

# of the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome

## NEWSLETTER



### The spectacular tomb of Maria Obolenskaya restored

*As you ascend the diagonal path through Zone 1, you can't avoid seeing the monument to Maria Obolenskaya. A disconsolate girl is seated in front of a pedimented monument, with its doors slightly ajar. It is carved entirely from different varieties of Carrara marble, except for the door studs of brass. Her statue was in particularly bad condition due to lichen, algae and fungal attack and, in less exposed areas, the presence of a black crust caused by atmospheric pollution. The inferior quality of this block of marble had contributed to its decay.*



Photo: G. Malorgio

Condition of the sculpture before restoration

*The whole tomb has now been well restored by Gianfranco Malorgio and Sara Toscani of Sinope Conservation, with funding from the Russian Centre for Science and Culture in Rome. The Centre has also funded maintenance work on six other Russian tombs, including that of the painter Karl Bruloff. We are very grateful to them and to Natalia Primakova, former Cultural Attaché at the Russian Embassy to Italy, who enthusiastically initiated the search for funding and who wrote the following note:*

Of the Russian burials in the Non-Catholic Cemetery, one is striking for its extraordinary "beauty, poetry and intimacy", as the Russian painter Ilya Repin wrote. It is the tomb of Princess Maria Obolenskaya (St. Petersburg, 1 July 1854 – Rome, 26 March 1873). She was the daughter of the governor of Moscow, Aleksey Obolensky, and Zoya Obolenskaya (née Sumarokova).

The Obolensky family was a fitting example of Tolstoy's celebrated passage in *Anna Karenina*: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." In the 1860s Zoya Obolenskaya left for Italy "to improve the health" of her children Ekaterina, Sergey, Maria, Aleksey and Zoya. Later, however, she was captivated by the ideas of Mikhail Bakunin who was

in Italy in the same period, and she started to finance activities by the anarchists. At the time such behaviour was severely punished. Zoya lost her financial support and inheritance rights, and her children were taken back to Russia by their father. Some of them later visited their mother who remained in Europe. On one of these trips to Rome Ekaterina, the eldest daughter, fell ill with smallpox and Maria, who had recently recovered from scarlet fever and was caring for her sister, was vaccinated against it. This was the cause of her unexpected death. Other sources, however, say she died from tuberculosis.

In Rome at that time was Mark Antokolsky, already a famous sculptor and a friend of the Obolenskaya sisters. Originally from an observant Jewish family in Vilnius, in 1870, aged 27, he was



Photo: N. Stanby Price

The Obolenskaya tomb cleaned



Photo: S. Toscani

Gianfranco Malorgio at work

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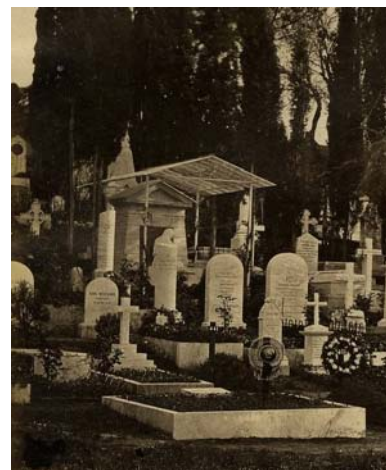
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given the title “Academic”. In 1878 his works were exhibited in the Universal Exhibition in Paris and he was awarded the Legion of Honour. His masterpieces were *Ivan the Terrible*, *Nestor the Chronicler*, *Jaroslav the Wise*, *Ermak*, and *The death of Socrates*. In 1876 he designed the tomb for Maria Obolenskaya, his only major work in Italy.

In 1878 Sergey, another son of Zoya’s, died aged 27. He had gone to Egypt to cure his pneumonia. The reverse of the tomb carries an inscription in gold leaf: “To my dear children Marusya 1873 and Serezha 1878 from their mother.”

Natalia Primakova

The editor adds: two old photos show a lightweight roof erected over the Obolenskaya tomb. The other identifiable tombs date the photo reproduced here to 1879 and the other one to mid-1882. So the roof must have remained in place for several years, protecting Antokolsky’s monument from the weather. This is our only known case of a protective shelter over a new sculpture.

