Piotruś.

· Unlike the common American-style rectangular, flip-top, split-lid casket, the traditional Polish trumna (coffin) is usually wider at the shoulders and narrower at the feet. Rather than being hinged, the lid is removable. The lid, always in one piece, is often quite built up, so that it accounts for one-half or even more of the entire coffin. A plain cross usually adorns the top of the lid. Oak coffins are regarded as the most elegant, and those made of pine are the cheapest. Often the less expensive ones are doctored-up to convey the impression of solid oak.

· It was once common to display the deceased in an open coffin at home for three days ahead of the funeral. (This practice is still encountered in the Polish countryside). Nowadays, it is becoming increasingly more common for only the nearest of kin to briefly view the deceased in his/her coffin, usually in the hospital mortuary or at a 'sala pożegnań' farewell (room) at the cemetery chapel. Others coming to pay their respects at the funeral see only the closed coffin and remember the person as he was in life.

· Especially if the deceased was a political figure, cultural celebrity or otherwise prominent individual, an honor guards of his colleagues often take turns holding a silent vigil round the

closed coffin; uniformed comrades-in-arms or fellow-members to take turns forming an honor guard and/or color guard next to the coffin of military officer, war veteran, member of a uniformed formation (fireman, postman, scoutmaster, etc.) or some prominent organization.

- The coffin is carried shoulder high by four or six men, not suitcase-style the American way. Those carrying the coffin have no special name (there is no Polish word for 'pallbearer'). The honors may be done by neighbors or friends in the countryside or by the undertaker's attendants in cities.

- Chopin's renowned 'Marche Funèbre' is often performed by a band marching in the funeral cortège or a recorded version thereof is piped over a public-address system. Considering that our Polish heritage rightly claims the world's most beloved and revered funeral march, performed at the burials of heads of state and other VIPs as well as ordinary people around the globe, it surely deserves wider exposure at Polish-American funerals.

- Especially at the funerals of veterans, members of uniformed formations or prominent individuals, a gun salute by a uniformed honors detachment is often fired at graveside prior to interment. A uniformed color guard at graveside will make the event more memorable.

- An integral part of the graveside prayers is the priest's invocation: 'Wieczne odpoczywanie (or: wieczny odpoczynek) racz Mu/Jej dać, Panie' (Eternal rest grant unto Him/Her, o Lord), to which the mourners respond: 'A światłość wiekuista niechaj Mu/Jej świeci' (And let the perpetual Light shine upon Him/Her).

- The prayers end when the priest blesses the coffin with holy water and throws a clump of soil on it saying: 'Prochem jesteś i w proch się obrócisz, ale Pan Cię wskrzesi w dniu ostatecznym. Żyj w pokoju' (Dust you are and to dust you shall return, but the Lord will raise you on the last day. Live in peace).

- At the funerals of the Polish-born in Diaspora, a handful of Polish soil (brought from Poland and specially kept for this final occasion) is often sprinkled upon the coffin prior to interment to symbolize the deceased's return to the earth from which he/she had sprung. This ritual may be performed by the officiating clergyman, a family member or close friend. A secular invocation at burials of the Polish-born goes: 'Niech Mu/Jej ziemia amerykańska/kanadyjska lekką będzie' (May the American/Canadian soil weigh down lightly upon Him/Her).

- A family member, close friend, co-worker, employer, fellow organizational member, etc. may say a few words about the deceased and bid him farewell. He may throw a clump of soil on the coffin and other mourners may follow suit.

- The best-known Polish funeral hymn, 'Witaj Królowo Nieba', is usually sung as the coffin is being lowered into the grave. It is intoned by the priest, with the mourners joining in.

· After the coffin has been lowered into the grave, more distant mourners often disperse. The closest of kin remains until the grave has been filled in by gravediggers.

· A post-funeral reception, known as a *stypa* or *konsolacja* is often held after the burial. It may be held at the home of the deceased or at a public dining establishment. A prayer for the repose of the soul of the deceased may be led by a clergyman and a few words about the person whose memory is being honored are said. A toast may also be raised '*za spokój duszy....*' (for the repose of his/her soul) or '*za pamięć*' (in memory of....), but this should not be the occasion for serious drinking and the frivolity it often produces. Lively music would also be out of character, but the performance of a hymn or piece of more serious music beloved by the deceased might be appropriate.

· A one-year period of mourning is customarily observed. Unlike the black arm-bands of yesteryear, nowadays it is more common to sport only a small black ribbon across the lapel of one's suit coat or dress. Lively celebrations and entertainment are avoided, and the widow or widower generally do not remarry until the period of mourning is over. If the deceased is a younger person whose premature demise has orphaned small children, an exception to this rule is sometimes made.

· A memorial mass is celebrated on the first anniversary of a loved one's death. It is attended by relatives and close friends of the family, and a memorial dinner is usually held after mass. In some families each subsequent anniversary is marked in this manner. In others, the commemoration is limited to the first anniversary and later to round (5th, 10th, etc.) ones.