

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 43 (2016)
Heft: 2

Artikel: The final resting place - Swiss-made
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907047>

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The final resting place – Swiss-made

Is there life after death? Who knows. One thing is for sure, there is definitely a vibrant form of posthumous tourism going on. For those who have passed away in different parts of the world, the great journey home sometimes begins with a detour to Switzerland.



MARC LETTAU

Firstly, to brush up on your Helvetian vocabulary, let me remind you that the word for ‘remembrance’ in the Romansh dialect of Puter is ‘Algordanza’. Algordanza is also the name of a company in Domat-Ems in the canton of Grisons, which recently delivered its 6,000th diamond. But these diamonds do not come from the depths of the Grisons mountains. They are created in production halls

where small quantities of graphite are exposed to high temperatures and incredible pressure in powerful machinery. This process transforms graphite into diamonds.

The most important point is that the graphite from which the light blue diamonds are made is extracted from the ashes of the deceased in a complex procedure. The high-tech company therefore works at the delicate juncture between letting go and holding

on and offers its customers an immortal product – precious stones for people who not only want to keep their deceased loved ones in their hearts but also to wear them as jewellery around their necks. Rinaldo Willy, who founded the company, has adopted the ethos of gemstone rather than gravestone. His “commemorative diamonds” are ideal for modern-minded people who no longer wish to be tied to one place.

A special kind of natural burial: in the stylish little wooden case, the urn containing the ashes of the deceased is flown by helicopter to a glacier where the ashes are scattered over the eternal ice.

Photo: Die Letzte Ruhe

Combating mortality with a petrification process – is that ethically acceptable? Algordanza spokesperson Celine Lenz believes that is an issue for family members. The company itself does not pass judgement. It simply wants to provide a service for “people with a distinctive culture of remembrance” and to “supply them with something personal that sparkles”. Questions about dignity during the production process are nevertheless justified. Strict rules apply: “Nobody touches the ashes. No-one touches the diamonds with their bare hands. That privilege is reserved for family members.”

The transformation into a diamond should be regarded as an alternative to other forms of burial, explains Lenz. This perspective is fitting, as being turned into a diamond is the most expensive option for ordinary mortals: Algordanza charges over 20,000 Swiss francs for a polished, 1-carat commemorative diamond. 0.5-carat versions are ordered more frequently. These are available for under 9,000 Swiss francs, and the order books are full. Ashes of the deceased who have started their great journey home often arrive from Germany and Japan, in particular. Over 90 % of those who find their way into the pure, clear crystal lattice of a rhinestone in Grisons previously lived abroad. The company has long had subsidiaries in over 20 countries. But despite the boom, turning ashes into diamonds is a niche service in the Swiss funeral services sector.

A grave out in the open

Switzerland has become the preferred destination in burial tourism. This is the view of the businessman Beat Rölli, who has operated as a “specialist in natural burials” for a decade with his company Die letzte Ruhe. By natural burial he means scattering the ashes of the deceased beyond the

narrow confines of the cemetery walls in the open natural environment. For people who believe their eternal hunting ground should be the alpine region with its natural landscapes, Rölli offers burials in mountain meadows, mountain streams, waterfalls, rocks and glaciers. Those who feel drawn to the skies can also book a burial flight. Rölli arranges for an aeroplane, helicopter or air balloon to take off, and the ashes are thrown to the winds at altitude.

There is great demand for natural burials, but the burial is just one aspect of departure from the earthly life, according to Daniel Reichlin, who is responsible for forward planning matters at Rölli’s company, in other words, all the agreements that people enter into while still alive in relation to their demise. In Reichlin’s opinion, all the discussions beforehand and the support of those left behind are at least as important as the fundamental decision to choose nature a final resting place in the open.

When Rölli’s telephone rings, the callers are often from abroad. The main reason for their desire to travel to Switzerland is not just related to the alternative undertaker’s services. Switzerland’s liberal laws are also a key factor. The Swiss confederation curtailed the influence of the churches over the burial system in 1874. Supervision of the cemeteries was transferred to the secular authorities. However, the fact that cemetery funerals and interment are not mandatory in Switzerland – in contrast to many other countries – also plays a major role. Although interment of the body is only permitted at cemeteries in Switzerland, too, family members are free to decide what they wish to do with the ashes of cremated relatives. They can opt for a cemetery. But they can also bury the urn in their own gardens, keep it on the bookcase or use the ashes to nurture a newly planted apple tree.



