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SMILES AND TEARS: OBSERVATIONS OVER THE CURRENT CHANGES IN THE BELARUSIAN CEMETERIES

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Until now, Belarusian cemeteries have attracted the attention of ethnologists, folklorists and historians from two main perspectives: places where historical tombstones are preserved and where traditional memorial practices can be observed. The huge new cemeteries founded outside the boundaries of growing cities in recent decades remained a "blind spot" for Belarusian researchers. This article aims to show how observation of contemporary Belarusian cemeteries and the changes taking place in them can help to understand contemporary Belarusians' ideas about the afterlife and the development of cultural memory and memorial practices. Five characteristic examples were selected for this purpose: the spread of tombstone portraits with smiling deceased persons, the tendency to demonstrate the profession of the deceased on the tombstone, the gradual disappearance of traditional grave designs, methods of depicting and articulating ideas about the afterlife and the tradition of bringing toys to children's graves. Interpretations of these examples are proposed. Thanks to this, we can see in the change a complex system that directly reflects the development of Belarusian society and understand what great epistemological potential modern Belarusian tombstones contain for ethnology and other social sciences.

KEYWORDS: Belarus, cemeteries, tombstones, practices of remembrance, culture of memory, tombstone portraits.

The number of publications devoted to the historical cemeteries of Belarus has steadily grown over the past quarter-century. Historians, art historians, ethnologists, philologists and local historians turn to a variety of aspects, exploring the historical necropolises of Belarus (Ramaniuk 2000; Lewkowska, Lewkowski and Walczak 2000–2008; Hruntou 2022). During this time, we have made significant progress in understanding the history of cemeteries, the semantics of tombstones,

the linguistic features of epitaphs and commemoration traditions. This list could easily be continued. However, for the current article, it is important to point out the following: the modern development of Belarusian cemeteries remains a "blind spot" for authors of various disciplines. Two focal points mainly attract researchers to study Belarusian cemeteries: folk culture and heritage protection (Sudnik 2023, Skvarčeŭski 2018). Neither of these can be easily found in the huge modern cemeteries on the outskirts of every Belarusian town, with their monotonous landscape and similar, repeating monuments. Thus, we need to take the time to understand that the cultural landscape of Belarusian necropolises has been undergoing significant changes since the mid-1980s, as will be described below. This process has not only not been completed but has accelerated in pace.

The goal of this article is to study some of the significant changes that have occurred in modern Belarusian cemeteries and how these changes correspond to commemoration practices, identities and ways of imagining the afterlife. The central part of the article is divided into five main sections that examine current tendencies to place the portraits of deceased persons with smiles on their tombstone as well as depict the deceased's work identity, the growing disappearance of burial mounds over graves, the depiction of afterlife perspectives on the modern gravestones and the practice of brining toys as a commemoration gift to children's tombstones.

In many ethnological works concerning cemeteries and commemoration rituals in Belarus and, more broadly, the East Slavic region, it was customary to speak about the conservatism and even "archaism" of this type of cultural landscape and the ritual practices associated with it (Aŭsiejčyk 2016, 445; Ramaniuk 2000, 11; Sedakova 2004, 17). We will leave aside the question of how correct this thesis is regarding historical cemeteries, but it is clear that this does not apply to the modern Belarusian cemeteries. Though dead people are still mainly being buried under wooden crosses, and tombs are visited a few times per year by relatives with candles, flowers and ritual food, the frame that helped to understand traditional commemoration practices and cemetery development is no longer relevant. The contemporary Belarusian cemetery is an area where many innovations occur. It is no longer organised solely by the logic of conservative tradition but also by modernisation processes that cannot be ignored when analysing this field.

We may ask ourselves why this break in tradition occurred, leading to such rapid change. What can the modern appearance of Belarusian cemeteries and their tombstones tell us about the attitude of Belarusians towards death, their ideas about the afterlife, their strategies for preserving the memory of deceased relatives? It is the broad range of questions I will try to clarify in this article while examining some of the most significant trends in modern cemeteries and tombstone development.

