



2020

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Recommended Citation

Martini, Plinio and Hacken, Richard (2020) "The History Of A Cemetery: An Italian Swiss Cultural Essay," *Swiss American Historical Society Review*. Vol. 56 : No. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sahs_review/vol56/iss1/3

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The History of a Cemetery:

An Italian Swiss Cultural Essay¹

by *Plinio Martini*²
and
translated by *Richard Hacken*

Years ago, there was no cemetery in my village. This absence, which weighed heavily upon the people as a cruel stroke of fate, was a result of our village having earlier been part of a neighboring community, whose more favorable location—sunny and protected from the north winds—had allowed it to prosper while our community dwindled.³ After long discussions and arguments, the mountain pastures, valley meadows and forests—formerly communal property—were divided up into separate realms with precise boundaries: everything was written down on parchment and sworn to in the name of God. The Catholic Parish remained intact, however, as did the church. Somewhat later, with money that emigrants had donated from Padua and Rome, we were able to build a large and beautiful church our-

¹ This essay is about a small village at the confluence of the Maggia and Bavona Rivers in Vallemaggia, a Ticinese region stretching north-northwest of Locarno along the Maggia River. This valley supplied the majority of Italian-Swiss emigrants to California in the nineteenth century. See also Tony Quinn, “The Ticinese Swiss Immigration to California,” *Swiss American Historical Society Review*, 47, no. 1 (February 2011) 23-26, as well as his article in the current issue, “Canton Ticino and the Italian Swiss Immigration to California” (93-112), in which he also mentions Plinio Martini as a novelist.

² Plinio Martini (1923-1979), son of the village baker in Caveragno, was a teacher and a writer.

³ Though left unnamed, Caveragno is the village in this essay, as it fits Martini’s narrative descriptions autobiographically, geographically and culturally with its neighboring community, Bignasco. Martini is able to affix his own personal experiences and impressions unto the historical legend and lore of his home village.



Madonna di Monte (“*Mountain Madonna*”), burial destination that accommodated both *Bignasco* and *Caveragno* for centuries. Credit: Wikimedia Commons..

selves, one that the neighboring community and the entire valley envied. From the Bishop of Como, we were given a chaplain who read the Mass. I cannot tell you how much this privilege made us happy and our neighbors jealous. We still were unable to bury our dead in our own lands, though; we had to carry them over to the old cemetery in the neighboring community.

The procession went forward in the following manner: our houses were among the simplest on earth at that time, and most of the kitchen doors led directly onto the street. Thus, after the all-night wake, when it was time for the burial, the dead were carried straight out of the house and laid out on the communal bier. Poor as we were, we wrapped and sewed them into a sheet. Four candle holders were placed to the left and right of the bier. The slightest breeze put the candles out. That made us sad for the deceased; but it was also a way to save candles. Then came the relatives, women in tears, the men stiff and sullen, as was proper. The men and women of the village, meanwhile, had gathered in the street and made way for the brotherhood that would soon arrive. In order to lose no time, the Rosary Prayer was recited.

If the large bell was ringing, then the deceased was a man; if the medium-sized bell rang, the soul ascending to heaven was a woman. Then the brotherhood appeared, along with the priest. The priest came to a stop, gave a blessing, set the Miserere in motion, and then those in the procession made their way to the church, mumbling their prayers, first the brotherhood—the men from the village, dressed in white—then the priest in his black vestments, followed by the bier, the relatives and the women. All the while, slowly and heavily, the bell was ringing and echoing over their heads, above the rooftops and between the mountains. The people listened to the Requiem in the church and then walked through the fields along the path down to the other community, which lay a quarter of an hour distant.

By the beginning of this path all the prayers for the dead had already been spoken. To shorten the time and do a good deed as well, it had become the habit to talk about the poor soul being borne off to the grave. The good acts he had performed were praised, and as many good things as possible about him were spoken aloud. It may be that this custom had arisen on its own, but it's also possible that the priest had suggested it. I don't know; I only know that this was always the way it was done in the village.

In every village, though, there are the good and the less good; the honest, the sly and the bellicose; those who would sell the soul of their father for thirty Gulden; others who would betray our Lord for a single Gulden. Once under the hot July sun, there was a man being carried to his grave who had been a true good-for-nothing all the days of his life: he had cheated on his wife and beaten his children; he had gotten himself drunk in the pubs, swindled his relatives, argued with everybody and spread slanderous lies everywhere. Thus, it was difficult to find a few general virtues to discuss in his case. Scarcely had we gotten past the last houses of the village, and the talk was already at an end. Silently, we passed over the mown meadows. It was hot and the crickets were chirping.

