

Busman's Holiday to the Ukraine

Prebendary Neil Richardson recently visited the Ukraine and, naturally, wanted to peek at a cemetery or two. In fact, he visited three. One was in the caves Monastery of Kyiv, which is a shrine of national importance. Then he went to a working cemetery, local to the people of Kopychintsy, a small town near Ternopil, and finally to Luchakivsky Cemetery, a famous-people-type cemetery in Lviv, and reminiscent of our very own Highgate cemetery. Here are some extracts from his journal.

Our first full day in the capital saw us being taken to Kyiv's Number One tourist attraction which is also a major place of pilgrimage, the Caves Monastery. Here we found pilgrims engaged in communing with the numinous and seeking spiritual satisfaction whilst mingling uncomfortably with camera-bedecked tourists seeking those special snaps to show back at home. Our host Krystyna had told me in advance about this place. "It is a cemetery only for priests" she had said, with a strange little smile on her lips. But I was not prepared for the impact of what we saw. It is really a very special shrine to a group of hermit monks who, from the 11th century, lived and died in the caves which are dotted all over the monastery campus.

The Kyiv Pecherska Lavra is a Ukrainian Orthodox Monastery, founded in 1051 by St. Anthony and St. Theodosius and set on a sloping bank over the river Dnipro with spectacular views of the city. The monks lived, worked, studied and then died in the caves, never coming out of their individual cells or speaking to each other, except by way of their writings. The climate in the caves was so cool and pure that when they died their bodies did not decompose but remained intact and just gradually dried out. So, still dressed in their priestly garments, they are now available to pilgrim and tourist alike to visit and seek enlightenment and inspiration.



Many cupolas excite the eye in the Ukraine



Inside the caves

The caves have an eerie light provided by the pilgrims and tourists who enter holding a candle. We were carefully instructed on how to hold the candle; palm upwards, with the candle held between second and third fingers. In this strange posture our candlelight, the only source of illumination, does not seem too penetrating. The palm offers a shade, preventing light from shining downwards too much.

The caves are packed with the monks. They lie now in glass coffins. Their bodies are covered apart from a few which have a hand visible, and this hand may be seen to hold a religious symbol. A Bishop's body is identified by his mitre. One appears to be very small. But it is not a child. One brother, trying to deny himself a little more perhaps, had buried the lower half of his body in the earth whilst still alive in his cell. But that meant his legs decomposed, thus only his torso remains. Two monks are lying side by side in one glass case – brothers physically as well as spiritually. The impact of this visit was quite profound and I did feel a sense of unease at the casual manner in which we were allowed to roam around the holy remains. We emerged from the dim caves back into the blazing sun feeling a sense of the sacred purposes and dedication of these hermits, but wondering how to respond to the shock of their steely commitment.

The journey from Kyiv to Kopychintsy, on terribly scarred road surfaces, took about 4 hours. We greeted our hosts and started to settle into our bedroom which overlooked the main street. Suddenly we heard the sound of music. I glanced out of the window, through heavy net curtains, and saw a procession. At the front were several men and women carrying banners and a group of people singing. Then came a priest, a young man, wearing a cope. He was followed by a farm truck but with a diesel engine rather than a horse drawing it. On the truck was a coffin languishing amidst richly decorated carpets and furnishings. Then came the family mourners and friends, all en route to the local cemetery. Here was an example of real life (and death) in Kopychintsy, but we had not yet even unpacked. Taken by surprise, the moment for a discreet photograph came and went without fulfilment.

We later learned that this was a Greek Catholic funeral. The first half of the procession had the air of professionals. They had clearly done this before – probably last week – and we later discovered that these were the church officials representing the community, paying their respects and leading the way. The family mourners didn't appear too affected by grief either. Perhaps this was a person whose death had been expected? The gait of the priest particularly took my attention. He was notably detached. He appeared physically and emotionally distant from the officials ahead of him and from the family behind. He even had time, and the inclination, to notice me gazing at him through our window. He walked along rather jauntily, ready for work, but not moved or involved in grief. Just as I would behave in the same circumstances, I guess?



A priest and any other funeral professional has to avoid falling into two traps. One is to be so uninvolved in grief that the mourners feel dissatisfied because they have failed to register on your emotional radar at all. The other trap is to identify so much with the mourners that one walks away from funerals feeling inappropriate levels of personal grief. Getting this right is a life-long struggle and I have found myself at either end of the spectrum from time to time. I never forget that at the funeral the priest has just one chance to get it right. Failure can lead to permanent effects for mourners, and there is no second chance.