In my opinion, it is precisely the study of the monuments themselves and the cultural landscapes of modern cemeteries that can answer these questions. This does not

mean that classic field interviews are irrelevant. Respondents eagerly answer questions concerning their habitual commemoration practices. However, they are usually uncertain about their beliefs about the afterlife and the posthumous fate of the deceased's personality. This is rather predictable and not something novel. Belarusian folk culture researchers in the second part of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century had to admit that attempts to tie peasant imaginations of the otherworld to an uncontroversial system were doomed to fail (Sedakova 2004, 37; Vinogradova 2012, 9). All the moral and ideological collisions of the twentieth century, with their vacillations between atheism and religious revival, could hardly clarify this issue, making people's opinion of the otherworld even more controversial. The situation of being asked, in which respondents find themselves, only increases the confusion. Given this, we may treat modern burial monuments as firm statements on what people do believe when confronted with the death of their close ones. This does not mean that analysing the variety of modern monuments will not yield an uncontroversial view of contemporary beliefs in the otherworld. However, we can trace some important trends in how people regard the memory of their dead and how they represent them in the tombstones and practices around it. What is needed is an epistemological effort to understand tombstones as answers to important questions about human personality and its posthumous fate. Themes such as faith, identity, self-presentation and memory come into play here. Thus, this article will show the practical possibility of applying this effort and the potential of such an approach.

The methodological approach used in this article is based on the three different intellectual traditions. The first is formed by cemetery studies within social history and is represented by such authors as Philippe Ariès, Michel Vovelle and James Stevens Curl (Ariès 2011, Curl 1972, Vovelle 2008). The second is a set of methods mainly use cemetery inventory making, including monument description, inscription collection, photography and so on (Lewkowska, Lewkowski and Walczak 2000–2008; Czyż and Gutowski 2020). The third tradition is semiotic studies based on the works of Roland Barthes and Juri Lotman (Barthes 2000, Lotman 2001). It teaches to regard every object within culture as a text deserving of our interpretation. The tombstone, which mixes visual and textual parts, is a perfect object for this approach.

I started my studies of the Belarusian cemeteries about twenty years ago but only focused on modern monuments beginning in 2018. In the ensuing years, I have collected data from urban and village cemeteries in all six regions of the Republic of Belarus. Field interviews collected in 2020–2024 are used here as an additional source. Thus, about 120 cemeteries were visited in the warm season, both on working and remembrance days. Throughout this time, I took numerous photos of historical and contemporary monuments and copied epitaph examples. Burial practices and temporary wooden monuments over the new graves are beyond the focus of this

study. For approximately 25 years, I have made annual visits to several cemeteries where my close relatives are interred. These sites, located in Belarus's western and eastern regions of Belarus (specifically the Brest and Vitebsk oblasts), have inadvertently become longitudinal observation fields. The gradual transformations I have witnessed over the years have significantly contributed to the formulation of the central theses presented below.

The modern Belarusian cemeteries discussed in this article arose primarily as a result of the Soviet secular practice of creating *obshchegrazhdanskikh* (general) cemeteries, first using historical Orthodox cemeteries and then establishing them on new plots of land outside the city without any confessional context. The Russian language dominated and continues to do so through the epitaphs in these cemeteries. This is partly a result of the Orthodox tradition in the region and partly a result of the Russification policy of the authorities throughout the twentieth century. Some exceptions are areas where the population is predominantly Catholic, such as many parts of the Hrodno region. Here, epitaphs in Polish are not uncommon, with Russian still more dominant in cities; a small number of epitaphs are in Belarusian. In addition, Jewish and Tatar cemeteries have historically been present in Belarus, but modern burials in them are few in number, and they also bear evident traces of Russification since the midtwentieth century.