Then an old woman stopped, one of those who feel compelled to always tell the truth at any cost. She took a breath while saying loudly enough that a number of people could hear her: "Not even to



Religious Procession in Val Maggia. Credit: La Regione, June 24, 2017.

the *campo rotondo* [“round field”] yet, and already we’re finished with him!” Since that time, it is said of an evil person: “He doesn’t have enough going for him to even make it to the *campo rotondo*.”

Nowadays, the dead are buried as quickly as possible. Back then, burials lasted a long time and were only finished around noon. Once the coffin had been lowered into the ground, everyone stayed to the last shovel of dirt and then the relatives of the deceased met in the community hall for a snack, where the womenfolk had set up tables. Someone started cutting into a virgin cheese round, and there were bread and wine to go along with it. That’s the way it’s been done since the advent of human memory—perhaps through distant ages when we weren’t even Christians yet—up until 30 years ago; and the custom demanded that the snacking should occur in a happy and positive atmosphere. The people were allowed, nay forced, to chatter

about things that were amusing, enjoyable, or that at least took everybody else's mind off the serious business they had just been engaged in. Death for the dead and life for the living! The wine warmed the general merriment.

After long discussions back and forth, one day our village was given permission to bury our dead next to the new church. We received the permission from the court in Canton Zürich, since our pathetic little argument was being adjudicated in that distant Protestant canton.⁴ In the Year of Our Lord 1786, on Wednesday September 13, the decision was sent down: "that the corpses of the community members of both communities can be transported freely and without hindrance through the territory of the one Parish or the other to the sanctified cemetery of whichever church they belonged to during their lifetime."⁵

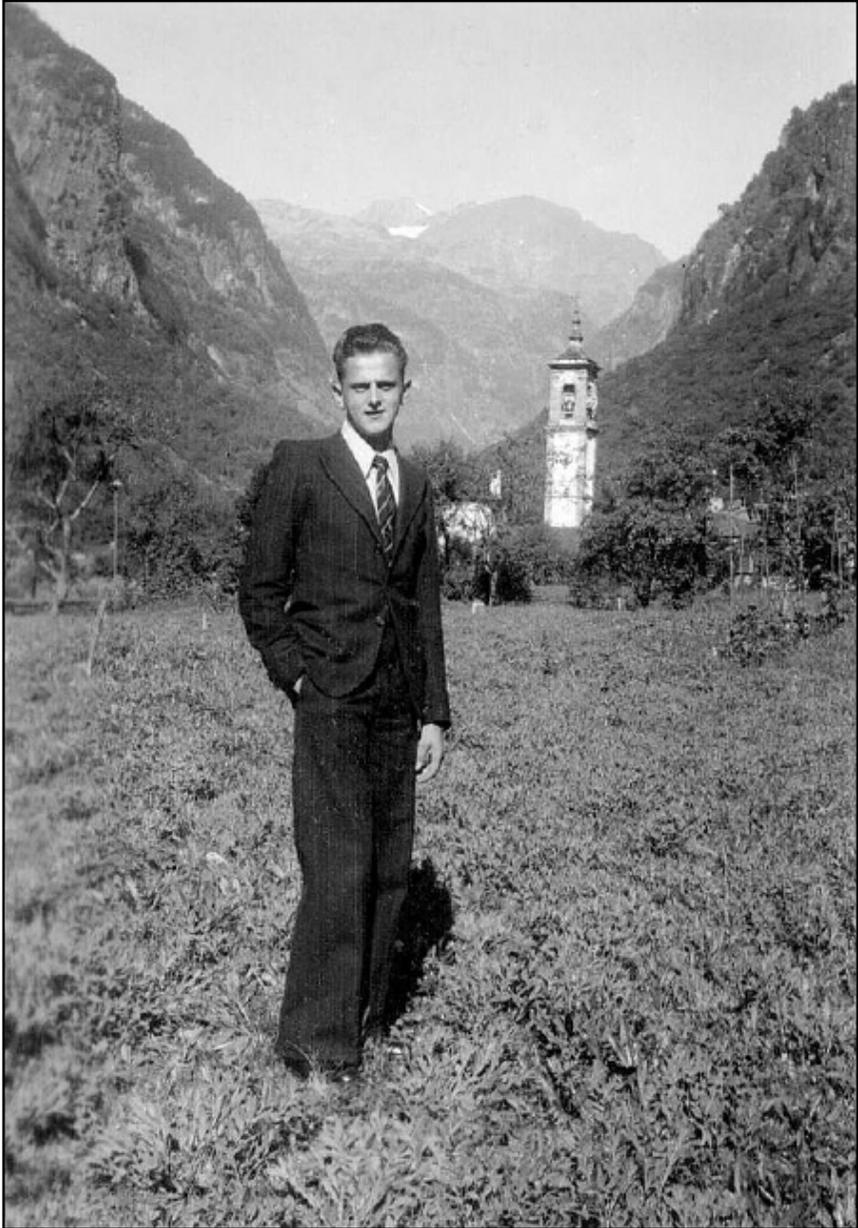
The dead were now buried between the new church and the community hall. When the children came out after school or after religion classes, it often transpired that they played hide-and-seek between the gravestones. The Government of the Three Capitals⁶ found this to be neither hygienic nor appropriate, and they requested that a new cemetery be developed outside the village proper. But we preferred our dead near the church. Our community council consisted at the time of five men, farmers who were no less devoted to the matters of the community than they were to their own. The government in power then—with an eye to coming elections—had no particular desire to anger the citizens of an entire community either. So, the question was deliberated back and forth, year after year, in letters, journeys and inspections.⁷

