



SEDLEC OSSUARY, THE BONE CHURCH. KUTNA HORA, CZECH REPUBLIC.
PHOTOGRAPH BY MARGIE HEMLEY.

Field Notes for the Graveyard Enthusiast

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In creating a taxonomy of graveyards, let's start with the obvious: Graveyards in Which We Are Not Buried along with Graveyards in Which We Are Buried. At first glance, both of these classifications would seem simple enough. The first consists of all graveyards Known and Unknown, and the second contains no graveyards, Known or Unknown. Given a few years, our relationship to these categories might well change, and the first category will contain all but one graveyard, and the second will contain that same graveyard, while excluding all the rest. If, however, you choose cremation, the categories will remain unaltered from your first encounter with them. However, as a Jew, more superstitious than observant, cremation is not an option for me—I can't, in any case, separate this option from the fate of so many of my co-religionists at the hands of the Nazis. As I age, the consideration of where to be buried occupies more and more of my time, in direct contrast to the fading of my preoccupation with where to live. My father and sister are buried in a rural cemetery

in Athens, Ohio, while my mother and grandmother and several other relatives are buried in a vast necropolis in Queens, New York. Considering this split in my family, which bears absolutely no relation to their closeness in life (my father and sister were often at odds, while my mother was extraordinarily devoted to them both), I feel an almost giddy amount of latitude in my eventual choice—happily, I have always loved graveyards, but my enthusiasm for so many graveyards makes me unable to settle on one, to settle down, as it were. As I am a restless spirit in life, unable to choose a more-or-less permanent place to live, never having lived in one place for more than eight years in my half a century on earth, I imagine I will make an equally restive spirit. If I had the means, I might simply have a codicil in my will drawn up, obligating my heirs to disinter me every few years and move my remains to some new pleasant and/or unusual location. As this eccentric request is unlikely to be followed, even if I somehow accrue the riches necessary to make the request financially possible, I suppose I must choose one. I'll leave that decision for another day, and instead will spend these several hours of my existence contemplating some of the varieties of graveyards, and will try to convey some measure of my enthusiasm for them.

As a child, I used to hold my breath when passing a graveyard, but now I breathe deeply—in any event, there will be plenty of time for holding my breath. If you are a breath holder, imagining holding your breath does some good, then you might want to forego this small tour of Graveyards I Have Known and Loved, and instead eat some ice cream or have a tumble in bed, both activities I would take to the grave if I could.

Perhaps the two largest categories of graveyards are Graveyards Known and Graveyards Unknown. A subset of the latter is Graveyards Forgotten and a subset of the former is Graveyards of Historic Note. A subset of either category

is Unintended Graveyards or Cemeteries of Happenstance. These would include mass graves, or as yet undiscovered graveyards. Of the latter we might surmise that graves are all around us, from the unmarked graves of vanquished if not forgotten peoples to some spot in the woods where a lone traveler froze in the snow, starved, or sat down feeling ill by a tree and never stood again. Under the streets of London, for instance, lie at least 37,000 bodies, according to *The London Times*.¹ Is it proper to call the city of London a graveyard? Perhaps in the strict sense, no, but conceptually, let's consider the graveyard's boundaries as limitless as the earth's, at least potentially so. In this way, we begin to demystify the graveyard (and possibly death) while conversely making into sacred if not consecrated space every inch on which we tread.

Walking through a graveyard is how most of us, at least those not in the medical profession or undertakers, come into our closest contact with death while remaining alive. An appreciation of this vast category of Unknown Graveyards is the cornerstone for a kind of mindfulness that those who don't hold their breath have when walking through a Known Graveyard—we might, as the Japanese do, hold a picnic by the grave of a relative, share beer and rice crackers, enjoy our outing while at the same time including our loved ones. Whether or not I might enjoy Spirit Beer and crackers, I like the thought of at least being included. When Janis Joplin treated her friends to a round of drinks in the Afterlife, she had the right idea, but perhaps she shouldn't have stopped there. Perhaps she might have requested to be entombed beneath her favorite bar, not that she might continue to let the good times roll, but so the combination of spirits and Spirit might give patrons a buzz that was simultaneously intoxicating and sobering. It's this paradoxical and powerful

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combination of inebriation and sobriety that is one of my aims as a devotee of the Unknown Graveyard.