Three major factors have influenced the development of Belarusian cemeteries from the mid-1980s to the present day: the growing professionalisation of the funeral industry, the development of a market for a new type of tombstone and the continued growth of cities and the establishment of new cemeteries far beyond city limits. The growing professionalisation in the funeral industry meant a decrease in local community involvement in burial and memorial practices. Traditional funeral and memorial rites experienced a gradual reduction and loss of some elements, such as washing the body, producing coffins and crosses by hand and cooking traditional dishes for the wake (Mokhov 2020). The development of a market for a new type of tombstone in the form of black steles with an engraved image of the deceased's portrait and accompanying elements has led to fundamentally new possibilities for the visualisation of memory and grief. Finally, establishing new large cemeteries far beyond the boundaries of the expanded cities and their microdistricts created a new type of unified memorial space, almost entirely filled with monuments of the new type. These new spaces, as far removed as possible from city centres, are often adjacent to industrial zones and city dumps. These spaces rarely attract the attention of Belarusian ethnologists, anthropologists or sociologists, although many ideas about prestige, status, emotions and the afterlife are presented here explicitly (Warner 1959). It is possible to analyse these sources from dozens of different perspectives, and our observations and conclusions can be just as numerous and varied. Here, I will focus

only on some of the main trends that dominate Belarusian cemeteries today and will likely determine much in their development tomorrow.

THE SMILING DEAD

From the first examples of tombstone photography in Belarus in the 1870s to the beginning of the twenty-first century, one principle has remained virtually constant for this type of image: the deceased never smile in their photographs (Hruntou 2023, 173). This can be explained on several levels. Firstly, the cemetery is traditionally perceived as a place of grief and memory, where cheerful emotions and smiles are considered inappropriate (Lobač 2013, 400–430). Secondly, the basis and standard for the tombstone photographs was often a formal portrait, such as an ID photo. It is not customary to smile in such images where the recipient is the "authority" or an imaginary collective "other" (Bayburin 2017, 314–326). In this sense, a tombstone photograph, especially a man's, belonged to the same order as the deceased's suit, obligatory jacket and tie. Finally, until recently, movement was also impossible in a tombstone photograph; the frozen poses were inherited from examples of nineteenth century cabinet portraits. Stillness defined everything in the photographs, from facial expressions to gestures, and seemed to correspond to the stillness of death and the dead that it depicted.

Although this standard cannot be said to be no longer present, a new trend is gradually coming to the fore: more and more often, in tombstone photographs, we see people who are smiling and whose poses are more relaxed than was previously common. The question is how these changes should be interpreted.

The photographs themselves have changed: in the digital age, their number has increased many times over, while static poses, on the contrary, have become a rarity. People in today's photographs smile, move, behave freely; formal photography, mainly represented by ID photos, is becoming unusual. Often, when choosing a photo "for a monument", people face the problem that a "good" photo of the deceased cannot be found. Digital photo editing comes to the rescue: faces are corrected, a smile often appears, and clothes are frequently changed. In many cases, the portrait of the deceased on a monument today is not so much a reproduction of a photograph as the standardised result of an image editor.

But this explanation in itself is insufficient. Yes, there are indeed many informal photos. Yes, the possibilities of image editing allow you to add a smile. Nonetheless, formal photos, such as passport photos, are always available, and photo editing can easily make a picture "formal". The answer may be sought in the explanations of relatives who choose the photograph for a monument. When interviewed, they often say that they would like to remember their deceased loved one as alive and happy. This

solution is especially common for monuments over the graves of young and middle-aged persons. The recent possibility of creating colour portraits also helps the people depicted on them seem more "alive".

The proposed explanation often given by relatives of the deceased seems highly credible but requires interpretation. The questions are why these changes occurred and why they took this form. It is possible to assume they are connected with the mentioned reduction of funeral rites and the decrease in death's social significance in post-secular society. If, in traditional cultural models, death meant a change in the social status of the deceased through rites of passage, then these rites are increasingly losing meaning in modern times (van Gennep 2019). For many today, death has primarily a biological dimension and is not often perceived as a situation in which the deceased changes his or her social status. In a biological sense, death is now no less certain than ever, but in a social sense, it turns out to be an unfinished event. As a result, this leads to the desire to see and remember deceased relatives alive and smiling. The latest means of visual representation help us in this task.

