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Reference Questions Answered: Discussion of Russian funeral rites as depicted in the 2006 Film *V posikakh schast'ia* (In Search of Happiness)

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ABSTRACT. The author answers a reference question on the depictionof a funeral in the 2006 Russian documentary film *V poiskakh schast'ia* (In Search of Happiness), which takes place in the Jewish Autonomous Region in Siberia. Consultations and referene sources show that what was depicted was not Jewish but a typical Russian civil funeral procession. Helpful publications included historical and historical-ethnographic monographs and an ethnographic encyclopedia.

KEYWORDS. Russia, Russian, film, *V poiskakh schast'ia,* In Search of Happiness, funeral rites, funeral customs, reference sources library.

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Editor's note. This piece begins a new occasional feature of the In Our Libraries column, interestind and/or difficult reference questions and the sources used for answering them.

Question: *"I am reviewing a DVD copy of "In search of happiness (V poiskach schastia)." The film is a Russian documentary about people currently living in the Jewish Autonomous Region of Siberia and also won the Best Documentary award at the 2006 Russian Film Festival. The DVD is distributed by The Cinema Guild (www.cinemaguild.com). My question is in regards to a funeral that makes up the last few minutes of the production. In the front of the procession a man holds a photo-portrait of the deceased. Is this person usually a relative? Does the family march in front or to the rear of the vehicle that bears the (open coffin)? Would the family be wearing any particular color (e.g., white or black)?"*

Submitted by Michael T. Fein,
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(Used with permission)

My answers to these questions draw upon four types of resources: an encyclopedia of Russian ceremonies and customs, primary ethnographic material on traditional Russian ceremonies, a monograph on death and memory in Russia, and interviews with scholars, including memories of an eye-witness account of a Russian funeral. The four source types demonstrate the fact that answers to such questions are frequently a collaborative effort.

While this scene takes place in the Jewish Autonomous Region of Siberia, it does not portray Jewish funeral rituals. In Judaism, according to Eve Levin, a Jewish scholar of Russian history,[1] there are certain traditional prohibitions against contact with the dead, especially for the priestly order, since dead bodies are ritually impure. Even though "many modern Jews regard this prohibition as outdated, the sense that one tries to avoid direct contact with dead bodies is

still very strong. At the same time, persons in the community who prepare bodies for burial (usually not family members) are honored for doing a good deed." [2] Because they do not embalm the dead body, the coffins are closed, and the deceased is buried as soon as possible after death occurs. While Jewish funeral customs do not include specific color-wearing traditions, they do incorporate cloth in other ways. Traditionally, men (only) wear prayer shawls and hats as a sign of respect. Nowadays, some American Jewish women also wear prayer shawls, but this custom has probably not come to Russia. Additionally, "rather than 'rending the clothing' in the Biblical manner (an expensive proposition!), mourners now wear a small strip of torn black cloth as a lapel pin." [3] Photographs of the deceased are not carried, and there is usually a Rabbi figure in the ceremony.

The film scene described above shows a typical Russian "civil" funeral procession. According to funeral rites described in the historic-ethnographic essay, *Traditsionnye obriady russkikh: krestiny, pokhorony, pominki* (1999), the coffin is typically carried out the main door of the house by distant relatives or friends, never by immediate family members. The current reason for this is unknown. In the past, family members were not allowed to carry the coffin or dig the grave out of fear that the deceased person, by some magical power, could drag the blood-relative into the grave with them.[4] Whereas funeral rituals inside the house tend to follow religious tradition or superstition; as the funeral proceeds outside it takes on a more "civil" character**.** The procession is led by those who carry funeral wreaths (*venki*); followed by the coffin cover, narrow end forward, and finally the coffin itself. So, in this description the coffin is open. Typically**,** the family walks directly behind those carrying the coffin (or the vehicle carrying the coffin), followed by close friends, and all others.[5] Russians have adopted the European traditions of wearing black.

Processions for military veterans and distinguished workers tend to follow "civil" (rather than religious) protocol. A portrait of the deceased, decorated with black ribbon, is carried at the head of the procession and followed by a person carrying a pillow with his medals. Comrades of the deceased carry the coffin as far as they are physically able. The procession is also accompanied by music, usually a band of brass or wind instruments of various types. Traditionally, the procession makes several stops along the way to let people say their goodbyes.[6] Based on the descriptions above, I suspect that the portrait, like the coffin, would be carried by a close friend, comrade, or even a distant relative, but not by immediate family members, who follow directly behind the coffin.