The Antithesis of the Unknown Graveyard is the Graveyard of Historic Note. Of these, the largest subset by far is the Military Graveyard. I'm stopped (dead, I'd like to say) in my tracks, left speechless at most such graveyards. Most recently, I visited the town of Aquileia in northern Italy, a town within a region that has changed hands and nationalities innumerable times, once the second biggest town in the Roman Empire. My companion wanted to visit the ancient mosaics that line the subfloor of the basilica that was later built on top of the Roman temple. I'm not the biggest fan of either mosaics or basilicas—perhaps having seen so many splendid cathedrals over the years that they have blurred, and mosaics, well, after exclaiming how meticulous the craftsmanship is, I quickly become bored by shallow Roman faces staring up at me, or birds or lions. No matter how beautiful the image, virtually none of them will stay with me longer than five minutes after viewing, unless I take a photo. I've ceased carrying a camera while traveling because I never look at trip photos and no one else is interested.

Attached to this church was a graveyard, and for me the graveyard was a hundred times more fascinating than the Roman mosaics. This was a cemetery of the fallen: *Cemetero de Caduti* of World War One. In this shaded courtyard, lay perhaps a hundred soldiers whose deaths were as strikingly meaningless as any I've ever heard of. This was a Hapsburg Cemetery—the men buried here died fighting to prop up the Austro-Hungarian Empire that collapsed as a result of this war. The cemetery is replete with iron crosses and encased photographs of young and middle-aged mustachioed men with stiff hats and stiff expressions that have somehow withstood the elements, dating to World War One.

'Mario Brva,' reads one inscription. "*Mori per la Patria.*" But what country did he die for? As his name and the names

of others suggest, part of his name was Italian and part Slovenian. In this region of the Istrian Peninsula, Hapsburg census takers were often confounded by the question of ethnicity. A village might self-identify one year as Italian and ten years later as Slovenian, depending on what the parish priest told them to say they were. Almost a hundred years after these men died in a war fighting for a monarchy that no longer existed, I was left feeling more bereaved than if I had been standing in front of the thousands of white crosses at Normandy. At Normandy at least, I could make sense of why the men had died in such vast numbers, but not in Aquileia. Not too long after these men died, the Italians switched sides and fought against the monarchy for which these men had given their lives.

To offset these ironies, I suppose, the people who had designed this graveyard aimed for greater glory by commissioning a statue of Christ supporting two fallen soldiers. The statue, a massive chunk of marbled sentiment depicts Christ on the cross, or mostly on the cross. He has freed his right hand from its nail and reaches down to touch the brow of a dying soldier, the soldier's face lifted like a beseeching child to the savior's face, a model of compassion and pity. Below the dying man lies another soldier, already dead, but the dying man has a hold on his dead comrade, lifting him up, too, to heaven. All three men are bare-chested, though Christ at least, doesn't wear a cartridge belt like the other two. The statue, of course, is largely ignored by the few other tourists in this courtyard. On the day I visited, I, alone, succumbed to the great sentimentality of this statue, feeling pity for everyone involved, including the donors and the sculptor.

Often, the Military Graveyard, the Historic Graveyard as well as what we might term the Cemetery of Happenstance are linked, but not always (as in the case of London—a Cemetery of Happenstance, but neither military, nor particularly historic, as a graveyard). A

famous example of the Military/Historic/Happenstance Graveyard is the Little Bighorn Battlefield, which was never intended (by Custer at least) as a graveyard. The soldiers in Custer's detail were buried in the spots at which they fell—220 bodies were later reinterred in a single spot on Last Stand Hill, except for Custer's body, which was transferred to a grave at West Point, and a number of the officers under his command, which were shipped back to Eastern cemeteries. But the markers remain in the spots where the soldiers fell, and in recent years new markers have been added in locations where Cheyenne and Sioux warriors reportedly perished. —And so, the remarkable feature of this graveyard is that unlike any other Known Graveyards (at least by me), one can mark the progress of a battle by the location of the points of death. There's something . . . immediate and visceral about seeing a battle marked in such a way. Instead of the ordered and stately crosses of Normandy and Arlington, perhaps it would be wiser in the long run to bury all casualties in all wars on the spots where they died. Imagine coming upon such reminders at random in some European village or city—we should see death inflicted by war, in any event, as surprising, random, chaotic, not ordered and stately.