Contemporary memory studies emphasise the increasing significance of death's digital mediation and the concomitant blurring of bodily boundaries. The remembrance of the deceased, both in terms of personality and corporeality, is subject to forms of editing analogous to those routinely employed in everyday life. In this context, social media platforms and tombstones converge as sites of curated self-representation. Both tend to promote idealised portrayals of the individual, often emphasising cheerful expressions, regardless of whether the subject is living or deceased (Arnold 2017, Sisto 2020, Walter 2017).

If this interpretation is correct, then the smiles on the people depicted on the monuments are evidence of a crisis affecting the funeral rite in its modern form. The inability to die completely, which caused fear in traditional culture, embodied in numerous stories about ghosts and the walking dead, now finds a new, much more widespread form, reflected in the smiles on the portraits of the dead (Levkiyevskaya 2012, Ovseychik 2022).

THE WORKING DEAD

The visual structure of monuments is becoming increasingly complex in many regions of Belarus today. This is especially obvious in the east and southeast of the country (Homel and Mahilou regions), but numerous examples can be found in the cemeteries of all major cities. Often, the portrait of the deceased is accompanied by various attributes, and his or her image can be adjacent to others. Frequently, it is not just the front side of the monument that is used for applying images but also the back side, which, in these cases, contains less formal images of the deceased or

various associated attributes. For example, if, from the front, we can see a serious man in a jacket, then from behind, he will be holding a recently caught fish in his hands and smiling. Examples of using two sides of a monument for formal and informal information about the deceased could already be found in Belarus at the end of the nineteenth century, particularly, in cemeteries in Grodno; however, these were few in number until the end of the twentieth century (Hruntou 2023, 148–150).

Nowadays, up to half of all monuments in these cemeteries may have images on two sides, and this tradition is developing further. In some cases, one can observe a tendency to lose the boundary between the specificity of the front and back of the monument. Back and front images could be informal in the same way. In other cases, the front of the monument is actively used for informal images, so the need for images on the back side disappears; the latter trend is particularly well represented in the Mazyr region. Here, even in traditionally more conservative village cemeteries, we find dozens of new monuments where the deceased can be depicted on the front of the monument in an informal setting and relaxed pose. This tendency in contemporary tombstone design is prevalent in both Russia and Ukraine and has become particularly widespread in the eastern and central regions of Belarus.

Even a cursory analysis of the iconography of this type of monument would require a separate article. Thus, here we will focus only on one important feature – the depiction of the deceased's profession. It is presented in two main ways: clothing (for priests, military personnel, police officers, doctors, etc.) or special attributes. Examples of such attributes include an aeroplane for pilots, a submarine for submariners, a globe for a geography teacher, the periodic table for a chemistry teacher, a car for a driver, a cow for a milkmaid, an accordion or other instrument for a musician and so on. Of course, it is not uncommon to see fishermen with fish and hunters with ducks, but it is professions, not hobbies, that dominate this type of iconography in quantity. References to the occupations of the deceased were not uncommon in nineteenth century epitaphs, but they remained relatively infrequent and predominantly concerned professions such as priests, soldiers, engineers and teachers. Contemporary tombstone portraiture has expanded upon this tradition, rendering occupational representation far more widespread and visually explicit.

To explain this, it is worth turning to Anna Engelking's book *Kołchoźnicy*, where she examines the identity of the Belarusian peasant (Engelking 2012). According to the researcher, one of the specific features of Belarusian peasants is their self-identification with the work. Belarusian peasants worked hard and long, which became an important part of their identity, at least for the generations of people who lived in the twentieth century. Observing modern Belarusian cemeteries, we could conclude that this thesis is still relevant both for village and town dwellers, or, at least, for their tombstones. The desire for visual representation to represent belonging to

a profession and being remembered with that status reminds us that the cemetery is not only a place of private memory for the family, but also a place of social representation before the eyes of the entire local community. Even in the anonymity of large city necropolises, this mode remains preserved and manifests itself in the same type of tombstone, referring to one profession or another.