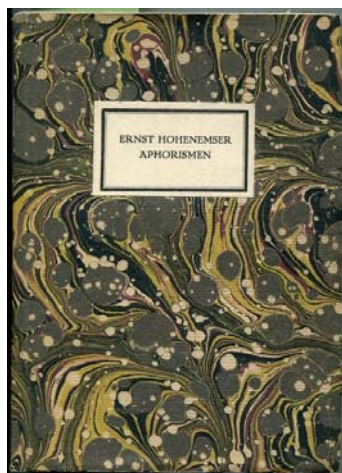


Unknown photographer, *The Protestant cemetery, Rome*, c.1879 (detail; private collection)

## WHO THEY WERE

### Ernst Hohenemser – a German writer and aphorist

Born into a Jewish banking family at Mannheim on 1 June 1870, Ernst Hohenemser abandoned his legal studies and graduated in 1899 at Heidelberg in art history. Probably he was baptised before arriving around 1900 in Rome where his cousin Ida lived with her aunt Emma Hohenemser, a noted teacher and wife of the Senator Marchese Gonzaga. In 1907 he published at his own expense his first small book of aphorisms (*Aphorismen als manuskript gedruckt*), which was reprinted six years later. A copy with a dedication is in the Florence estate of the Jewish historian Roberto Davidsohn. In 1914 he joined the well-known Impressionist painter Max Slevogt and three friends at the port of Brindisi to travel together to Egypt, where Ernst took a number of travel photographs.



The German edition (1918) of *Aphorismen*

the small volume *Wie ein Smaragd in schönem Golde steht. Sonette an Helly* (As an emerald stands out against gleaming gold. Sonnets to Helly). Paul Cassirer published in 1921 Ernst’s translation of Ovid’s *The Art of Love* with lithographs by Max Slevogt. The correspondence with his former travel companions on this publishing project is preserved in a German archive.

Their son Rudolf was born in 1920 at Brunswick where Helly was working in theatre management. The boy went to the German school in Rome when his parents moved there in 1923. Both were translators but Helly supported the family as correspondent for German newspapers. They took part in the cultural life of the city and in lectures at the Istituto Italiano di Studi Germanici founded in 1932. But trouble soon came to the family, who were living in Palazzo Primoli (today the Museo Napoleonico) in Via Zanardelli 1. In 1935 Helly was expelled from the Association of Writers for being the wife of a ‘non-Aryan’. Her fee agreements were cancelled and the books she had translated were banned. Three years later, Ernst was forced to change his name, as a bitter letter he wrote to the Embassy shows: “At the request of the responsible authority, the German Embassy in Rome, I add to the name that I received at my Christian baptism the honorific name Israel.” The letter concludes on the back: “Another acquaintance has confirmed the conferral of the name of Israel in the following manner: ‘To the German Embassy in Rome. I communicate with this letter that the name Israel was conferred on me by Hitler.’”

Fascist Italy allowed him still to work. In 1934 he published his *Memorie tedesche a Roma*, produced by the National Fascist Federation of Professionals and Artists in their ‘Collana di Ricordi Stranieri a Roma’. It contains three photos of the Cemetery. He translated travel guides and also *Economia fascista* by G. Tassinari. In 1938 a German edition of his memoirs was published in Naples (*Deutsche Erinnerungen in Rom*).

He died in time to avoid being caught up in the racial laws such as the decree of 7 September 1938 which gave Jewish immigrants who had arrived before 1 January 1919 six months to leave the country. Fortunately, Roman bureaucracy is slow. His death on 17.2.1940 of heart disease probably saved him from internment or deportation. The Pastor Erich Dahlgrün held the funeral and his ashes were kept for several years at Campo Verano. In 1945 his wife Helly decided to bury them in the Cemetery (Zone 1.15.19).

Translations of Hohenemser’s aphorisms appeared even after the war: a German press printed another small volume of 100 aphorisms in 1961. Today the author is almost unknown but some of his ‘pearls of wisdom’ can be found in aphorism collections on the internet, such as “Fantasy is the capacity to think in images”, “One who loves sees everything in relation to the loved one”, and “Knowledge of oneself is the first step towards hypocrisy”.

Contributed by Dorothee Hock, Casa di Goethe, Rome



Postcard (1919) from Max Slevogt to Ernst Hohenemser (Landesbibliothekszentrum Rheinland-Pfalz)

After war broke out Ernst moved to Berlin. In 1918 the publisher Walther C.F. Hirth produced 1000 copies of his *Aphorismen*: 1,630 aphorisms divided into chapters, on human psychology, culture, morals, God, liberty and immortality. The ones about art were also published in the prestigious review *Kunst und Künstler: illustrierte Monatsschrift* but Hohenemser never became a celebrity. He married the brilliant art historian and theatre director Helly Steglich (b. 1892) to whom he dedicated, under the pseudonym Alexander Frauentraut,

## John Rangeley – inventor, engineer, entrepreneur

John Rangeley's name is recorded on one of the wall plaques above Ossuary 1 (Zone 2). He died in Rome in December 1842, while on a mission to present his invention for railways to Pope Gregory XVI. On Saturday 18 February 1843, an English newspaper, the *Leeds Intelligencer*, reported his death:

On the 26th December last, at Rome, John Rangeley, Esq. formerly of this town, and Oakwell Hall, Birstall. Mr. Rangeley had visited Rome for the purpose of laying before His Holiness the Pope, the drawings and models of a new plan for the construction of railways, for which a patent had been obtained prior to departure. So pleased was His Holiness with the principle, that he gave immediate instructions for a short experimental line to be put down, and appointed him engineer to superintend the construction; subsequently to which he was seized with apoplexy, and almost instantly expired.