The next day we decided to visit Kopychintsy cemetery, above. I had yet another missed photo opportunity as we arrived. An old woman, inside the cemetery fence, was waving her broom, shouting and shooing her geese out of the grounds and back into her garden from whence they had escaped! I had the camera in hand but felt uncomfortable with taking her picture.

Once inside, I immediately felt at home; there was the same combination of experiences as I find at home. Recent graves, including that of the 'friend' who passed us by in procession yesterday, mingled with well-established but now neglected monuments. Weeds everywhere disguised the rotting flowers and the broken kerbstones. There were little signs of activity such as plastic water bottles left under bushes and, by many graves, a little bench for one or two fixed to the ground and ready for a visitor to sit and contemplate life and death.

But there were some differences. I could find at least two war memorials. One, above left, belonged to the Soviet era and bears the motto "Nobody forgotten... Nothing forgotten." In a land which has seen centuries of wars perhaps the idea of forgetting may be a refreshing change? As well as the Soviet era war memorial there is a Ukrainian national war memorial, indicative of the re-emerging sense of Ukrainian identity, separate from their many colonisers – Russian (whether Soviet or pre-soviet), Hapsburgs, Romanian, Polish... the list goes on.

One of the oddities I liked in this cemetery was the practice of putting the headstones of the clergy, pictured right, facing in the opposite way to others; as it were, facing their congregation. After all, the priest faces that way in church, so here we are expressing the same idea in perpetuity!



What I found rather disconcerting was the practice of preparing headstones in advance. On the left you see a gentleman who died in 1998. Here too you see his wife – still alive, well and no doubt shopping in Kopychintsy – yet ready to take her place in the course of time. All that is needed is the addition of the date of her actual death. Are there no other possibilities?



'Keeping an eye on the congregation'

concluded over



'The Cross remains firm as the world turns and turns'.

There were several headstones with interesting illustrations on them. This one, left, shows the Cross standing firm whilst all around are signs of change. Birds prepare for migration, the wind blows seeds ready for new growth. The sense of excited movement leaves uncertainty about which direction it will eventually take. The Latin text for this is *Stat crux dum volvitur orbis*; 'The Cross remains firm as the world turns and turns'.

So we moved on to Lviv, a city of great charm which will, when polished up a bit, become a major tourist destination in the next 10 years. Luchakivsky cemetery in Lviv is very reminiscent of aspects of Highgate except that here is a proper gatehouse, public toilets and a security officer, rather than nice old ladies with hand-knitted woolly leg-warmers imperiously, and pointlessly, instructing visitors not to pose at the memorials. (love it!!!) Our guide book told us that it is like the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, but without the sight of people holding vigil at the grave of Jim Morrison!

Some of the great and the good are interred here, including Ivan Franko (right), a national hero and poet. Over 400,000 people lie buried including Ukrainian and Polish soldiers. Their memorials make a fascinating sight. We visited on a Saturday and it was crowded with visitors and tourists but with the added irritation of loud-mouthed official guides speaking in a variety of languages, none of them English.



Work goes on...

However it is also a working cemetery and I was interested to peer into a brand new deep family vault in preparation. There is a kind of 'decaying aristocracy' feeling but they are also building a huge extension and the war memorials and war graves are kept to a very high standard. Once again, I resisted a photo opportunity when I saw one woman standing close to a grave and speaking intently into her mobile phone. The idea was amusing at the time, but it wouldn't travel! I rather liked this memorial, below. It shows a mother and daughter and beneath, a sinking ship. I could only guess at what happened on this sad sea voyage.



...amidst 'decaying aristocracy'

My journey to the Ukraine was full of surprises and I really enjoyed just how different their life is to ours in Britain. The one thing we all have in common is death and how we deal with it in all its aspects.



The human grief I witnessed in these cemetery visits touched me, as funerals always do, with the simple thought that the thread of life is very fragile and it is often when it breaks that we see clearly the missed opportunities for love and friendship. But I remain to this day totally unromantic about death. It is a fact of life and in my view we make far too much fuss about it and messy cemeteries are just one unfortunate outcome of this.