When speaking about gravestones with the depictions of portraits associated with one profession or another, we must also acknowledge that the large number of portraits that include Belarusian folk costumes belong to this trend. The Belarusian language epitaphs or other sings of Belarusian identity are still seldom seen in our cemeteries. Thus, when we see a person in the Belarusian folk costume on the grave portrait, it rather means that he was a member of a folk song collective, that was this person's work or hobby, rather than declaration of his commitment to national identity.

DISAPPEARING GRAVES

The word "grave" (*mahila*) in the Belarusian language refers to both the burial pit itself and the small mound above it that forms after it is filled in. It is in this latter meaning that we will consider the disappearance of graves. The grave has traditionally been important, representing the deceased in the Belarusian folk culture: "To step on the grave is to trample the dead man's sides", and other proverbs regulated the careful attitude to grave mounds. This attitude was mostly preserved throughout the twentieth century in urban culture, where the grave and the monument always formed an inseparable complex. In the traditional culture of Belarusians, grave care was an important part of memorial practices: prior to remembrance days, graves were swept with a broom, sprinkled with new sand or covered with turf (Ausejchyk 2015). In many regions, on memorial days, the grave served as an improvised table: it was covered with a tablecloth, and people ate and drank on it during the ritual commemoration of the dead (Boryak 2021, 75).

Anthropologist Sergei Mokhov, based on his study of Russian material, concluded that care of burial sites is in itself one of the most important forms of commemoration, which has only increased in importance in the post-secular society (Mokhov 2018, 233). These observations can be easily extrapolated to the Belarusian commemoration practices and cemeteries, where an overgrown or unkempt burial site is a socially recognisable sign of oblivion, as the poor condition of the family. Though these observations are still correct, the situation is now changing in front of our eyes. City cemeteries are the main site for these changes. Increasingly, relatives order a burial design option where the entire surface is covered with stone slabs or concrete tiles, so that in many cases the grave, in its understanding as a burial mound, completely disappears. It can no longer become overgrown with grass or look unkempt.

On the one hand, these changes can be interpreted as a manifestation of hyper-care: the desire to keep the burial site in a constantly well-groomed condition leads to a decision that reduces the need for care to a minimum. But such a decision obviously also leads to a reduction in the minimum practice of caring for burial as a form of commemoration. The reasons for such changes are not difficult to determine. The population of Belarus, which today is almost three-quarters urban, has increasingly turned away from engaging in typical peasant practices – weeding a grave and the area around it. In addition, the development of the funeral services market and the gradual increase in the population's income make more expensive solutions possible in the design of the grave and the space around it.

The popularity of this solution is also affected by distrust that future generations of the family will be keepers of memory. The large number of abandoned graves, many of which are less than half a century old, in Belarusian cemeteries indicates the limited temporality of graves and tombstones, which in the frequent rhetorical formulas of epitaphs promise "eternal memory". Given this, investing in solutions that promise longer-term preservation of the burial site, even with the almost complete impossibility of caring for it, becomes logical and justified for many. Moreover, even if the burial site is filled with concrete and covered with stone slabs, there are still weeds growing around it, which, if desired, need to be weeded regularly.

On the other hand, the changes described can be understood as an admission of the inability to ensure regular care of the burials in the long term. The brevity of what would be called communicative memory in the twentieth century was no secret to any generation (Assman 2012). Traditional memorial practices, with their conversion of the memory of an individual into the memory of ancestors (*dzyady*) generally helped to accept this brevity as natural (Sharaya 2002). This acceptance made it possible to calmly accept that wooden tombstones disappeared over time and were replaced by new burials and new tombstones. This model declined throughout the twentieth century, with wooden monuments replaced by concrete and stone tombstones. Nonetheless, their ability to preserve the deceased's memory without the practice of care turned out to be very conditional.

An important condition that makes these dilemmas possible is that Belarusian cemetery law allows for the use of burial ground free of charge and eternally; this is uncommon for many European countries. Added to this is the increasing prevalence of cremation, primarily in Minsk, where more than half of all dead bodies are cremated. Even in cases where the urn is not placed in a columbarium but buried in the ground, the grave mound above it is redundant and meaningless. Cremation eliminates the body, and with it, its symbolic representatives, such as a separate grave, also lose their significance. According to our observations, relatives gather around the burial urns of their loved ones, including near columbaria, on traditional

memorial days. However, implementing the usual memorial practices here is very difficult. It is easier to do these near burials hidden under a thick layer of stone. Still, in both cases, the disappearance of the grave leads to the impossibility of a key practice of commemoration that cannot be replaced by anything else.