⁴Until 1803, Ticino (Tessin) was a territory subordinate to the thirteen cantons of the Confederation.

⁵It follows that each village had its own Parish by this time, or else the court in Zürich had the wrong impression about the unified ecclesiastical organization in Cavigno and Bignasco.

⁶During the first period of Ticino's independence, the seat of government switched between Lugano, Bellinzona, and Locarno.

⁷This period of bureaucratic inaction appears to have lasted roughly 150 years, from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century.



Plinio Martini as a young man with the church tower of Caveragno in the background. Credit: Azione. Settimanale della cooperativa Migros Ticino, April 4, 2019.

We were not forced to give in until the highway was built through the village. The pavement was designed to pass directly between the graves, so the cemetery needed to be cleared and moved. Great, deep holes were dug in order to find everyone and everything down to the last little knuckle bone. The new cemetery was laid out fifty meters downhill from the church, and a stone cross was erected at the site of the old cemetery. The whole thing was done according to all the rules of art, a thoughtful labor that was also supported with governmental funds. Admittedly, the old folks shook their heads and there were women who wept: nobody wanted to be the first one to be buried in that large and empty field. It was a stroke of luck that twins died right then. They had left no will and testament, and they had only dwelt on this earth for a few hours, just long enough to be baptized and then take their last breath. After this burial, nobody was left that could refuse to provide the dead twins with some company.

The cemetery is very simple; it distinguishes itself from others only in having fewer gravestones and ostentatious monuments. There is one private family chapel, to be accurate, just one that's so modest it doesn't come across as pushy. I learned to smoke there. That was during the summer, when almost everybody was staying up in the mountains or the high pastures, and scarcely fifty people and a few strangers were still around in the village. As a result, the cemetery lay open and deserted with high grass, crickets and wind. We boys went there—without arousing any suspicion—to play and to smoke Arturo's cigarettes. I remember that we hid them in the private chapel, behind a Statue to Faith.

Our carefree youth thus came in contact with death, a contact that was later renewed in the long, gloomy, all-night wakes that were the norm in the village whenever somebody died. Our parents would drag us there by force, and during the Rosary Prayer we stared, eyes wide open, at the stiffened corpse beneath the sheet. At the end we were given a glass of wine, and this bonus compensated for everything.

For me, as the son of a baker, there was another type of work to be done when somebody died. After the all-night wake and after the

third Mass, acceding to the wish of the heirs, we passed out the “death bread.” My father filled two or three baskets with loaves of bread and stood next to the church door, he on the one side and me on the other. We gave a nice crusty one-pound bread to everyone who was leaving. Even today this custom is followed, but instead of the bread itself a printed card good for a gratis loaf of bread at the bakery is distributed. This new system is certainly more practical and attuned to our world of television and rockets. However, the aroma of fresh-baked bread has been lost, the smell of that “death bread” that was taken home as a remembrance of a person who had emigrated to the other world. Many of our customs have come to a similar end, printed on cards. That is probably the reason we sometimes look around us like people who have lost their way.