

of the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome

NEWSLETTER



Johan Hugo Beck-Friis (1890-1969) (photo courtesy of the Swedish Embassy, Rome)

The guidebook to the Cemetery

The guidebook to the Cemetery, entitled *Il Cimitero Acattolico di Roma*, enjoys good sales in the Visitors' Centre. It consists of an illustrated historical account of the Cemetery and a 'General Map of the Protestant Cemetery with an alphabetical list of a number of eminent and famous persons interred there'. Last year we produced an updated map with an extended list of a greater number of prominent people whose graves might be of interest to visitors (see *Newsletter* no. 5).

We have recently reprinted the Italian and German editions of the guidebook which are now on sale for €7.00. These and the English version (also €7.00) include a copy of the new list of graves and map.

You may wonder why the Cemetery continues to reprint a guidebook that is now more than fifty years old. A short answer would be that, as a brief history of the Cemetery and as a guide to one hundred or so of the more interesting graves, it still serves its purpose admirably. A longer answer would include the following points: that it has in fact had several additions made to the text and illustrations since its first edition in 1956; that the texts of the Swedish, English, Italian and German editions are not identical in content; and that the Cemetery is hoping to produce a

new guidebook if the necessary funds can be raised. We appeal to Friends to consider supporting this initiative.

We owe the continuing success of the present guidebook to the enthusiasm and historical researches of its author, Johan Beck-Friis. At the time of writing it, he was Ambassador of Sweden to Italy and (from 1951) chairman of the General Committee of Ambassadors responsible for the Cemetery. Rome was his final posting in a long diplomatic career that saw him serving in many European capitals and at home in Stockholm, but also in Washington, D.C. and in Shanghai. He retired in 1956, the same year in which his guidebook to the Cemetery was published in Sweden simultaneously in the four languages. As its author, he put at the disposal of the Cemetery all copies of the printed publication. The proceeds from its sale were to go towards maintenance of "The Cemetery of Artists and Poets", as he described it. There is no stronger reflection of his devotion to the Cemetery than in the closing words of the text that he wrote for the guidebook (see "How others see the Cemetery" in this *Newsletter*).

Deservedly, Johan Beck-Friis was acknowledged after his death in 1969 as a "Beneficente" (benefactor) of the Cemetery and was duly honoured with the erection of the memorial that one can see today a short distance through the arch leading to the *Parte Antica*.

The guidebook that he prepared has itself become a monument of a kind, having been reprinted numerous times in the four languages. But, as monuments deserve, it has earned a certain legal status too. According to the Cemetery's Regulations, among the tombs to be recognised as permanent and not subject to expiry, the first category consists of "all the tombs named in the Guidebook to the Cemetery published in 1956, and all the tombs in the *Parte Antica* of the Cemetery".

So, even though our new map showing some 170 graves of interest is a welcome addition to the information provided to our visitors, the previous list of graves compiled by Johan Beck-Friis has now acquired a status that will ensure its continuing to be influential into the future.

New book about the Cemetery and the Pyramid

Chiara Di Meo. *La piramide di Caio Cestio e il cimitero acattolico del Testaccio*. Palombi editori, Roma (2008). Paperback, 224 pages. ISBN 978-88-6060-136-0. €15.00

(From the publisher's web site, translated from Italian. The book is on sale in the Visitors' Centre).

The cemetery of Testaccio was the first modern cemetery in Rome, in the sense of an area of ground outside the city with individual burials. Until 1765 no indications of tombstones were apparent and so for a long time the area maintained its appearance of open country. This place embodied the topos of the eighteenth-century garden, "a romantic landscape", the goal of travellers thanks to the fame given it by tourist guides who described it and by 19th century *vedutisti* who illustrated it.

The first burials at Testaccio were of English Protestants and of the upper class, which explains the proximity of the cemetery to the Pyramid of Caius Cestius. The character of the area surrounding the Pyramid was congenial to the mentality of northerners, Protestants who had particular cultural preferences: this burial ground resembled the foreigners' own cemeteries, only that in place of a chapel there was the Pyramid. Testaccio long remained a distant appendix to the life of the city, which for the small Protestant community made it an attractive district because it was quiet and sheltered even though in the heart of Catholicism. In other respects, anarchy prevailed with regard to the burial of non-Catholics in Rome, there being no precise regulations in this respect: the only certain prescription was that the "heretics" should not be buried in consecrated ground. The Testaccio cemetery is notable for the Nordic rite of burial in the ground, for its dense vegetation and for the sober taste with which the tombs are laid out.