In some cases, an Unknown/Happenstance/Military Graveyard (belonging, as in the cases of all Military Graveyards Known and Unknown, to the larger category: Graveyards in Which I Am Not Buried) will shift categories to Known/Happenstance/Military/Historic Graveyards. One such instance, on which I'd like to touch briefly is the Japanese Military Graveyard on the island of Corregidor in the Philippines. On this island, General Douglas MacArthur's American and Filipino forces held at bay the Japanese Imperial Forces from December 1941 until May of 1942, far longer than the superior Japanese forces anticipated. When MacArthur and President Quezon of the Philippines were smuggled off the island before the island fell to the

Japanese, he made his famous “I shall return” declaration. Like MacArthur, I have had a repeated urge to return to Corregidor, too, though for different reasons. If one believes in ghosts, then this island is surely haunted. The entire island is in essence a graveyard. Not an inch was spared by Japanese guns in taking it at the beginning of the war, nor an inch spared by American guns reclaiming it. Ruined bunkers, hulks of gigantic guns, barracks with trees and metal cables and twisted vines grown together, even the ruins of a movie theater, dot the island. Here is where the memorial to the War in the Pacific was placed, but this memorial has about as much relevance to war as a bombardier’s eye to his target. The real memorials are the ruins and the graves—here, the Japanese graveyard holds the most promise for the graveyard enthusiast because it is the rarest of military graveyards. For many years, its location was unknown, but was rediscovered 40 years after the war. Well tended now, the memorial has a spectacular view and a large statue of the Goddess of Mercy, upon whose foot my Filipino guide, a man old enough to have been a child during the war, made a point of taking a piss on when we stopped at this site.

Graves We Might Piss On could take up pages of notes, perhaps starting with Hitler’s unmarked grave in a parking lot of the former East Berlin and no doubt including the well-marked grave of Custer at West Point. But let’s not go there, to coin a phrase, or else we might veer off onto a bitter tangent that strays too far from our aim, which is, after all, to familiarize ourselves with our eventual homes rather than alienate ourselves further.

Instead, we might consider Historic Graveyards that are not Military Cemeteries. These include your standards, Père Lachaise and The Pantheon in Paris, the catacombs of Rome, as well as Recoleta in Buenos Aires. We might also include most such cemeteries in a subcategory of Historic Graveyards: Known Graveyards in Which Famous People

Are Buried. We must acknowledge at the same time that not all Famous People are Buried in Historic Graveyards, nor are all graveyards necessarily considered Historic if say, one famous person is buried there, or if that person's star fades over time, and not all the graves of famous people are Known. But of Known Graveyards in Which Famous People are Buried, few hold my attention or interest for long. I have little interest in visiting Molière or Jim Morrison at Père Lachaise, or Victor Hugo and Marie Curie at the Pantheon. At Recoleta, I was more interested in the graveyard's cats than in the tomb of Evita. And I would surely skip the Catacombs of Callixtus in which assorted popes and martyrs are entombed in favor of the anonymous stacks of skulls in the Capuchin Crypt, or in favor of the so-called Bone Church of Kutna Hora in the Czech Republic in which the bleached skulls and bones of 40,000 victims of the 15th-century Hussite Wars and Black Plague were arranged in the church in 1878 into chandeliers, crowns, chalices, and bells made of bones and skulls. While studying a blackbird made of bones pecking out the eye of a Turk (the Schwartzenberg family coat of arms, the family that commissioned this ossuary), I marvel at the thought that the skull of the Turk was never a Turk at all in real life, but some poor local peasant struck down by illness, that in death he or she has achieved a kind of anonymous fame. The fact of the skull reminds me of the fact that he was a person once with a life, a history, passions and unhappiness, but someone whose sense of personhood has been as bleached as thoroughly as his bones.

For this reason and others, the Famous hold much less interest to me in death than the Anonymous dead. While viewing the crypt of Shakespeare at Westminster, for instance, my thoughts of death are subsumed by thoughts of fame. The anonymous dead are my brethren; and to the skulls of Kutna Hora, I can imagine adding my own to the fragile pile, from which nothing tumbles. At Pompeii,

I can gaze for an hour as at a painting by a Master at the anonymous pyroclastic cast of a slave forever trying to shield his face from the mountain that has buried him.

Perhaps the largest category of Graveyard, in any case, is Graveyards in Which the Anonymous Lie, a grouping that contains nearly every graveyard Known and Unknown. My favorite of these—and I use the word “favorite” advisedly—is Auschwitz. People are buried in the form of ash at various points in the death camp, but these are not the most affecting gravesites—still, the various urns made out of ash are perhaps the closest we Jews have to reliquaries. Each room at Auschwitz is a tomb of sorts, each containing, if not actual DNA of the departed, then something of their history and humanity. We follow our guide to the room of women’s shoes, to the room of prayer shawls, to the room of artificial limbs and crutches, to the room of eyeglasses, to the room of pots and pans, to the room of suitcases and baskets, to the display of broken dolls. The suitcases are grave markers, as are all the other markers. On many of the suitcases are stamped the names and sometimes the date of birth and the city from which they came.

