Central Queensland University

Bambi Ward

Searching for missing graves: the agony and the ecstasy

Biographical note:

Bambi Ward is a PhD student in creative writing at Central Queensland University. Her creative work is a memoir of her spiritual journey. Bambi is based in Melbourne. She has a background in general practice, medical education and oral history.

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Introduction

Visiting graves and respecting the dead is a universal practice that has remained applicable to many cultures throughout the ages. For some, it's a meaningful opportunity to connect with the deceased's soul, to talk to them, to pray, to receive comfort, to feel their energy, to study their teachings at the gravesite, to reflect on the life of the deceased, to honour the memory of a loved one, or to feel at peace.

My mother role modelled most of the above activities when she took me to the local cemetery several times a year during my childhood in the 'sixties and 'seventies. However, rather than visiting graves of deceased relatives, we stood alongside a tall wall of plaques that bore the names of my paternal grandfather, and (three years later) my paternal grandmother, in bronze letters that faded quickly from the harsh elements of the Melbourne weather. There was a communal aluminium structure that looked a bit like a vent with holes on the ground in front of sections of the wall for flowers. Mum would usually bring pink or red roses that were grown in our garden. If there were no other flowers in front of the section of the wall we were visiting, Mum would lift up the aluminium grate, fill up the container beneath it with water from a nearby tap, and place the flowers lovingly through the holes in the grate. She would then stand in silence in front of the plaques for a few minutes. I would stand in silence next to her. I had the impression that she was praying or talking to her relatives in silence. When she finished her ritual, we sat in meditative silence on a nearby brown wooden bench. Every time we went there, Mum would joyfully point out how the sun had come out when we'd arrived at the wall, even if it was overcast. This was true. It amazed me how it happened every time we visited. For Mum, this was a sign that her loved ones were greeting us. It was one of the rare moments in Mum's life that I saw her at peace.

After a few minutes, Mum would stand up, kiss her fingers and immediately touch the plaques, before saying 'Goodbye' out loud. I would follow her out of the cemetery after copying her ritual.

These visits went on year after year, especially on birthdays and other special occasions. Mum's cemetery visits increased in frequency after my maternal grandmother died. By that time, I was engaged, and I'd stopped accompanying Mum. In fact, there was a long gap between my visits to the cemetery. They didn't resume until my father's death in 1989. This was followed by another long gap in my visits, which resumed after my mother's death in 2009. In the meantime, all the plaques were moved – at Mum's request – to a nearby plot on the ground. The plaques of my five family members were placed in a circle around several rose bushes that had been transplanted from my mother's rose garden.

Searching for family graves in Hungary

In 2005, my husband and I went on a pilgrimage to Hungary and other parts of Europe, as part of my spiritual journey. Mum suggested that I visit the graves of our family members in Budapest and Székesfehérvár, about a one-hour drive from Budapest. Mum's maternal grandmother, great-aunts and great-uncle were buried in Budapest. It was quite easy to find those graves, as we still had connections with elderly friends of

our family who offered to take us. However, no-one in our family knew exactly where the graves of my great-great-grandparents and my great-grandfather were located in the large Jewish cemetery in the small town of Székesfehérvár. I organised for Stefi, the granddaughter of friends of my family, to drive there and act as our interpreter at the cemetery. She spoke good English and was happy to assist. My parents had chosen not to teach me Hungarian, so I was very grateful to have Stefi's help. Her husband, Zsolt, who spoke very little English, drove from Budapest to Székesfehérvár on a hot Sunday morning. They picked us up from our hotel and drove us to the cemetery. No-one at the hotel knew where the Jewish cemetery was, but we managed to find it. The black wrought iron gate was open and we walked through it on to a concrete path. There was a large area of grass on either side of the path, full of graves and tall trees.

Being a Sunday, it didn't surprise us that the office was closed, but that day was the only one Stefi was available to meet us there. We decided to split up into pairs and look for the names of my relatives in different areas of the vast cemetery.

After searching for over an hour in the heat, I started to get desperate. We had come all this way and none of us could find the gravestones. Surely life couldn't be so cruel as to have us leave without finding what we were looking for? I then recalled how Vera, my mother's cousin, told me how she often prayed to her late mother – my Hungarian great-aunt Mickó – whenever she couldn't find anything. This practice invariably led to Vera finding the object shortly afterwards. I decided to give it a go.

'Please Mickó', I prayed, 'We need your help to find the graves of our family. Please help us. Please!'

