

The Gravediggers: Attempt to an Anthropological Approach based on own Experiences

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This essay gives record of the author's memories and direct experiences with gravediggers. In the first part he describes the memories of his childhood relationship with his grandfather who was a gravedigger during WWII and that of a neighbour who occasionally but regularly worked as gravedigger. Then, he presents the ministry of gravedigger, as provided in the rural area of his origin, as well as currently in some parts of Romania, Germany, Switzerland and the United States of America and analyze their behaviour in relationship with the mournful family as well as with their professionalism. It also contains a short chapter on the funeral ministry in the Early Church.

Keywords: gravediggers; anthropology; community life; profession; half-professionalization; death; cemeteries.



The author is an experienced traveller who was active as an ecumenist, priest and professor in more than eighteen countries from all over the world. He publishes in this journal a series of brief anthropological approaches on several categories of people and professions based mainly on his own experience. The present one is about gravediggers.

Introduction

I would like to begin this essay by telling a story related to the name of the profession (or mission or ministry?) I intend to write about: The Gravediggers. When I described to a British friend, whose English is noble, the role of the people I would like to write about in this essay, he said: “You intend to write

about undertakers.” As I was not totally sure whether this is the right word to describe the people I meant, I checked in the Oxford Dictionary the meaning of the word “undertaker.” It reads that an undertaker is “a person whose business is preparing dead for burial or cremation and making arrangements for funerals.”¹ A synonym for undertaker would be “funeral director.” This is not the right word to describe the people I want to write about and the work they do. After consulting other dictionaries, I found the correct word: gravediggers. However, there is a connection between the two terms. Therefore, when I speak about the way in how the Early Church dealt with funerals, I mean not only gravediggers, but rather what we call today undertakers, or, more generally, what we would call “funeral services.”

My essay contains three parts. In the first part,



I describe my own encounter as a child with two gravediggers and their stories. The gravediggers I know from my childhood were what I would call “occasional gravedigger.” The first one, the father of my father, was forced to be a gravedigger in the abnormal circumstances of WWII. The second one was a neighbour of my parents and he occasionally and sporadically did this job. In the second part, I present the ways in how gravedigging work is done in the rural area where my parents come from. The focus here is on the communitarian understanding of this work which is done by relatives, neighbours and friends. I will highlight the fact that the gravedigging is not done by “professionals”, and therefore the original communitarian dimension of this ministry is kept, almost like in the Early Church. This rural tradition which is, in my opinion, linked with the way the Early Church dealt with funerals, provides the opportunity of a short encounter on this matter. The third part contains a record of my direct encounter with what I call “half-professional” and professional gravediggers in different countries of the world. In the final conclusions, I focus on analysing different types of gravediggers from the perspective of their professionalism, as this dimension seems to me to be an important one from an anthropological perspective.

Childhood memories of gravediggers

The first gravedigger I ever met was my grandfather. In fact, he was not a gravedigger by profession, but he served as such in World War II. As a Romanian who lived in Northern Transylvania, a region which was taken from Romania and given to Hungary through the Diktat from Vienna,² he was recruited for WWII in the Hungarian army. As all ethnical Romanians, he did not get a weapon in his hands and was not sent into combat because, for obvious reasons, Hungarians did not trust Romanians. He served in a group of gravediggers active behind the frontline who were responsible in burying dead bodies of the civil population, enemies and animals. German and Hungarian bodies were collected by professional undertakers and were buried with military ceremonies. My grandfather used to tell a lot of stories related to his experience in WWII and his activity as a gravedigger. After digging common graves or simply using holes made by bombs, the gravediggers dropped in dead bodies, both human and animal. Sometimes they were able to do their work only weeks after combat or a bombing took place. Bodies of humans and animals started to stink terribly. According to my grandfather, human bodies are the most pestilential ones. Gravediggers used all sorts of tricks in order to be able to complete their task. Smoking cigarettes