The volume is rich with illustrations of the *vedutisti* and engravers that reflect the historical evolution of the Pyramid.

WHO THEY WERE...

The Fersen family of Imperial Russia

Buried in the *Zona Terza* (riquadro 3, at the end of row 3) of the Cemetery is a family that owed its rescue from the Russian Revolution to the generosity of the Dowager Empress Marie Feodorovna, born Princess Dagmar of Denmark and later to be the mother of Tsar Nicholas II.

As 1918 passed and 1919 began, hundreds of Russian aristocrats made their way, often with terrifying escapes, to their familiar resort at Yalta on the Crimea peninsula. The Dowager Empress was living in the imperial palace "Livadia," with many of her relatives and court members in neighbouring villas. The Fersen family had rented a small villa nearby at Coreiz. But, as the Revolution raged on, the situation became ever more perilous. It happened that Empress Marie's sister Alexandra was the mother of the British King George V. He, troubled perhaps by not having helped the Tsar to escape from Russia, sent the *HMS Marlborough* to Yalta to pick up his aunt, whom the family called "Minnie." She, however, refused to sail away without all those who wished to leave with her. In the end, the *Marlborough* was packed with as many as 6000 passengers - aristocrats, their servants, household tutors, physicians, and close friends - who would never see Russia again.

From Yalta the *Marlborough* sailed in April 1919 to Malta, and from there the Russian émigrés scattered to France, England, and Italy. The Fersens went first to England, but soon left for Italy, which they knew from earlier holiday trips. By 1920 they had settled at Rome in the Villa Sforza Cesarini, right behind the Acqua Paola fountain on the Janiculum. Grand Duke Nicholas Romanov, formerly commander of the Russian army and a cousin of the murdered Tsar, was the first from the *Marlborough* to lease the Sforza Cesarini and, although he himself moved on to France, the Russian families who had arrived with him took up long-term residence there and soon welcomed paying guests. Thus began the Pensione Fersen, which remained in this location from 1921 until the mid-1930s.

Eight persons are named on the Fersen gravestones in the Cemetery: Count Nicholas Fersen (1858-1921), who escaped from Russia after his family had left; his wife Sofia, born Sofia Dolgorukaya (1870-1957); and their four children Paul (1894-1943), Alexander (1895-1934), Elizabeth (called Lili, 1899-1938), and Olga (1904-1998). Also named are Paul's wife Baroness Marie Stael von Holstein (1893-1941) and Countess Sofia's sister Varvåra Dolgorukaya (1885-1980), the wife of Prince Kolia Kotchubey. Their Russian years live vividly in Varvåra's memoirs, *I Quaderni: Russia 1885-1919* (translated from the original English text by A. D'Agostino Schanzer, Milan 1976).

The Fersen family belonged to Baltic nobility, with distant relatives in Sweden and even more distant links to Scotland. Their estate "Olustverre," now an agricultural school, is located in Estonia.

The Dolgoruky princesses Sofia and Varvåra, however, came from a famous house closely associated with the Tsars. Their father, as grand chamberlain and member of the Council of State, enjoyed many court privileges, and their schedule at St. Petersburg was filled with balls, imperial receptions, and religious ceremonies. As lady-in-waiting to Empress Alexandra, Varvåra had

many duties at court. Among the events of her first social season (1902-03), she describes an especially stunning ball at the Winter Palace, to which everyone came wearing ancient Russian costumes made of elaborate brocades, velvets and furs. On the heads, the women wore traditional high crowns (called *kokoshniki*), gilded and set with jewels. Tsar Nicholas II was inspired to host this ball by his interest in Russian history and in particular his admiration for his ancestor Tsar Nicholas the Mild. For weeks St. Petersburg buzzed with preparations - costumes were copied from 17th-century models by the famous dressmaker Lamánova and old dances taught by ballet master Aistoff. Surviving photographs attest to the resulting splendour. Varvåra greatly admired the marvellous beauty of her sister Countess Sofia Fersen.

That February 1903 gala was, in fact, the last ball to be held at the Winter Palace. After the birth in 1904 of Alexis, the haemophilic heir to the throne, the imperial family withdrew more and more to the seclusion of their vast estate at Tsarkoe Selo. And by the time of the Revolution, the famous imperial ball would be only a glittering memory of a vanished world.

Katherine A. Geffcken

Atlanta, GA, USA (a Friend of the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome)

Our thanks to Christine Huemer for helping with the submission of this article.