Klement Hedwig
8 10 1898

Jnes Meyer
Koln

Neumann Friedrich
1890

My own Aunt Rose, an aunt by marriage, was one of the 430,000 Hungarian Jews brought here toward the end of the war. Most of her family was killed, except for her and a son. She told me about Auschwitz when I was a boy, how the Nazis shaved her hair and pulled out her fingernails, how she didn’t know her son was alive until ten years after the

war. My father's family were all Hungarian Jews. Those who didn't emigrate surely perished here or in nearby Birkenau.

This is the closest I can come to visiting their graves. At Auschwitz there is a room of hair, two tons of it. Every prisoner was shaved and the hair that was of any length was sold for half a mark per kilo. The two tons of hair behind the window in the room of hair at Auschwitz represents 40,000 people, only a fraction of the seven tons of hair the Soviets found here, which itself was only a fraction of the hair that was shorn from the prisoners about to meet their deaths. The hair has all turned gray over time because of the light, but once it contained all the colors that hair can be, and here, as close as anywhere you can stand, you stare at stacks of bodies disguised as filaments.

Perhaps I should include Auschwitz in the category Graveyards in Which I Am Buried, a category I previously thought uninhabited. At first glance, this might seem merely a sentimental gesture, or grandly symbolic, but I would argue that all graves are sentimental gestures, all of them grandly symbolic. That makes them no less necessary, but does one really take up residence in the ground? As with an Honorary Degree, an honorary burial has little in the way of actual benefit, and so I must include myself in Auschwitz in the honorary sense—my connection to the place, in any case, is not arbitrary.

But here I'd like to add a tiny category of graveyard that the enthusiast should not miss or fail to notice: The Graveyard Guarded by Avatars. Before now, I have tried to keep my feet on the ground, as it were, considering that my subject itself is so earthbound. Yet graveyards exist as habitat for living things as well as dead, and while the animals that inhabit these spaces might do so solely out of a need for unoccupied space, certain species take on the form almost of sentinels at the graveyards they occupy. The cats of Recoleta cemetery in Buenos Aires, for instance, seem like perfect companions for the wealthy inhabitants of the

grand mausoleums that crowd the streets of the cemetery. From around corners, they peer at you, as if to question your intentions and to report your business. At Auschwitz, I noticed only pigeons, but Polish poet Adam Zagajewski makes mention of swallows:

In the barracks' quiet,
In the silence of a Summer Sunday,
The swallows' shrill cry.

Is this really all that's left
Of human speech?

The day after Auschwitz, I visited the Jewish Cemetery in Krakow. This cemetery belongs to the subset of Historic Graveyard that might be termed Graveyards of Lost Civilizations. The "New Jewish Cemetery" ("new" only in the sense that it is distinguishable from the nearby Medieval Jewish cemetery) holds many more dead Jews than the city of Krakow holds live ones. While the Jewish population of Krakow numbered a quarter of the city's inhabitants, or about 60,000, at the outbreak of World War II, only about 150 self-identified Jews remain in the city. The day I found the cemetery, I was the only live Jew (or live human of any kind) inside the graveyard. It was me and a minyan of pigeons, milling around as I walked among the ancient trees and ancient gravestones, many graves well tended still, and stretching the length and width of a sports arena to its far walls. As I always do in graveyards, I read the gravestones and tried to imagine what the lives of these people might have been. I came across relatively new gravestones as well as older:

Mauryey Wiener
ADWOKAT
1906-1990

Helena Goldman
1909-1983

Helena Krischer
1902, Krakov -
Bergen Belsen, 1945

A number of the graves had stones on them, a sign of remembrance that's part of Jewish tradition. I gathered up a dozen stones and then another dozen and placed them on the graves with the most faded inscriptions, many completely illegible. I placed stone on stone—a stone finally is the only price the dead expect, the only language worth sharing. For the graveyard enthusiast, it's best to always have a pocketful.

Jews say Kaddish for the dead and remember the day of death, the Yahrzeit. Remembering feels good, but forgetting is inevitable. In the graveyard we all lie down together, the Remembered, and the Merely Dead. It's not with acrimony that I say the Remembered will also eventually be Merely Dead, but to point out that the solace of anonymity is that it is what bonds us finally with every other human. My gravestone will be blank. In that way, I will have beat Time to the punch. This wish at least I expect my heirs to carry out.