Paul Delaroche, *Pope Gregory XVI*, c.1844

Whatever the reliability of this report, nothing came of the initiative. Pope Gregory XVI is always portrayed as having opposed technical innovations such as railways and gas lighting. In fact, in 1840 he had commissioned a feasibility study for a railway in the Papal States. On 3 March of that year, in England, Rangeley filed Patent No. 8410 for *Railways, Propelling Carriages*. Technical drawings show train carriages, details of the mechanics, and specifications for propelling the trains, essentially by applying motive power to rotating cogs mounted in the track. When racks mounted on the train's underside engaged with them, the train would be propelled forward. Perhaps the Pope was mesmerized by his ideas:

The carriage may be varied in size, form and ornament, as fancy may dictate, carriages built upon running rails, running smoothly without springs, closed coaches for first-class passengers, open carriages

for second-class passengers, luggage boxes, walls encasing lower wheels to protect from gravel, a train of wheels revolving on axles...

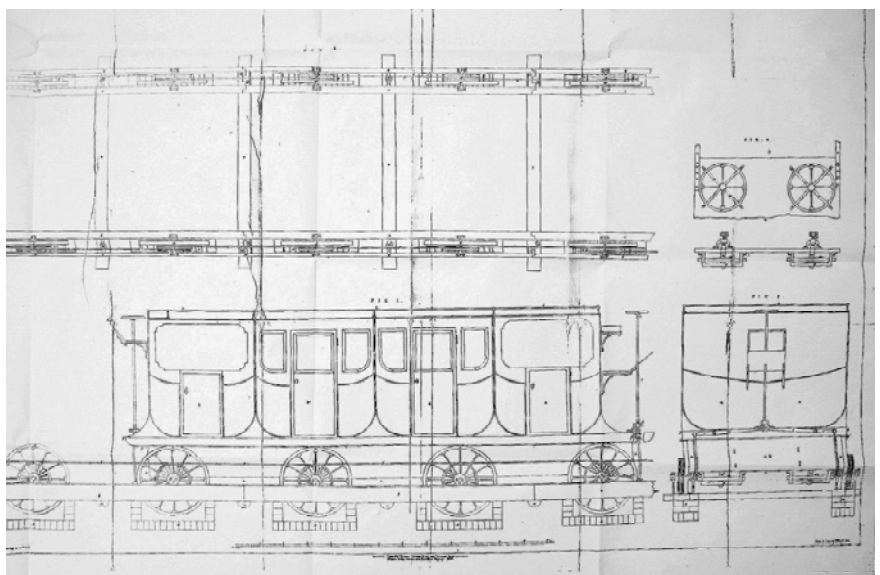
John Rangeley arrived in Rome after his release from a London debtor's prison and a sentence served in 1841-42 for bankruptcy debts. Aged 61, rather than retire into anonymity with his wife in London, he chose to seek an audience with the Pope, perhaps a last attempt to gain recognition for his invention and to escape the stigma of being listed as an 'insolvent debtor' (*The Jurist* 1842).

His name crops up in numerous references in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in engineering patents, cast iron manufacturing, textile trading, legal records, scientific publications, and family archives. One of five children, he was born in the West Riding of Yorkshire around 1781 into a world of trade centred on the flourishing woollen industry. His father, John, was a Merchant & Master Cloth Dresser. The younger John and his older brother, James, worked in the family business of John Rangeley & Sons, Birkenshaw. From 1803 to 1811 he co-owned a cotton mill for spinning cotton and manufacturing calico, until his bankruptcy in 1811 followed by seven years of legal proceedings.

In June 1811, John was living with his wife Sarah, whom he had married 1799, and their five children in an Elizabethan manor house, Oakwell Hall, Birstall in West Yorkshire (the house features as 'Fieldhead' in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Shirley*). He filed his first patent on 3 March 1813, for *Hydrostatic Engines and Centrifugal Pumps*, and a second (1816) for a *Hydro pneumatic Engine*. Another chapter in John Rangeley's life began in 1818 when he moved to Stone, Staffordshire, as joint-owner with his brother-in-law, William Dixon, of an iron foundry and pump-manufacturing enterprise. Among the products of Messrs. Rangeley & Dixon were the cast-iron mile-posts which still stand along the Trent & Mersey Canal, bearing their initials *R&D.1819*.