while burying bodies or using barbed wire to get them into the graves so as not to approach them too close, were just two techniques. As I understood from my grandfather’s stories, the main lesson he learned from his experience as a war gravedigger was about the vanity and fragility of human life. He got this understanding from seeing the dead bodies of the aggressors near dead bodies of their civilian victims, or the dead body of a farmer near the dead bodies of his animals. He also learned how worthless money, gold or other abstract values can be. A piece of bread or a bottle of cognac valued more than money and a good pair of boots valued more than gold. In a mixture of black humour and practical thought, my grandfather` gravediggers used to take the cognac from dead German soldiers (according to his statement all German soldiers had with them such a bottle as part of official endowment) or their impeccable boots, with the comment: “Either way, he does not need them anymore.” What kind of gravedigger was my grandfather during the WWII? He was forced to do this job. He and other Romanians like my grandfather were entrusted with this job by the Hungarian occupant because it was perceived as being unpleasant, even awkward, and humiliating. It was a dirty job which had to be done for obvious reasons. However, it seems that my grandfather and his companions did this unpleasant work with a certain respect which Orthodox Christians have for the human body and for the end of human life. The abnormal circumstances of doing this work stimulated him to reflect on the sense of human life and its fragility and vanity. And he got another ability which was useful to his rural community for ages: a certain fearless familiarity with dead bodies. Therefore, anytime someone committed a suicide in his village and it was a need to have a first encounter with the body in order to bring it into a worthy stage, he was the one called to do this unpleasant job. If such a job is done by people with no familiarity with dead bodies, the psychical consequences for them can be terrible: anxiety, nightmares etc.

Another particular gravedigger played a certain role in my childhood. He was an old neighbour of my parents, so a kind of a retired gravedigger who told us children all sorts of stories related to his life, including stories about his earlier sporadic occupation as a gravedigger. He was not what one may call a “professional gravedigger”, as there were none of this category in the small town I grew up in. Even today, there are no “professional gravediggers” in small Romanian towns. This job is done by people living at the margins of the society who are ready to take any hard work for some amount of money and food and drinks. I remember some of the stories told by the gravedigger of my childhood. His stories, including those relating to his work as a gravedigger, were full

of fantasy and imagination. According to one of them, he and his team buried a young girl and when they were about to finish their job and put the last shovels of earth, they have heard some knockings coming from the fresh grave. They did their best to dig up the grave as fast as possible; however, it was too late. But they could at least find evidence that the sound they have heard came from the buried young girl, as they found wooden pieces under her nails and the cover of the coffin was scratched. Another story I remember was about a fox which was walking through the cemetery with a chicken in its mouth, as the gravedigger and his team were digging a tomb. The gravedigger used the shovel as a weapon and the result was that the fox left the hen and ran away. That evening the gravedigger's family enjoyed a pleasant dinner. This second story tells something about the social status of the gravedigger's family. I learned from the same source that dry and cold seasons seem to be a nightmare for gravediggers, as they need to dig into hard or frozen earth. Their work, as it is done mostly manually, demands a lot of energy. Therefore, gravediggers seem to eat a lot. There is a Romanian saying based on this reality. When one wants to express self-criticism for having a too large of a meal, he/she says: "I eat like a gravedigger." Apart of a certain kind of mystery related with gravediggers which is common to all categories of people who relate in a way or another with the end of human life, my own mysterious approach regarding gravediggers was increased by these and other stories I have heard as a child.

Rural gravediggers

In traditional villages of the region I was born in, as well as in other regions of Romania, the work of a gravedigger is not professionalized. It is made up by relatives, friends or community members of the one who passed away. Aged people decide before they pass away who is going to take certain responsibilities related with his/her funeral; who will wash the body, who will carry the cross which is later installed at the head of the tomb, who will carry to body and who will dig the tomb. This last job is normally done by a small team of the closest friends or relatives who become what one might call undertakers. One of my grandmothers told me that her husband, my grandfather, told her in a certain moment, when he felt that his end got closer, who should play an active role in his funeral. Yes, people like my grandparents had no fear or reservations speaking about all these things. And I am sure my father will do the same. In the rural Romanian world, wishes expressed by someone about to die have to be fulfilled as truthfully as possible by the remaining members of the family. There is an

expression in Romanian: "word(s) left with tongue of death" meaning they are the works which contain the last wishes of a person and they need to be fulfilled by those who were entrusted with them.

