

The Day We Buried My Father

A winter's day in December seemed a fitting backdrop to a funeral. We had gathered from far and near to lay to rest Stanley J. Marykuca, the son of a pioneering immigrant family from the tiny village of Dubivtsi / Dehowa in western Ukraine.

Dad was but a month short of his ninety-ninth birthday when his spirit left him in 1995. He was alone in his bed at the personal care home in Arborg on the night he died, but not at all alone in any true sense for he was ever in the hearts and minds of his children and theirs. Residing in the area and near enough to visit him regularly were his only daughter, Helen, and his step-son, Peter, and their families. These two of his children did yeomen's duty in providing for Dad's needs and wants in his waning years, and Mom's, when she was still living; this on behalf of the rest of us, removed by time and geography. We, that being my brothers Bill, John and I, owe, and know that we owe, Helen and Peter a great and unrepayable debt for their love and care for our aging parents.

We received the news of Dad's death with sadness, certainly, but no great shock as he was at an age where life for him had become very much a day-to-day thing. Of course we consulted by telephone on the arrangements for the funeral, taking into account that travel of some distance was required by a number of immediate family members, and all was put into motion, again by who else but the people "on the ground", so to speak, Helen, Peter and their families.

Those of us travelling from outside of Manitoba flew into Winnipeg a day or two before the funeral was scheduled to take place in Poplarfield, in Manitoba's Interlake. We were frequently in telephone contact with Helen, who was handling most of the funeral arrangements with the local funeral service, and Peter, whose farm yard was but a few meters from the community cemetery where Dad was to be interred. All seemed to be well, although Peter noted, from his vantage point near the cemetery, that no grave had yet been opened. Helen contacted the funeral director about this and was assured that arrangements for this were in place.

But, the very day before the funeral, no grave had yet been prepared and Helen again relayed our concerns to the funeral director, yet again to be reassured that all was in hand and that we should rest easy.

The following day, when all the family and friends gathered at the Poplarfield Community Hall for Dad's funeral service, we learned, with some greater chagrin, that there still was no grave dug in the family plot. The funeral director then apologetically advised that, yes, he had encountered some difficulty in hiring a crew for this work because he was handling several other funerals in the area at the time, but that the grave was being dug as we spoke. He suggested that we change the usual order of events at the service by inviting all present to the reception prior to driving out to the cemetery for the interment, just to ensure that the crew working on the grave would have a little extra time to finish their work. There was little we could do but agree, and so we conducted the reception as per the funeral director's request.

By this time, though, it was quite clear that we had placed too much faith in the arrangements, so we advised all in attendance that we had run into some unexpected delays. We asked them to remain in the reception area while Rocky, Helen's son, and I drove the half-mile or so to the gravesite to see for ourselves. Peter had done the same even earlier and was already there to let us know that two men had shown up to do the job, equipped only with some propane equipment to thaw the frozen ground, but no spades as the rest of the crew carrying such tools had not yet arrived. To their credit, those two crew members who were there took the initiative of walking over to Peter's place to borrow several spades and a pick axe.

However, these tools were not put to use. We recognized the futility of trying to dig a grave in frozen ground with only hand tools, knowing full well that the task could never be completed before sundown on one of the shortest days of the year. We dismissed the crew and drove back to the community hall to advise funeral guests that the interment would need to be delayed.

We did note, though, that the crane-equipped truck delivering the concrete box to be placed in the grave to receive Dad's coffin had arrived at the cemetery. Since there was no grave yet dug and the drivers had to return to Winnipeg, the funeral director had them unload the concrete container on the cemetery grounds. In due course, Dad's coffin was laid in the box, the concrete cover was secured and the funeral director then explained that he absolutely had to go to deal with another funeral in another near-by community. We couldn't see why we needed his help any further, so we didn't argue and watched him drive off in his empty hearse.

Rocky was frantically calling around the locality to find his friend who owned a backhoe and could help us with that piece of equipment. As luck would have it, the backhoe was at work at some fair distance away and it would be several

hours before he could get to our site, but we had no other options. So we sat in our vehicles parked around Dad's remains, wondering how in the world something could go so wrong. The big irony of the affair was that when Helen, with Rocky, had been making the arrangements for the funeral, Rocky had offered to have the grave dug by the very same friend who was now driving towards us in the impending dark, but the funeral director had refused that kindness because his crews could do the job.

Only immediate family remained, and even some of them who had arranged to fly home out of Winnipeg that evening had to leave Poplarfield before the interment. Peter's house, just next door to the cemetery, became an important convenience and everyone took turns going there to warm up and have a coffee.

The wait seemed interminable, but in due course the backhoe lumbered in to the cemetery to begin the excavation. The operator had to tip-toe the machine in between several rows of headstones as the Marykuca family plot was one of the first to be established in that burial ground, up against huge trees and the cemetery fence, surrounded on the other three sides by many graves. Some of the markers were, of course, hidden under the snowdrifts, and it took a great deal of caution to move the machine around as required without damaging anything.

But the excavation was completed. The night was fully upon the proceedings but a merciful moon and sparkling stars did their best to relieve a sense of eeriness. The backhoe then picked its way back to the concrete box holding Dad's coffin. Chains were fixed to the box, the backhoe lifted it and then slowly made its way back to position itself to lower its load, swinging and swaying above headstones and amid trees, guided by many helping hands, into the waiting grave. We will never know whether the coffin is correctly oriented as the swaying and swinging was more than we could track under the circumstances.

It was left to a child to pronounce a final, fitting comment on the bizarre events of that day. Among the mourners was one-year old Joseph Ouellette, Dad's youngest great-grandson. But a babe in arms, he had travelled to the funeral with his mother from Yellowknife. He was just learning to speak, but he already had in his vocabulary what was needed to express what was in the minds of everyone else in this quiet, moonlit group in the middle of a lonely cemetery, late at night, when Dad's coffin reached its final resting place at the bottom of the grave: "All done!" said Joe.

More words were, of course, spoken at the interment, some out loud and some just within our hearts. Many were farewells, but many, too, would have been apologies to Dad for managing his departure as we did, and for making it into such a spectacle that people driving by the usually dark cemetery had pause to wonder what on earth was happening there in the middle of the night.

Dad's influence and his way of doing things live on more in the events of the days following the funeral. It was necessary to settle our account with the funeral home, and this we did do only after we asked ourselves, "How would Dad have handled this?" We listened to the funeral director's profuse and earnest apologies, we said not one word about the matter except that there was really no need to further discuss it, and we settled our account in the full amount we had been quoted, less only the several hundred dollars we had had to force upon our backhoe friend. Because that is what Dad would have done, because even funeral directors can have days that turn into disasters, and because, too, I think, in retrospect, we did not have such a bad day ourselves that day. For certain, it lives on vividly in our memories --- it is highly unlikely that any of those present will ever forget it --- and, as one of the group put it, "Well, that takes care of any fears anyone may have had about being in a cemetery at midnight!"

We smile about it now, and often imagine that had he had opportunity to comment on the events of the day, Dad too would have smiled a little, jammed his hands deep into his pockets, turned his head slightly to the side, and then nod and say, sardonically, of course, "So, yeah, rely on them!", except that he would have said it in Ukrainian, "Та є, спустися на них!"

Вічная Память, Dad!