Countess Sofia Fersen at the Imperial Ball, St. Petersburg, February 1903

American guidebook project underway

In 2007, the Rome Chapter of the Colonial Dames of America embarked upon an ambitious project: to create a guidebook including biographical information about the approximately 1,000 Americans buried in the Non-Catholic Cemetery. Collaborating with Christine Huemer, the founding editor of this Newsletter, they set to work on what they hope will serve as a research tool for historians and genealogists, as well as an informative book for visitors.

The Colonial Dames of America was founded in New York in 1890 with the purpose of American historic preservation. The Rome chapter was organized in 1930, and several early members are buried in the cemetery. Friends who are willing to research and write entries for the guidebook are invited to contact CDA chapter president Sharri Whiting, at sawhiting@earthlink.net or Christina Huemer at huemer@tiscali.it.

Reception at the Norwegian Embassy

At the invitation of the Ambassador, H.E. Mr Einar M. Bull, the Norwegian Embassy kindly hosted a Christmas party for those associated with managing the Cemetery. As President for the current year, Mr Bull invited the staff, volunteers and members of the Advisory Committee to an evening reception on December 18. We are grateful to the Embassy for proposing this pleasant event and for all its support for the Cemetery's activities.

Donations from the Embassies

The Russian Embassy has been making a generous annual donation for the restoration of individual tombs and of its National Tombs. On 10 February it held in the Cemetery the annual ceremony in honour of the Russian Day for Diplomats, in the presence of the Ambassador, H.H. Mr Alexey Meshkov. The German Embassy has also been generous in meeting the costs of restoring the tombs of German nationals. Future Newsletters will report on the restoration of tombs of particular interest.

Needless to say, these donations are all very welcome as the Cemetery tackles the restoration of tombs that are in poor condition and no longer maintained by family descendants or others. This is a task that is way beyond its own resources. We strongly urge other Embassies to help fund the restoration of tombs of their Nationals buried in the Cemetery. Please contact the Director at mail@protestant.cemetery.it.

Weed & Read

On February 13, the fifth Weed&Read event focussed on cleaning gravestones and garden maintenance. Some 30 student volunteers associated with Friends of Rome, a not-for-profit organization, worked enthusiastically to improve the appearance of the Cemetery after the heavy rains of this past winter. They worked under the supervision of Il Trattore, the firm to which the garden maintenance is contracted, and of Rita Galluccio, the Cemetery's restorer, for the work on the gravestones. The students worked for about three hours and then were treated to a historic and literary tour of the Cemetery. More Weed&Read days are planned for the spring. Our thanks to Laura Flusche and Susan Sanders for co-ordinating these events which are a substantial help in maintaining the beauty of the place.

Poets in the Cemetery

Two poems by B.R. Whiting

Hadrian's Villa

(for Peter Finch)

Thick weeds on a bare skyline,
A fat and disgruntled guardian,
Green lizards flick, the rebuilt
Pool stares flatly at the brick wall,
It is all so hot and the thorns
Crackle.

But below the hill
In the overgrown theatre
As you recited his dying verse
Sheep, like souls, flowed in to crop the grass.

Silence

Your first parachute jump, after the waterfall of sound:
What surprises is to hang in silence – but you are not still,
There is a flutter of silk, the earth bulges up all round
And with a resounding thump you return to normal;
And in the desert at noontide
When the insects pause and the baking claypan cracks
There is still the regular surf of your blood
On the reef of your ears, echoing back;
They say it is true the stars sing in their freedom,
The atoms raise an inaudible hymn and rejoice,
We are attuned to noises, not to the vacuum:
In silence we hear the still, small voice.
Unlike lust and self-sacrifice, loyalty and treason,
The idea of silence has a false quality,
A fiction deriving from our fault
Like the immaculate, like immortality.

From *The Poems of B.R. Whiting* (The Sheep Meadow Press, 1991), by kind permission of Lorri Whiting.

B.R. "Bertie" Whiting (1923-1988) settled in Rome with his wife Lorri in 1955. His poetry, which he for many years kept to himself, is inspired by his wartime army service in India, by the landscapes of his native Australia and by his passion for the mountains and for sailing. His poems are available for sale in the Visitors' Centre. May he rest in peace in the Cemetery.