Rangeley's entrepreneurial endeavours caught the spirit of the changing industrial age through which he lived. The challenges of transport and machines were his inspiration. His epitaph should have included the words of Mrs Gaskell in her *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1867): "West Riding men are sleuth-hounds in pursuit of money."

*Contributed by Sue Rangeley and Jane Rangeley, descendants of John's brother, James Rangeley.*



J. Rangeley, Patent No. 8410 for carriages propelled by rotating cogs on a rail-line (detail)



## Trees and plants in the garden: a botanist investigates (no. 4): the acanthus

The common Acanthus (*Acanthus mollis* L.) is a perennial, herbaceous angiosperm which can live for many years, even in a cold climate. It looks exotic and tropical, its original home is in the Mediterranean and north Africa, but it can survive long periods of cold. Its aesthetic appeal makes it an ornamental plant widely used for flowerbeds, parks and gardens – and cemeteries. Both the common acanthus and its thorny variety (*Acanthus spinosus* L.) also appealed to the ancient Greeks and Romans as a design element for tapestries, dress and, best known perhaps, for the capitals of columns, the Greek Corinthian and the Roman Composite styles. Virgil imagined the beautiful Helen of Troy dressed in a white *peplum* (tunic) with its hems decorated with beech and acanthus leaves. Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History*, recommended the elegant common Acanthus for adorning gardens.

The common Acanthus is one of about twenty species of the *Acanthus* genus, its leaves a shiny, dark green colour with well-defined lobes. Its flowers are hermaphroditic (both male and female) and are pollinated by bees. They usually appear

in summer, forming an inflorescence, or flower spike, 30-40 cms high. Because of its ability to grow, apparently spontaneously, from bare ground, it has been seen as a symbol of virginity; in Catholic tradition it can symbolise the Resurrection. It is therefore commonly found in cemeteries, including our own, notably on graves in Zone 2. In the past, the niche in which Shelley's grave lies was full of the plant (see photo). The British diplomat Rennell Rodd and other visitors in the 1890s described the poet's marble slab embedded in acanthus foliage.

Giuliano Russini and Nicholas Stanley-Price



Unknown photographer, *The grave of Shelley*, 1890s



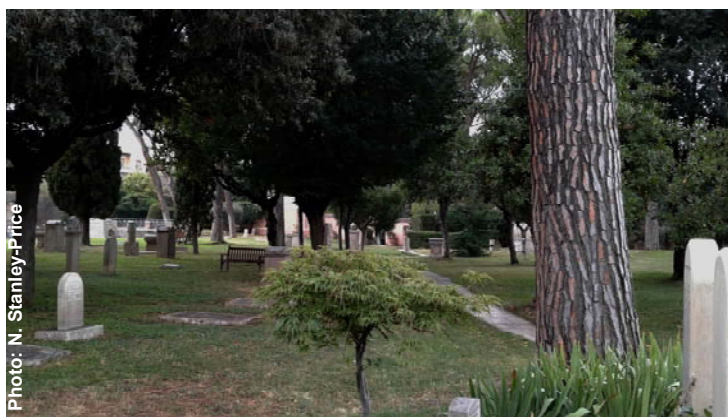
An ancient Corinthian capital as a grave monument (Zone V.10.2)



Monument to the German writer, Malwida von Meysenbug (Zone 1.14.18)

## Looking after the trees

In the past few months Il Trattore, the gardening co-operative, and Alberando ("the tree-climbers") have pruned many trees, following the advice of tree consultant Gian Pietro Cantiani. They treated the tall pines in the Old and New Cemeteries (see *Newsletter* 44), and a number of laurel trees including those near Keats's grave where the adjacent gravestones have also been cleaned. Near the Aurelian city-wall, we have removed a laurel tree whose roots had destabilised the grave of Gisela Richter (1882-1972; Zone 1.16.2), the historian of classical Greek art.



Area of Keats's grave before the recent work

### HOW TO BECOME A FRIEND

This Newsletter is made possible by the contributions of the Friends of the Cemetery.

The Friends also help fund the care of the trees in the cemetery and the restoration of tombs. Please can you help us by becoming a Friend? You can find a membership form at:

[www.cemeteryrome.it](http://www.cemeteryrome.it)

### THE NON-CATHOLIC CEMETERY IN ROME

via Caio Cestio, 6, 00153, Roma

Director: Amanda Thursfield

#### OPENING HOURS

Monday to Saturday 9:00am - 5:00pm  
(last entrance 4.30pm)

Sunday & Public Holidays: 9:00am - 1.00pm  
(last entrance 12.30pm)

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### NEWSLETTER

of the Friends of the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome

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