We split up into four and continued our search, even though I felt it was futile. We all revisited places in the cemetery we'd already been to. Still nothing. Time was marching on, and Stefi and Zsolt would have to leave at lunchtime.

About ten minutes after I'd said the prayer, I heard a voice calling out to my husband in Hungarian. An obese middle aged woman wearing old clothes and a scarf was asking if he needed some help. We had all heard her words and approached her eagerly. It was the cemetery's caretaker who lived next door to the cemetery in a rundown looking house. Stefi explained what we were looking for. When the caretaker heard my family's names, her eyes lit up. She said she knew where the graves were. I could barely contain my excitement.

She gestured for us to follow her. We walked into a huge building with light blue walls, a large Star of David hanging from the ceiling and large rectangular plaques that reached from chest height to almost ceiling height, containing rows upon rows of names of Jewish people from Székesfehérvár who had been murdered by the Nazis during the Holocaust.

The caretaker located a spiral bound A4-sized exercise book with lined paper that had A–B on the front cover, denoting the first letters of the deceased's surnames. As she opened the book, I noticed her fat fingers and the dirt under some of her fingernails. She turned the pages of the old book slowly and eventually pointed at what she'd been looking for. There, in neat capital letters, were three handwritten entries of the names of the family members whose graves we were looking for. The location of their graves

and the years of their births and deaths were also included in black pen. I felt like jumping for joy.

She hesitated before asking us to follow her.

'The headstones have been damaged', she told Stefi. 'That's why you couldn't find them'.

'When?', I asked via Stefi.

'I don't know exactly', she replied. 'But at least fourteen years ago. That's how long I've been a caretaker here. A lot of the graves were damaged by people who didn't like Jews'.

We followed her back to a place that we'd surveyed a couple of times already.

There was a double grave and a single one next to it at ground level. Overgrown grass grew around the graves as well as on top of them. The double grave for my great-great-grandparents had two black marble pillars without headstones on the top of the grey concrete at the head of the graves. There was no writing on them. The single grave, which belonged to my great-grandfather, lay immediately adjacent to the double grave. It had no pillar.

A thick amount of greenery in the form of leaves and trees stood just beyond the heads of the graves. The caretaker indicated that the missing gravestones bearing the names of my family members were hidden in the ground under the greenery. She walked behind the graves, and spread some branches and leaves to show us. I gasped. There, on the dirty ground, lying beneath a thicket, were two enormous black marble headstones with gold Hungarian lettering. They had been removed from the black pillars that remained above the graves of my great-great-grandparents. The headstone of my great grandfather's grave was missing.

The caretaker mentioned that it would require a crane to lift the headstones, as they weighed about one tonne each. I expressed my deepest appreciation to the caretaker in the form of words and money, and she left. I then took three smooth stones from a plastic bag in my handbag. I'd brought them from my mother's home in Melbourne. I placed one stone on each of the graves to signify that I had visited. This symbolic act, performed when people visit Jewish graves, marks one's presence, and signifies that the deceased has not been forgotten.

When we informed Mum that the graves had been vandalised, she set about finding out how they could be repaired. Access to the headstones would be impossible unless a bobcat transported a crane to the site. Nevertheless, Mum was determined to get the graves repaired. She obtained a quote, and subsequently organised the job from Australia. Her American cousin also contributed to the cost. When the restoration was complete, a man from the Jewish community took photographs of the repaired gravestones, and posted them to my mother. She was delighted. It brought her a great deal of peace of mind.

This remarkable incident was not the first time I'd been searching for a family member's missing grave. In fact, given the importance that cemeteries had in my

mother's life, it wasn't surprising that she too longed to find another grave. A grave whose location had been hidden from her by my father.

The search for my stillborn sister's grave

17 March is meant to be a joyful celebration for many people in Australia because it's Saint Patrick 's Day. However, as far back as I can remember, it was always a difficult and painful day that Mum just wanted to get through as fast as possible. 17 March was the day that my sister was stillborn at Melbourne's Bethlehem hospital in 1956. Mum never saw her baby, who was born by Caesarean section. To make matters worse, Mum was moved to a post-natal ward after her surgery, where she was constantly reminded of her loss by seeing new Mums lovingly holding their newborn babies. She was also given medicine to dry up her milk. A well-meaning nun, who was also a nurse, attempted to console Mum by telling her it was God's will that her baby had died.