TOWARDS HEAVEN

Modern tombstone iconography depicts not only the deceased's portrait, profession or hobby but also relatives' ideas about the afterlife. These often contradictory ideas, which in an interview may not be easy for a person to reduce to a consistent statement, here acquires unconditionality and certainty. We will look at this using one clear example.

A half-hour drive from Minsk is the town of Smolevichi, one of many sleepy and provincial so-called satellite towns around the capital. Founded in the Middle Ages, its cultural landscape is now dominated by Soviet architecture, making it hard to distinguish from others. The new town cemetery is located in its eastern part, with the modern burial sector bordering the field of a neighbouring farm. It is a typical monotonous area without trees, filled with uniform black stone tombstones with portraits of the deceased. This monotony is interrupted by the monument to a woman who died in 2017, located close to the corner of the cemetery and clearly visible from the road. It is three times taller than the neighbouring tombstones. In the centre is a full-length, life-size image of the deceased in a red dress. She stands on the first step of a stone staircase with golden railings leading up to the sky. Behind her, the stairs dissolve into a shining light in which one can discern the open gates of heaven. Around them, in the clouds on both sides, we see a group of angels playing musical instruments. What we have before us is nothing less than the clearly recognisable iconography of the ascension into heaven.

In many other cases, the reference to paradise, heaven and ascension to it may be less vivid but still easily recognisable; modern colour tombstone portraits often depict in the background an image of the sky and clouds or just the colour blue.

No less often and no less clearly, the belief in the presence of the dead in heaven, in the Christian paradise, is expressed in numerous verses commonly found on modern Belarusian tombstones. Most of these poems use standard patterns and metaphors of naive versification. Their poetic level is not high, but simple and sentimental. And they are important for understanding today's ideas about the afterlife. Let us give an example of a poem from the tombstone of a woman who died in 2021 and was buried in the Orthodox cemetery in Kreva (Smarhon district, Hrodna region), the village and former shtetl dominated by the ruins of the Medieval castle.

Mamochka, kak plokho bez tebya,
Kak tebya poroyu ne khvatayet,
Podnimayu vzglyad na nebesa,
No Gospod' tvoy vzor ne posylayet.
Ya proshu Yego, nu khot' razok,
Day mne mamy lik zhivoy uvidet',
No s nebes lish' kapel'ka dozhdya
Shepchet tikho "mama tebya vidit"…

(Mommy, how bad it is without you,
How I miss you sometimes.
I raise my gaze to the heavens,
But the Lord does not send your gaze.
I ask Him, at least once,
Let me see my mother's face alive,
But from the heavens only a drop of rain
Whispers quietly, "Mama sees you"…)

The main theme of this poem is the melancholy of not being able to see a deceased loved one. But the idea of the mother's posthumous fate is also clearly expressed here: she dwells in Heaven. This is an example of the persistence of the Christian concept of the afterlife in a post-secular society, which is not unusual. This model, however, can only be called "Christian" in part. In all cases known to us, the Christian ideas of the afterlife are limited exclusively to Heaven. Hell, or the recognition of the connection between earthly life and the posthumous destiny, is entirely absent both in modern funerary iconography and in the texts of epitaphs. Based on the experience of studying modern Belarusian cemeteries, we can assert that today's post-secular consciousness has left itself only paradise from the entire topography of the afterlife. The Christian heaven here is indistinguishable from the heaven of traditional Belarusian culture, where the soul flies after the obligatory memorial days (Lobač 2004).

Direct references to Hell are also notably absent when examining epitaphs from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the same time, paradise – or Heaven – was not portrayed as an assured destination for the deceased, except for young children. Entry into paradise was understood as contingent upon divine judgment, which could be influenced by the intercessory prayers of the living. Consequently, a significant number of epitaphs incorporated appeals for prayer, reflecting both theological beliefs and the enduring relational ties between the living and the dead. In contemporary epitaphs referencing Heaven, the notion of judgment is often omitted, presenting entrance into the celestial realm as a presumed or unconditional outcome for the deceased relative.

