

# Cemetery Customs in Central Europe

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The slides used in the PowerPoint presentation illustrate the following characteristics of German burial practices:

	Before 1900	Since 1900
Cemetery location	Beside or around the parish church	Often moved to the edge of the town or the village
Time of the funeral	Day of death to 8 days later*	Within 72 hours (modern German law)
Announcement	By word of mouth	Obituaries/social media
Embalming	None	Essentially never
Coffins	Wood if any	Wood of any kind
Location of the body between death and funeral	In the home*	In the home; since 1945 in the cemetery chapel
Funeral procession	From the home to the cemetery*	Rarely outside of the cemetery
Funeral sermon	At graveside, rarely in church	In the cemetery chapel or graveside, rarely in church
Church bells	Often for a donation	Usually without a donation
Markers	Wood or stone according to the family's circumstances*	Temporary wood or metal (1 year), then stone
Care of the plot	The family is responsible	The family is responsible; new trend to grass surface
Term of plot occupation	Permanent	Leased for 20-35 years (seldom renewed)
Removal of markers	Extremely rare	Increasingly common
Removal of remains	Essentially unknown	Essentially never
Cremation	Extremely rare	Approx. 70% today
Death/burial records	Church and civil registry	City cemetery records

\*Different conditions apply in times of war, natural disaster, and epidemic.

***Norbert Schlüter interviewed by Roger P. Minert on 31 March 2022***

RPM: What is your position?

NS: I am the manager of the largest cemetery in Frankfurt am Main. I have been in cemetery service for 35 years.

RPM: Who may be buried in this cemetery?

NS: Anybody from anywhere in the world.



RPM: What costs are associated with burial here?

NS: From this six-page fee schedule, you can see that we have many funeral and burial options.

RPM: What is the standard lease period?

NS: We use a twenty-year lease in Frankfurt. Other cities have different terms that range up to 35 years. We inform the family when the stones are to be removed.

RPM: What about military graves and graves of those killed in air raids?

NS: Those are protected as national memorials. You have seen those sections in the eastern rear of our cemetery. And Jewish graves must never be removed.

RPM: Can the lease be extended?

NS: Yes, in the case of a self-selected grave. No, in the case of a consecutive row burial.

RPM: What are the requirements for caskets?

NS: Only wooden caskets are allowed (and we don't use vaults like you describe in the U.S.). Only interior trappings that will quickly decay (such as cotton linings and pillows) may be used. Everything needs to break down in good time.

RPM: What is the size of the grave?

NS: 1 meter wide [39 inches], 2 meters long [79 inches], and 1.7 meters [67 inches] deep.

RPM: But what about those double-wide graves with marble top plates?

NS: Those enclosures can have sides of zinc, but you will never see that.

RPM: Do you use modern devices to lower the casket into the grave?

NS: No. Here in Frankfurt we use ropes like they did in the old days. We like the tradition.

RPM: What percentage of deaths result in cremation?

NS: Approximately 70% nowadays, and the frequency is increasing due to the high costs.

RPM: What about embalming?



NS: That is not allowed, except in the case of Sinti and Roma. Those cases are perhaps once per annum.

RPM: Do you ever find bones when a plot is re-leased?

NS: On rare occasions. If we do, we dig down about another two feet and put the bones in there.

RPM: I noticed areas with grass surfaces like we use so commonly in the U.S.

NS: Grass is becoming increasingly common. We allow only flat stones there so that lawn mowers can roll over them.

RPM: Do people purchase plots and place monuments in advance?

NS: Yes, that is happening more often as well. In some cases, the double grave designed for husband and wife have a casket on one side and an urn on the other.

RPM: What happens to stones once they are removed?

NS: We send them to be ground up. But a stone is private property, so the family can claim it.



RPM: What happens if the person responsible does not care for the grave?

NS: We will send them a letter indicating that if they do not maintain the grave, we will hire a private gardening company to do so and send the bill to the family. If the family does not pay the costs, we can remove the stone—even after as little as two years.

RPM: What do you do when you notice that a grave has sunken after the casket top has disintegrated?

NS: We notify the family to have the plot leveled out. The gardening company does that.

RPM: What about records of persons whose graves have been removed?

NS: You can see here in my office the burial books from 1946 to the computer age. Then we have it all in digital records. The

books before 1946 are now held in the county archive.

RPM: Thanks so much for your time! This has been fascinating.

NS: Certainly! And I've learned a lot from you about American burial practices.

## The Value of European Cemeteries in Family History Research

Due to the fact that graves and monuments are almost always lost after 80-100 years, it is quite rare for modern researchers to find stones of their great-grandparents and earlier ancestors. Thus “walking a cemetery” is essentially non-productive in Europe. The best discoveries are usually the occurrence of an ancestral surname in the town, suggesting that there might be distant relatives who just might have genealogical data from family records. Last but not least, European cemeteries are generally clean and beautiful



locations that are always pleasant to visit.