So, in rural Romania relatives, neighbours or friends become occasional gravediggers. This is a profound way to express a deep sense of community by conducting such a ministry. It is a service provided out of respect and communitarian awareness to the one who passed away and out of moral support to the mournful family. Occasional gravediggers are rewarded, but the reward is definitely not the reason why relatives or friends accept this job. The way they are rewarded emphasizes the communitarian service they provided: normally they get a live animal (a hen or a lamb) which is handed over by the members of the family of the one who passed away over his/her coffin. The meaning of this symbolic gesture is clear to me: the ultimate rewarder of the occasional gravediggers is the one who passed away through the mournful members of the family. The memorial meal which is eaten by all participants of the funeral has the same sense, as the coffin with the body is placed in the middle of the tables which are arranged in a square: the one who offers the memorial meal is the one departed.

Gravediggers in the Early Church

This practice present in rural areas of my native region as well as in other parts of Romania is close to the practice of the Early Church. We tend to forget nowadays that gravediggers were an inferior rank of clergy. Later this inferior rank of clergy got lost, and their ministry was taken over by lay people. One of the theories which try to explain the success of Christianity in the Greek-Roman world stands that people converted to Christianity also because Christian communities provided funeral services to the poor and to those who did not have a family.³

This is indirectly acknowledged by the Emperor Julian The Apostate (361-363) who wrote, around 360 CE the following words on the Christian Church: "Why do we not observe that it is their (i.e. Christians) care for the graves of the dead and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase atheism?"⁴ By "atheism" Julian means here Christianity. As one of the members of the Constantinian dynasty who was baptized as a child, in order to disqualify him from the status of a candidate to the rank of Emperor, Julian converted in secret to Paganism and fought openly against Christianity when he became Emperor. In the above quoted epistle, he explains why Christians are so successful. Among the reasons he mentions is also the care for the dead. It means that Christianity provided a certain guarantee that in case the family cannot take



responsibility for the funerals, the community will do it. In this way, the post mortem dignity was ensured. And such a guarantee was attractive to some Pagans.

The old Christian ethical order “To bury the one who died” seems to have its roots in Early Christianity. It remained a basic Christian duty over centuries, to provide this last act related with the earthy life, both to those members of the community who have no family, or, if circumstances demand, to strangers.

Half-professional and professional gravediggers

More recently, meaning from since I started priesthood, I had some experiences with half-professional or professional gravediggers. In Sibiu, I met gravediggers which are, in principal, professional. They seem to be employers of the municipality. I strongly suspect that those I met, originate from the same type of circles as the gravedigger whom I had known from my childhood as being the neighbour of my parents. I overheard a conversation between a female family member of a departed person and a “half-professional” gravedigger. I will present here this conversation because I think it is relevant for understanding the way in which these people perceive their work and for assessing the level of their professionalism. The female family member of the departed was still very affected by the loss of said member. She looked sad, vulnerable, fragile and unsecured. The gravedigger who spoke on behalf of his small team had a dirty costume, was unshaved and routine and indifference could be read on his face. His colleagues looked similar. At least one of them started smoking immediately after the priests concluded the funeral service and his colleagues finished putting earth on the grave.

Family member: Here is something for you! And she handed over some money (tips) and some packages containing, as I was told later, wine and some food.

The gravedigger: Thank you! Could we get also some memorial bread!

Family member: Yes, of course. All gravediggers got memorial bread which immediately disappeared under their dirty dresses.

The gravedigger: Could we participate at the memorial meal?

Family member: Yes, of course!

The gravedigger: May God forgive his sins! These words given with a routine tone concluded the discussion.