This refers specifically to the explicitly stated topography of the afterlife. Many other epitaphs use a different metaphorical system, placing the deceased in "eternity", in "our hearts" and so on. Some epitaphs suggest the idea of the afterlife as dissolution in nature. For example, in the cemetery of the town of Dubrouna (a small regional centre on the border with Russia) sits the tombstone of a man who died in 1990. The adorning text is written in the first person on behalf of the deceased.

Nu chto ty, mama,
Utri slezu
Pechal' pust' budet
Gost'yey redkoy
Ved' ne odin ya tam vnizu,
Pod nulevoy zemnoy otmetkoy
Prosti za bol', prosti za muku
Nas razluchili navsegda,
No ya s toboy na vse goda
V ryabine, ive, laske vetra
Yeshcho raz mamochka prosti.

(Oh, come on, Mom,
Dry your tears
Let sadness be
A rare guest.
After all, I'm not the only one down there,
Under the zero mark of the earth
Forgive me for the pain, forgive me for the torment
We were separated forever.
But I'm with you for all the years
In the rowan, willow, caress of the wind
Once again, Mom, forgive me.)

This set of ideas about the afterlife is also indirectly present in numerous images on tombstones, where the deceased is depicted in the bosom of nature, often by a river or hugging a tree. Although "dissolution" in nature cannot be depicted (at least by means of traditional iconography), the deceased are often shown in a "natural" context. These scenes always represent a recognisable local landscape with its birches, cherry trees, meadows and the like. These images obviously do not refer to the Garden of Eden, the topography of the Christian paradise. On the contrary, they clearly reveal the features of local nature, with which the dead are inseparable.

These examples show how contemporary Belarusians demonstrate the different and sometimes controversial views they carry while commissioning gravestones for their relatives. Though limited in number, these examples encapsulate some of the most recurrent themes observable across numerous Belarusian cemeteries. In this way, they have much in common with their ancestors from the nineteenth century, as they were described by ethnologists of that age. At the same time, the secularisations of the twentieth century have left evident traces on the concepts of the otherworld. It erased the idea of hell as a possible fate for the soul of a close relative, leaving only heaven. In many other cases, the idea of the otherworld is not even mentioned at all.

TOYS FOR DEAD CHILDREN

Even with all the significant changes that have taken place in Belarusian cemeteries in the last three or four decades, one thing seems relatively stable – gifts to the dead. Indeed, in many cemeteries we can still see saucers, vodka glasses, candy, eggs and bread brought on memorial days. Recent decades have added ubiquitous bright plastic flowers, but they have only replaced the live flowers that were previously brought to the graves of loved ones. Candle lamps are still popular among Catholics and are becoming somewhat widespread in Orthodox cemeteries as well.

The desire to bring gifts to the dead remains unwavering; people rarely go to cemeteries empty-handed. This tradition itself influenced the infrastructure of burials and some modern features of monuments. In many regions of Belarus (primarily Polesie and Podneprovye), one can find tables of various size near burials. They are traditionally used for commemorative meals and serve as a sign of the preservation of memorial practices, often criticised by the Orthodox church. The intolerant position of the church has recently been able to push back these traditional practices in a number of regions. Still, in general, we can talk about their relatively high level of preservation.

The need to bring and leave gifts is reflected in modern monuments, where stone vases for artificial flowers and special installations for placing lamps are often used. At the same time, it is worth paying attention to columbaria, an increasingly popular type of burial; this choice of burial makes the traditional offering of gifts virtually impossible.

In addition to all the listed features, which can be called traditional, some have recently become widespread. An example of such a new phenomenon in memorial practices is the tradition of bringing toys to children's graves. Not uncommon in previous decades, when I started my research at the beginning of the 2000s, I encountered fragments of ribbon dolls that people brought to their children. However, this was never more than just a single toy or its fragments. Today, you can find graves where the number of toys can approach twenty or more, including soft toys (teddy

bears, etc.), various types of cars and so on. Parental grief is combined with the tradition of bringing gifts to the dead, and, as a result, the brought toys accumulate on the grave, testifying to the tragedy that has befallen the family.