Dad made the necessary burial arrangements, but chose not to tell Mum where their baby was buried. He thought he was protecting her from undue pain. Soon after Mum was discharged from hospital, Dad and Mum's mother went back to work. Mum was left alone at home, except for Nicky, her Labrador dog, who had been like a substitute child to her for the past ten years. When Mum struggled to walk to the toilet due to weakness and fatigue, it was Nicky who accompanied her, allowing her to hold on to him for support.

Every year during my childhood, 17 March would come around and Mum would remind me that her baby had been born on that day. Dad never said anything about the significance of the day. It was as if my stillborn sister had never existed in Dad's mind.

Every now and then Mum would ask Dad where their baby was buried. He refused to tell her. Maybe it was too painful for him to deal with and he was actually protecting himself. Dad wanted to adopt a baby after this painful experience rather than see Mum go through another pregnancy. Fortunately, Mum's obstetrician advocated on Mum's behalf, and Dad finally agreed to try for another baby.

It seemed cruel to me that Dad didn't tell Mum what she wanted to know, especially because visiting the local cemetery to honour the memory of deceased family members was such a comforting activity for her. But who am I to judge? I do not believe for a moment that Dad's motives were malicious. I think they may have stemmed from the need to protect himself from his overwhelming feeling of grief and loss.

It never occurred to me to ask Dad where my sister had been buried. The question only arose several years after Dad's death. By that time, I was married, in my forties, and a mother of two. I was having counselling about some issues related to my relationship with my mother. The counsellor, a compassionate woman in her fifties, encouraged me to try and find out where my sister was buried. I decided to take up her suggestion. I doubt that I would ever have come up with this idea by myself, so I am very grateful to her.

Mum was in her seventies at the time. She had some health issues, so I decided not to tell her what I was doing until I had some news. I opened pages of the telephone book

and looked up the addresses of the cemeteries in Melbourne. There were about twenty. Did my sister have the same surname as me? I checked the year in which my parents anglicised their Hungarian surname. This established that we would have had the same surname. I then wrote a letter to each of the cemeteries, explaining that I was searching for my stillborn sister's place of burial. I included her surname and date of birth/death in the letter.

The waiting game began. I searched the letterbox with anticipation every day. As time went by, I started to receive some replies. Again and again they read something like this: 'We regret to inform you that there is no record of your sister having been buried here. We wish you all the best for your search'. In the first few weeks, my heart raced every time I received a letter from a cemetery. I would hurriedly rip open the letter, anticipating good news, only to have my hopes dashed again and again. The weeks went by, and the number of replies in the negative increased. I began to lose hope.

After several months, only two cemeteries had not replied. By that time, I'd been conditioned to expect a 'no' whenever I opened a letter from a cemetery. So when the next letter came, I opened it as if I were a robot. I felt numb and had no expectations. Why should this letter be any different from the rest?

But I was wrong. The letter, from Melbourne General Cemetery, informed me that they had a record of Baby Hardy having been stillborn on 17 March 1956, and that she was buried in the Parkville Cemetery. I was both stunned and excited. After jumping up and down on the spot, I rushed over to my husband Michael who was working from home, and showed him the letter. He gave me a big celebratory hug and asked me if I would like him to take me there.

'Yes please', I replied.

We decided to go the following day.

I decided not to tell Mum what I'd found out until after I'd been to the cemetery and obtained more information. Michael drove me there. We parked outside the reception area and walked inside. My heart was beating fast. I showed the woman behind the counter the letter they'd sent me. She looked up the records, told me that my sister was buried in the Presbyterian section, and handed me a map that showed how to get there. I asked her a few questions and found out that my sister was buried alongside other stillborn babies, in a larger grave. My thoughts went straight to the photographs of mass graves I had seen from the Holocaust. Shivers ran through my body.

'Would she have been put in a coffin?' I asked.

She answered in the affirmative. I wasn't sure I believed her, but I hoped it was true.

Michael drove to the nearest place where he could park the car. I opened the car door slowly and stepped out onto a path. I took a deep breath and walked slowly towards an area of beautifully kept green grass. There were some remembrance plaques attached to several large rocks on the grass. Some of them had pictures of angels or teddy bears alongside an inscription.

I gripped Michael's hand tightly as we walked in silence, pausing to read the inscriptions on each and every plaque. One plaque read 'Cherished but not cradled'. I

brought my hand to my mouth. Tears flowed silently down my cheeks. No words were adequate in this sacred place where angels lay.