It looked to me like the gravediggers I have seen in the city I live in now put a lot of effort to make their best to get the most material advantages possible for the work they provided. Their self-understanding seems to be a combination of traditional perception of their work, as I described in the second part, and the

awareness that the people they provide their services for, i.e. the mournful family, is vulnerable and therefore sensitive to their exaggerated appetite to get rewarded. On the one hand they expect the reward and the treatment of the occasional gravediggers from the rural area, in additional to the official salary they get from the fees paid by the family to the administration of the cemetery, but on the other hand they do not make any (or enough) efforts to show sympathy and condolences to the mournful family. The traditional Orthodox wish (May God forgive his sins!) was expressed, but the tone was not an appropriate one.

I met professional gravediggers in Germany, Switzerland and in the United States of America. There is not a lot to report on the German and Swiss ones, apart from the fact that they were extremely discreet, serious and professional in doing their job. And even as a priest, i.e. as someone who is in the very centre of everything related with a funeral, I did not experience any encounter between them and mournful families. Their attitude could be described as a distant-professional one.

I have however to report a lot about US American gravediggers. I stood in several times for either one or a couple of months, a Romanian Orthodox priest from the New York area. I conducted several funerals and therefore I had contact with several gravediggers. They looked and acted very professional. All of them were wearing appropriate costumes, with the code of arms of the cemetery. Their costumes were clean, in spite of the, sometimes, literally dirty job they have to do due to rainy weather. I was impressed particularly by the gravediggers of a very fine cemetery where I conducted the funeral service for a wealthy departed member of the Romanian community. Everything related with that cemetery was of high quality. The way they treated the priest was special: I was required to submit a signed formulary for the funeral I conducted. They came to the car I was in with a filled formulary and asked me just to sign it. The way they conversed with me, the respect shown to me as a minister was professional and more!

In regarding the gravediggers of that cemetery, I was impressed not only by their clean costumes that they were wearing, but especially by their attitude which I would name “professional,” although it certainly went beyond the meaning of professionalism: they were discrete and serious and, more than that, they knew how to express compassion to the mournful family and all other participants in the funerals. Even other gravediggers engaged in other funerals or in digging other graves which we met on the way to the grave knew how to pay respect to our funeral cortege. They stopped their work, removed their hats and made a discrete reverence. It was a complex of gestures which I think they were taught how to make. I am sure that they

practiced those gestures again and again in front of a couch, as I am sure that in America there are courses for gravediggers working in fine cemeteries! No particular wish (like “May God forgive his sins!”) related with the reposed one was expressed to the mournful family, as that cemetery is a multi-ethnic and multi-faith one and the gravediggers most probably were unfamiliar with the Romanian-Orthodox tradition. However, half-professional gravediggers from Romania and very professional gravediggers from the very fine New York cemetery have something in common: both had a glow in their eyes when they got handed over their tips.

Conclusions

There is a kind of a mystery related with gravediggers, as there is a certain mystery related with everything regarding the end of human life and the dead. The famous Bram Stoker used this mystery in his novel on Dracula.⁵ Is, or should gravedigging be a profession, or rather a mission or a ministry? The gravedigger’s models presented above and the model of the Early Church allow me to try a response: at least in a Romanian context, we need to seriously reflect on re-introducing the inferior clergy rank of gravediggers.

Finally, I would like to express something which emerged from the ever-changing realities of the world we live in: the very existence of gravediggers, either occasional, half-professional or professional seems to be threatened currently by the constant growth of the practice of cremation all over the world. However, I do not have enough experience with the professional category of cremators in order to write an essay of the same kind about them. But who knows what the future may bring, also in relationship with gravediggers and their work?

Note:

1. <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/undertaker>
2. Known in history as “The second Arbitration from Vienna,” it was the decision taken at 30 August 1940 by Germany and Italy to force Romania to oblige Romania to give to Hungary the Northern part of Transylvania.
3. Eric Rebillard, *The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity*, Cornell University Press, 2012.
4. Julian, *Epistulae* 22. 429d.
5. See Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (Free eBooks at Planet eBook), p. 305.