Already in the nineteenth century, there was a clear tendency to spend significant amounts of money on tombstones for deceased children. Of course, it was not the rule, but wealthy families often ordered expensive monuments from workshops in Warsaw, Kyiv or Riga for their deceased children. This tendency continues today. Large monuments, colour portraits or images of angels in the case of the death of newborns, detailed epitaphs, often in verse – all are common in modern children's burials in Belarus, and part of this trend is the children's toys brought to the cemetery.

The traditional model of bringing gifts to the dead means reciprocity: remembering the dead assumed their disposition to the living and even help. The gift, like all the gifts in a traditional culture, assumes its return in another form. When bringing toys to children's graves, we can speak of a dysfunction in the principle of a gift's reciprocity. As a rule, the epitaphs serve as confirmation of this, speaking of grief and the senselessness of loss.

However, this telling example of bringing toys to children's graves can be seen as part of a larger trend. The system of practices associated with bringing gifts to the dead dominates the belief systems that justify it. This is particularly evident in the post-secular landscape of Belarusian cemeteries, which was formed mainly in the twentieth century. Here, one can see how the graves of consistent atheists, whose graves were either decorated with red stars (common over the burials of local Soviet party leaders and military men) or simply devoid of religious symbols, were also places where relatives came, brought flowers and carried out other caring practices. Although reciprocity in a secular situation is formally impossible, it is realised through the consolidation of the family and the confirmation of social statuses associated with family visits to the cemetery.

All this allows us to say that most likely, even given the ongoing slow secularisation in Belarus, the practice of visiting cemeteries and bringing gifts to the dead will continue to be preserved. The presence or absence of faith in the existence of the soul, the certainty of ideas about the afterlife, turns out to be secondary; even the emergence of new practices, such as bringing toys to children's graves, turns out to be not only possible, but also natural.

CONCLUSIONS

Modern Belarusian tombstones may tell us a lot about humans beliefs in the afterlife, about their ways of coping with grief and about the very culture of memory itself. Many things may be observed here and many interpretations proposed. I hope that

the five themes I have touched upon in this article regarding the development of modern Belarusian cemeteries give a good example of the fruitfulness of this perspective.

The increasingly frequent smiling faces of the dead on tombstone portraits indicate changes in the social status of the deceased and the rapid loss of strict memorial conventions that were common in the twentieth century. Frequent images of the deceased in the context of their working profession testify to the continuing importance of work for the identity of Belarusians – after death, many want to be remembered precisely in the context of work. At the same time, the arrangement of burials is changing so that the need for care for them is optional and minimal. Thus, the practice of care, as one of the most important forms of commemoration, is gradually becoming a thing of the past. Most modern monuments are marked with a cross, identifying them as belonging to a particular Christian denomination. However, a detailed examination of their iconography and accompanying texts shows that this affiliation conceals a mixture of different beliefs. The model of the Christian afterlife has been reduced: Hell is usually excluded from it, and the dead inevitably end up in Heaven. The growing popularity of cremation and burial in columbaria leads to an inevitable reduction of traditional memorial practices. But, at the same time, new forms of commemoration are emerging. One is bringing numerous toys to children's graves, representing the development of post-secular culture in Belarus.

Though the ways of interpretation could be argued, what we see here is a complex system of practices, beliefs and representations undergoing rapid changes before our eyes. The scope of this article permits the examination of only a limited number of cases; however, these examples are among the most representative and recurrent patterns I have encountered during regular fieldwork in Belarusian cemeteries. Many things will be altered within a decade, so we must observe and understand this system as it progresses. Debates on memory culture, secularisation and family development may find much here for further discussion and understanding. Modern Belarusian cemeteries may lie at the outskirts of towns and cities, but they deserve a central position in our attention to the changes Belarusian society is undergoing today.

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