A brief description of modern Orthodox Russian funeral rites can be found in *Entsiklopediia obriadov i obychaev* (1997). I have included a short summary here**.** The coffin is placed on a table in the center of the room with the head toward the icon, usually located in the front corner of the room. Burning candles surround the coffin. The coffin is carried out of the house feet first. Once inside the church, the coffin is placed in the center of the church with the feet toward the altar. After the funeral service family and friends circle the coffin and kiss the person for the last time. The whole body is then covered with a sheet, and the priest sprinkles earth on the body making the sign of the cross over the body as he does so. The lid is placed on the coffin not to be opened again, and the coffin is conveyed to the burial site.[7]

Kornei Chukovskii's book, *Sovremenniki. Portrety i etiudy* (Contemporaries. Portraits and etudes) also includes a description of an open coffin. "In the last four lines of the part that is devoted to Blok, he cites an excerpt from a letter of Aleksandr Blok's friend: '... *Mesto na kladbishche ia vybrala sama – na Smolenskom, vozle mogily deda, pod starym klenom... Grob nesli na rukakh, otkryty, tsvetov, bylo ochen' mnogo.'* (...I myself selected the place in the

cemetery - in the Smolensk [cemetery] near granddad's grave, under the old maple... They hand-carried the open coffin, there were many, many flowers)." [8]

In *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth Russia* (2001)[9] Catherine Merridale comments on large public funerals and their impact on Russian society at the time. Of particular interest is her discussion on the death and funerals of famous Russian/Soviet writers, leaders, composers, political activists etc., such as, Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, Dmitrii Shostakovich, Petr Tchaikovsky, Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, and others. Merridale's monograph also includes several plates of photographs.

In researching answers to these questions, I also consulted with Maia Kipp, emeritus faculty at the University of Kansas. Her memories of a Russian funeral prove insightful.

> "I've never been to a *derevenskie pokhorony*, although I did live in a village for a while. The Orthodox funeral rite that you describe is familiar to me.... [W]e usually have our dead in the house/apartment before they are carried to church...we also lay him/her on the dining table. I remember when my mom's uncle died, relatives and friends came to say good-bye to him while his body was in the apartment. I still remember Uncle Oleg, lying on the table, with *piataki* (copper 5-kopek coins) covering his eyes and with an icon in his hands. And yes, there were candles around the table. I know that the reader from the nearby Troitskaia church stayed by the casket overnight chanting and reading from the Bible....
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> I remember that [event] visually and remember it being explained to me by an old lady whom I asked. Uncle Oleg's casket was placed on the dining table in the middle of the room, his head toward the icon (in the right corner of the wall across from the entrance). This is done for a particular reason: it is believed that the dead person should face the door, the exit, when his/her soul departs (as if he were getting up, facing the door). The icon or icons should bless and protect his departing soul (see it off). For the same reason, he/she should be carried out feet first (just as he was lying on the table), so that his soul proceeds to church and then is laid to rest and does not come back into the house to haunt it. I do remember the open casket carried out the door feet first. Russians, by the way, even have a saying to that effect. Old people often say to their children, or grandchildren when they feel unappreciated, *Vot kogda menia vynesut nogami vpered, togda menia vspomnish'* (When they take me out of the house feet first, then you'll be sorry)."
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> I [also] remember uncle Oleg in Troitskaia church, lying in his casket up on a high *katafalk* (catafalque) in semi-darkness; the faces of a whole crowd of people in the flickering light of candles (no electric lights), the bluish white smoke of incense floating in the air like a shroud, and the sound, mournful and solemn, of *Vechnaia pamiat'*... (Eternal memory) sung again

and again. I was very scared. The altar and *tsarskie vrata* (royal gates) are in the Eastern section of the church, symbolizing Eden or Paradise, which God created in the East. *Tsarskie Vrata* thus represent the entrance into Eden. The dead person faces the altar and the *Tsarskie Vrata*, that is, east. The dead person should face this gate [so that] when he arises he will be facing the royal gates [of heaven]. We also bury our dead with their head in the west and feet in the east, so that, when they arise, they face east, that is, [toward] Eden and God." [10] [The *Encyclopedia of rites and rituals* elaborates: "In the grave the deceased faces east (anticipating the arrival of the eternal morning, or the second coming of Christ, as a sign of the deceased going from the west of life to the east of eternity)." [11]] "My parents decided not to take me to the cemetery which was very far.