When we had finished reading all the plaques, we walked over to a nearby wooden bench and sat down. Michael reached out and took my hand. We sat in silence for a while. I felt at peace. I was also immensely grateful that I had finally found the place I'd been searching for.

When I felt ready to go, I stood up and took one last look at the grass and rocks before walking back to the car with Michael in silence. I did very little for the rest of that day after arriving home. I was emotionally exhausted.

Several days later I visited Mum. I told her that I'd found out where Diane – the name she chose for her baby – was buried. Her eyes shone, and she touched my hand tenderly. She told me she'd recently been starting to think about how to go about finding out where her daughter was buried but hadn't done anything about it. I was in awe over the synchronicity. I asked Mum if she wanted me to drive her there. She nodded, and gave me a huge smile.

I drove to Mum's place several days later. Mum was dressed more elegantly than usual. On our way out of her home, she walked over to her wooden dining room table and picked up a special floral arrangement. It was a huge bouquet of beautiful scented pink roses, surrounded by a bronze coloured ceramic angel. I was surprised that Mum had gone to the trouble of ordering them from a florist.

The cemetery was a forty-minute drive away. On our way there, Mum started talking about her labour and the stillbirth in much more detail than I had ever heard before. Her description of the traumatic events poured out quickly, as though they had just happened yesterday. I had the feeling that this may have been the first time she had spoken about some of the details. I was stunned and overwhelmed by the amount of grief and pain Mum had been carrying for over forty years.

We finally arrived at the entrance to the cemetery. The gates were open, and I drove in as far as I could go. We stepped out of the car. I slipped my arm through Mum's arm. We walked along in silence. When we arrived at the area of green grass and rocks, I told Mum that this was the place where her baby was buried. Mum placed the beautiful bouquet of roses in water and started talking aloud to her baby.

'I love you and I've never forgotten you. I hope you haven't felt abandoned because I haven't visited you until now'.

I stood there, speechless.

After standing on the green grass for some time, Mum walked over to a nearby tree and tied the ceramic angel around a branch with some wire. She thanked me for having given her the best Christmas present ever. I smiled back at her. Neither of us shed any tears. When Mum was ready to leave, we walked back to the car and drove home in silence.

Several weeks later I wrote and performed a memorial service for my stillborn sister and my relatives who were murdered by the Nazis during the Holocaust. Only Mum and Michael attended the service. It was held in a small chapel at the University where Michael and I were married. My mother was present for the first part of the service, in which I read a speech about our deceased relatives, and named them all. Mum and I lit a candle in their memory. She then listened silently to my speech with a blank look on her usually expressive face as I expressed my anger (fury, actually), towards Hitler and what he did to our relatives and our people. When I announced that I was about to start the part of the service to honour my stillborn sister, Mum stood up and left the room. I'd been forewarned that she would leave the chapel at that point, but I still hoped she would change her mind at the last minute and decide to stay. It was not to be. Mum chose to sit outside on a bench and wait for us there.

I was grateful for Michael's reassuring presence in the chapel. Later on, I began to wonder how Mum felt while she waited, alone and unsupported. Were her thoughts filled with memories of her baby, or was she pushing down the pain and thinking of other things? I never asked her. I doubt if she would have told me anyway.

Some time after the service, I asked Mum how she felt about getting a plaque made for my sister. She agreed, so I wrote to the cemetery asking for information about the types of plaque emblems that were available, as well as their prices. I received a prompt reply to my query, and showed Mum a page of possible pictures to include on the plaque. Mum pointed to a teddy bear design that she liked. Later she wrote a draft version for the wording on the plaque. It read as follows:

> Baby Hardy
>
> Our first born daughter
> Stillborn 17.3.1956.
> Left without a cuddle and a kiss.
> She is in God's care.

I offered to organise to order the plaque, but Mum put me off. I made several attempts, but the response was always the same, so I finally stopped offering. Maybe Mum was resisting getting it done because Dad had always been against it. Or, perhaps it was because getting it done would make what happened final and more real. I didn't think to ask why.

Mum never visited that cemetery again. This was out of character. She visited the local cemetery on several occasions throughout the year, such as birthdays of deceased family members, as well as Mother's day. If she had really wanted to go to the other cemetery, she could easily have asked me or a carer to take her there.

