

History of Modern Cremation in Romania

By

Marius Rotar

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PREFACE

Dr Marius Rotar is passionate about the study of death. He is enthusiastic about the value of cremation. He proved his commitment to the study of death with his *Moartea in Transilvania in Secolul al XIX-Lea* (2006). In 2011 he took up the even more radical task, the history of cremation in Romania, published as *Eternitate prin Cenușă. O istorie a crematoriilor și incinerărilor umane în România secolelor XIX-XXI* (Iași, Institutul European). This has now been shortened and revised; and translated into English by Ms Monica Losonti and Dr Helen Frisby.

Dr Rotar has not only encouraged others with his publications; he has founded a very successful annual conference in his native Alba Iulia where each September for four years scholars from Romania and abroad have come in ever greater numbers. A particular feature of these international conferences is the participation of increasing numbers of younger Romanian scholars. Out of the conference he has also founded an academic society to pursue death scholarship, *Asociația Română pentru Studii asupra Morții (ARSM)*. He has founded a new cremation society, Amurg, heir to the inter-war society Cenușa (1923-1948). Cenușa was a voluntary society which had opened Bucharest's first crematorium in 1928 but was closed by the Communist Government in 1948. Marius has followed the practice of other pioneering cremationists, that the best way to promote cremation is to build a crematorium. Working with colleagues in the funeral service industry he has helped to build a first crematorium for Transylvania (Phoenix Crematorium in Oradea).

Death, along with birth and marriage, provides a critical lens for the interpretation of human life and society; and their study enlightens the understanding of our human behaviour, individual and communal, intimate and public. In particular, the study of death opens up perspectives on issues of family and kinship structure, gender, occupation, age, social class; and of voluntary societies, party politics, government, nationalism, medicine and health systems, legal systems and religious organisations and beliefs. When individual families face bereavement, the choice they make about the disposal of their dead has been influenced by such key factors. The strength and interplay of these factors reveal national characteristics. In his study of cholera *Death in Hamburg* Richard Evans wrote, "In the epidemic [of 1892], the workings of state and society, the structures of

social inequality, the variety of values and beliefs, the physical contours of everyday life, the formal ideologies and informal ambitions of political organizations were all thrown into sharp and detailed relief.” Marius’ new book will reveal how funeral rituals and arrangements are a part of the context of continuity and change in modern Romania.

In more traditional – and especially pre-industrial – societies, support for people facing death or bereavement came primarily from family, local community and religious practice. In contemporary (industrial and post-industrial) societies, these once-vital networks have been weakened and separated. Opportunities for work and education, greater gender equality, increasing individual sufficiency – all bringing greater social and geographical mobility and a greater awareness of the claims of different religions and of secularism – have weakened traditional social networks and forced us to seek either the adaptation of old or the adoption of entirely new support systems/strategies to confront death.

So any book of quality which informs us about how beliefs, attitudes and practices around death are maintained, challenged or changed will empower us to make deeper sense of our own mortality, exercise informed choice about our deaths and funerals, and analyse the complex of specialisms and vested interests behind arrangements around the end of life. This is a book of high quality.

Its research question sounds simple, “Why is there only one crematorium in a country of over twenty million people?” Answering this short question takes the author first to the Roman period to establish cremation’s Romanian credentials. Then, in four major chapters, he examines the work of pioneers like Jacob Felix in the nineteenth century; the inter-war period and the first crematorium in Bucharest; the Communist period; and the decades since 1989. He has used a very wide range of archival, literary and material culture sources to tell an extraordinary story.

The book is particularly fascinating for the English-speaking world in that it is the first account that discusses the issues about cremation in a society with a dominant Orthodox Church tradition. The Orthodox Church has always buried its dead, with liturgical forms unchanged over the centuries, and with a dynamic understanding of the relationship between the living and the dead. Orthodox Churches have often functioned as a symbol and vehicle for national identity. There is, however, a particularly intriguing issue which the author presents. A Communist government ruled Romania from 1948 to 1989. Now, there is in Europe a close correlation to be observed between the growth of cremation, emergent nationalisms, and governments of the Left. Yet in Romania, the government sided with the church in supporting burial throughout. Marius

Rotar subjects this paradox to a fascinating analysis which sheds a new light upon recent Romanian history. The modern study of death has proved again and again that it offers a critical lens by which human societies may be analysed and understood.

This ground-breaking book will also find a place in the international setting. There is now a growing body of scholarship exploring the origins and growth of cremation in modern society, and this book will play a prominent role in these developments. In the West, there are full-length accounts in English of cremation in Australia, England, the United States and, in preparation, Scotland. There are also full-length vernacular histories for at least Finland, Germany, the Netherlands and Norway. In the East there are cremation histories for, among others, India, Japan and Korea. Romania now takes its place in this list, and in handsome fashion.

I highly commend this book both on its own merits as a model of research and as a contribution to the study of cremation and the role of death in society. It is also a great incentive to the work and commitment of future scholars. We are all mortal and this subject requires a line of succession.

Revd. Dr. Peter C. Jupp,
Department of Divinity,
University of Edinburgh, UK

Author of *From Dust to Ashes: Cremation and the British Way of Death*
(2006)
Chairman of the Council, the Cremation Society of Great Britain, 2001–
2009