I do know that, just as your excerpt from "*Entsiklopediia obriadov i obychaev*" indicates, the casket was closed before it was taken out of the church. And I have never seen an open casket procession in the streets of Leningrad, with a photo carried in front of it, although I saw many funeral processions. The caskets were always closed. Yet, not only do we have the reference to Blok's funeral, where he is carried to the cemetery in an open casket, but *Doctor Zhivago* opens with a description of Zhivago's mother's burial, in which the casket is closed at the cemetery, right before it is lowered into the grave. See the second paragraph on the very first page of the novel: "*Sviashchennik krestiashchim dvizheniem brosil gorst' zemli na Mar'iu Nikolaevnu. Zapeli 'So dukhi pravednykh'. Nachalas' strashnaia gonka. Grob zakryli, zakolotili, stali opuskat'.*" (The priest, making the sign of the cross [over the deceased] cast a handful of earth on Maria Nikolaevna. They began to sing 'From the spirit of the righteous.' The terrible race began. They closed the coffin, nailed it shut, and began to lower it [translation mine]).

Now, it is true that, during the Soviet period, at the funeral procession for some military, or a party functionary, his or her portrait was carried, and a wind band played. My grandfather was a naval engineer, a rear admiral. He had always asked *chtoby ego ne 'khoronili s muzykoi, kak sobaku'* (that he would not be buried with music, like a dog), but that's exactly what happened. My mother could not help it, because it was an official, Soviet style funeral. I can attest to the fact that there are photos on the graves in Russian cemeteries,[12] usually placed right in the middle of the wooden cross. Whether that means that each photo was carried by the funeral procession, or brought to the cemetery subsequently, I do not know. But not all graves by far have photos. Most, as the matter of fact, do not. Perhaps many of them were destroyed by time.... But neither Uncle Oleg's, nor my grandfather's, nor my mom's graves have photos. On my Mom's gravestone, there is an Orthodox cross and the words *Gospodi pomilui nas, ibo pravednogo ne stalo* (Lord, have mercy on us, for the righteous one is no more), but no photo.[13]

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[1] This paragraph combines and interweaves content from conversations with Eve Levin, March 15-16, 2007 and e-mail correspondence with Eve Levin from April 10, 2007. The descriptions of Jewish funeral traditions may or may not be typical of Russian-Jewish funeral traditions.

[2] Levin, Eve. Conversations with Eve Levin, March 15-16, 2007; e-mail correspondence with Eve Levin, April 10, 2007.

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[3] Levin, e-mail correspondence, April 10, 2007

[4] Nosova, G.A. *Traditsionnye obriady russkikh: krestiny, pokhorony, pominki.* Moskva: Institut etnologii i antropologii im. N.N. Miklukho-Maklaia, 1999, 181. [Part III of this historical-ethnographic essay documents modern Russian funeral customs that were observed in several villages of the Bobrov district (Voronezh region) and the Mtsensk district (Orlov region) between 1980 and 1990.]

[5] Nosova, *Traditsionnye obriady russkikh,* 182-183.

[6] Nosova, *Traditsionnye obriady russkikh,* 182-183.

[7] Brudnaia, L. I., ed. *Entsiklopediia obriadov i obychaev.* Sankt-Peterburg: Respeks, 1997, 472.

[8] Kipp, Maia. E-mail correspondence from March 21-22, 2007, in which Kipp cites Chukovskii, Kornei. *Sovremenniki. Portrety i etiudy*. Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 1967, 297.

[9] Merridale, Catherine. *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth Russia* (2001). New York: Viking, 2001.

[10] Kipp, Maia, E-mail correspondence from March 21-22, 2007.

[11] Brudnaia, *Entsiklopediia obriadov i obychaev,* 472.

[12] For an example, see Merridale, *Night of Stone*, lower photograph on the plate facing page 245.

[13] Kipp, Email from March 21-22, 2007.