It took fourteen months after Mum's death for me to get around to filling out an order form for my sister's plaque. My grief for Mum was intense. I was also occupied with executor duties, the painful task of sorting through all of Mum's possessions, as well as work and family duties. I received a letter from the cemetery in response to the order form I sent them, asking me if my stillborn sister had had a name. Yes, she had. It was Diane. I was then in a dilemma. Should I change Mum's original wording from Baby

Hardy to Diane Hardy for the plaque? I went backwards and forwards in my mind, and finally decided to put Diane Hardy on the plaque. It was such a difficult decision for me to make because I wanted to honour Mum's wishes to the letter. However, my intuition told me to make the change.

Many years later, I came across an article written by John P. Rosenberg in 2012 that affirmed my final decision. It explained how adult siblings of stillborn babies often take on the role of memory keeper of their deceased sibling. This can involve naming a stillborn baby, even after many years have passed, as a way of ensuring that the baby is not forgotten. In my case, the process of searching for where my sister was buried, taking Mum to the cemetery and organising a plaque with Diane's name on it was a healing, empowering one for both Mum and me. Now Diane can rest in peace. She will not be forgotten, and her name lives on through my daughter, who was named in honour of my baby sister.

Conclusion

Jewish law states that Jews are to be buried rather than cremated. It is therefore significant that all the Jewish members of my family who survived the Holocaust and died in Australia chose to be cremated. This may have been because they chose to keep their Jewish identity a secret, both in life and, sadly, in death.

My mother gained ongoing comfort and peace of mind from being able to visit the ashes of family members at the local cemetery, despite the deviation of the act of cremation from Jewish practice.

When I discovered where my mother's stillborn baby was buried, it created a much deeper bond between my mother and me. The subsequent pilgrimage to Hungary, and the discovery of the vandalized graves of our family members, resulted in even more healing of our somewhat volatile relationship. Her vicarious travels with my husband and me, coupled with her project to restore the vandalized graves, empowered my elderly mother and brought more meaning and satisfaction into her life.

As for me, writing creatively about the search for my stillborn sister, occurred in several ways. Firstly, after seeing the positive healing experienced by my mother, I wrote an article in the third person for a national doctor's magazine in 2001. As well as sharing my experience, my intention was also to prompt doctors to encourage their patients with stillborn babies to search for the burial places if unknown.

Some years later, I submitted the abstract for this article to a conference on the theme of 'Death, dying and the undead'. It was accepted and, as I read out my piece, I noticed that several audience members were in tears. Others were obviously also deeply moved. Having the courage to share my personal stories with a larger audience was a positive healing experience for me, particularly in relation to my grief for my stillborn sister.

Finally, whilst writing this article, I realized that my mother did not know where her father, who died when she was only eighteen months old, was buried. I am surprised that while my mother was alive, I never thought to ask her why she didn't try and find out where he was buried. Writing this article prompted me to initiate the search for my

maternal grandfather's grave. I am close to confirming the location of the grave, and just need a Hungarian translator to complete the process. I will then be able to continue my mother's legacy, organise to visit the grave when I next visit Hungary, and gain more inner peace through this memorial practice of searching for another missing family grave.

Works cited

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Research statement

Research background

The Holocaust continues to be an extremely popular theme in books for adults, young adults and children, both in Australia as well as overseas. However, there is an identified gap in the area of memoirs written by second generation Holocaust survivors raised as gentiles who subsequently reclaimed their Jewish identity in adult life.

Research contribution

This creative nonfiction work uses cremated remains and lost or hidden graves of some family members as a metaphor for my lost Jewish identity and that of my family. The search for missing graves and their discovery parallels the phase of my spiritual journey that involved reclaiming my Jewish identity. The piece also demonstrates the toxicity of family secrets. Examples include: the extremes a family traumatised by the Holocaust took to conceal their Jewish identity, even in death; and the extent to which my father chose to deal with the grief of his stillborn daughter by keeping the location of her grave a secret. The process of writing a memoir has empowered me to pull the metaphorical sticky tape off my mouth. For example, an article I wrote about the importance of searching for a stillborn baby's grave was published for a medical audience in third person fifteen years ago. It read as though I was the doctor doing the counselling, and the patient was the one with the stillborn sister. The creative nonfiction I have produced to date has also given me the courage to rewrite the abovementioned article in first person narrative, and include it in this piece. My intention in sharing this work is to model one way of writing about toxic family secrets relating to identity issues, in the hope that it will assist others in similar situations to find their voice.

Research significance

This creative work was accepted both for presentation at a scholarly conference and publication in a high quality refereed journal.