Student volunteers do some cleaning at Weed&Read in February

How others see the Cemetery

There have been many Scandinavians who have been moved to write about the Cemetery. We quote first the closing words of Johan Beck-Friis in the guidebook to the Cemetery that he prepared (see elsewhere in this Newsletter) and then an excerpt from Sigrid Undset, the Norwegian author:

Is there any cemetery in the world that inspires such a feeling of timeless peace, hope and certainty of belief as this one? Here is no fear of death, no anxiety, no decay, no difference between rich and poor, no cleavage of language and religion – only a feeling of unspeakable peace, something of the peace that passeth all understanding. The noise from the tumultuous traffic of the metropolis does not reach here; the only thing interrupting the silence is the singing of birds, which is stronger here than in any other place. Representatives of every race and tongue, from all parts of the world, of every birth and age, rest here side by side. Inscriptions in all the languages of the world give evidence thereof.

Many sleep here after a completed life-work, more have died while still young. One thing all have in common who rest in the shadow of the Cestius Pyramid and the town wall, under cypress and pines, surrounded by myrtle- and laurel-trees, wild rose bushes and fiery red camellias: they have all had the great privilege of living for a short or for a long time in The Eternal City.

From *Il Cimitero Acattolico di Roma*, by Johan Beck-Friis. Ab Allhems Förlag, Malmö (1956).

In 1928 the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to the Norwegian author Sigrid Undset (1882-1949). At the age of 46, she was one of the youngest recipients and only the third woman (since its inception in 1901) to be given this prestigious award. The Nobel jury cited in particular the powerful storytelling in her serial novels set in 14th-century Norway, of which the *Kristin Lavransdatter* trilogy is the best-known internationally (published in 1920-22). But she had already caused a stir with her earlier novels set in contemporary Norway which portrayed in an unsentimental and realist way the emotional lives of women.

One of these was *Jenny* (1911) which opens, as it closes, in a setting of the contemporary Scandinavian artistic community in Rome. Sigrid Undset should have

been born in Rome, as one of her biographers, Gidske Anderson, has pointed out. Her father Ingvald Undset – an archaeologist – and mother were spending the year of 1882 studying in Rome. But his sudden and serious illness caused them to leave urgently for her mother's house in Denmark, and there she was born. Anderson suggests that "Undset herself very likely felt that her proper place of birth was Rome" and when she spent nine months there in 1909-10, the city immediately made an extraordinary impact on her. It was there that she fell in love with the married Norwegian painter, Anders Svarstad, who eventually became her husband and the father of her children. And, significantly, it was to Rome that she returned with her husband in 1913 for the birth of their own first child. Her evocation of the buildings of Rome, its people, its faces and its sounds in *Jenny* betrays her love of the city during what must have been one of the happiest periods of a life full of solitude, tragedy and a crisis of faith (in 1924 she stunned Protestant Norway by converting to Catholicism).

The passage in *Jenny* referring to the Cemetery is notable for the love of flowers, and of nature in general, that inspires much of Undset's writing. When she first visited the Cemetery, its large extension as far as what is now known as the *Zona Terza* had been acquired only some fifteen years previously. The *Zona Terza* that she describes here had a very different aspect to the closely serried rows of tombs set among mature trees that we see nowadays.

The spring air was damp, clear and mild. Inside the cemetery, in the intense green shade, it was as humid and hot as in a greenhouse. And the white narcissus along the border of the pathway had a torrid and sultry scent.

The old cypresses stood close together, forming a grove around the grave sites, which were dark with clinging vines of periwinkles and violets and lay in terraces along the ivy-clad old city wall. The monuments to the dead gleamed – small marble temples and white angel statues and big, ponderous sarcophagi. Moss tinged them green and shimmered on the trunks of the cypresses. Here and there a white or red blossom still remained in the shiny dark foliage of the camellia trees, but most of the flowers lay brown and withered on the damp, black soil, from which a rotting, clammy smell rose up toward him...

...Jenny Winge was buried at the far corner of the cemetery, near the chapel. It was at the very edge of the light green,

daisy-covered hillside, where there were still only a few graves. Cypresses had been planted along the perimeter of the lawn, but they were still tiny, looking like toys with their sharp, dark green crowns atop erect, twining brown trunks that resemble pillars in a cloister arcade.

An excerpt from *Jenny*, by Sigrid Undset, published by Steerforth Press of Hanover, NH. Copyright © 2001 by Steerforth Press, Translation Copyright © 2001 by Tiina Nunnally.

HOW TO BECOME A FRIEND

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www.protestantcemetery.it

NON-CATHOLIC CEMETERY IN ROME

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MON - SAT

9:00am - 5:00pm

(last entrance 4:30pm)

Sundays & Public Holidays

9:00am - 1:00pm

(last entrance 12:30pm)

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