This was once a person: A Swiss company makes diamonds from the ashes of the deceased.

Photo: Algordanza

Most people are cremated

The legal framework not only boosts ‘burial tourism’ but is also primarily driving the rapid change in burial culture in Switzerland. Whereas the village carpenter making a coffin, the funeral procession making its way through the village and strong men lowering the coffin into the grave were a common sight a generation ago, a very different picture has emerged today: 60,000 to 65,000 people die in Switzerland each year, and well over 80 % of them are cremated. This trend is also on the up. Philipp Messer, President of the Swiss Association of Funeral Services (SVB), underlines that the continual increase in cremations is also changing the culture of departing life. The traditional, individual grave in a row is on the way out. Increasingly fewer people are insisting on an individual plot. Today, over a third of those buried in a cemetery opt for a communal grave. Very often, the ashes are scattered “outside the cemetery”, explains Messer.

Resting places beneath trees

The most commonly selected alternative to conventional burial in Switzerland is being laid to rest in the open, often in a specially designated woodland. Ueli Sauter, who lost a friend of many years in 1993 and then decided to plant a tree and to put his friend’s ashes into the roots, is a pioneer of woodland burials. Following on from this occasion, Sauter looked for opportunities for burial in woodlands and subsequently set up an organisation called Friedwald. Friedwald has now contractually secured 70 woodland plots where it offers stately trees declared ideal and sturdy by foresters beforehand. Those who choose a Friedwald tree can also bury the ashes of several loved ones there. It is kept as woodland and does not become a park. There are no name



plates for the deceased on the trees, no benches identifying it as a place of rest and it is not fenced in. If storms and bad weather leave a woodland resting place looking unkempt, then that is seen as the way of things and part of nature.

The concept of the woodland cemetery has firmly established itself. Sauter reveals that woodland owners now even approach him offering plots of land. Many municipal cemetery authorities have long since also responded to this trend by planting trees in sections of their cemeteries at the foot of which urns can be buried.

SVB President Philipp Messer said that when reflecting upon the form of burial, the primary consideration should be for what it represents. He often sees "too much modesty": Many elderly people do not wish to become a burden to their relatives or for someone to have to tend the grave for many years. They insist on a "very simple affair". Pomp is very much passé. But such great restraint is also sometimes "a naive approach". "It is inconceivable to most people that nothing takes place at the grave," remarks Messer. Somebody's passing always requires a structure and some words: "A fu-

neral without words can be a very oppressive occasion." The needs of the living should not be discarded: "Anyone who says they don't need anything or anyone at their funeral is excluding all those who would like to pay their respects in their own way."

The trend towards greater simplicity is nevertheless also explained by demographic factors. People are living much longer and are often also ill for longer, sometimes suffering from dementia. Distance from the living begins while they are still alive. Such circumstances often make death seem like a relief.

Disappearing without a trace

The urn placed on the bookshelf where it can be seen every day. The ashes scattered with no name in the beech grove. The most expensive option as a diamond on a small gold chain. The loved one scattered to the winds on a mountain peak. The striking conclusion is that the change in burial culture in Switzerland oscillates between the need for permanent, eternal remembrance and the desire to gently disappear without a trace. Daniel Reichlin, who works for Letzte

Releasing ashes in a stream: This is also possible in Switzerland.

Photo: Die letzte Ruhe

Ruhe, has also noticed these conflicting interests. The way in which people think has changed completely, and he points to a growing sense of equanimity. Lots of people say: "Either I'll be remembered or I'll be forgotten." Theologians nevertheless object that the change does not result in a better way of dealing with death and grief. The trend towards departure without a trace is robbing those left behind of the place they need to grieve. It certainly does not alleviate the grief. And the opposite trend towards the eternal memorial is a way of resisting the definitive nature of death.

What is more, the technology deployed to produce diamonds from the ashes of the deceased can now also be used by those who are very much alive and kicking. The Swiss company Augenstern also synthesises diamonds from a handful of incinerated hairs of living persons. But business with the living is far less brisk than with the deceased. It is as though the living suspect that the eternal affection expressed through man-made diamonds may be somewhat more fragile than the diamond itself.

www.algordanza.com
www.die-letzte-ruhe.ch
www.friedwald.ch