

## Funeral and Mourning Customs in Podgora

Podgora is a village in Makarska Littoral, in the south of Croatia. It has been known not only for its beautiful beaches but also as a religious tourism destination ever since 1831. The village of Podgora was mentioned for the first time in the 15th century (1). At present, it has some 1500 inhabitants, but there are three times as many inhabitants of Podgora in New Zealand.

The oldest preserved parish registers date from 1621. In the 18th century, during the wars with the Ottomans and fugitives, the castles and towers were built and the place was called the Castle of Podgora. However, prehistoric archaeological sites and some ancient pottery indicate that there was a human settlement in that area long before the 15th century.

Podgora has very rich religious and cultural tradition, with as many as 10 churches in the relatively small area, most famous of which are All Saints', St. Liberan's, St. Tekla's, and St. Roko's churches.

Podgora is also known for the longevity of its people. The large majority of inhabitants of Podgora live to 80, even 90 years of age, and 5 centenarians were registered in the town during the 20th

century (2). An old song "Oh, you, daughter of my daughter, tell to daughter of your daughter that her baby cries" reflects this multigenerational community.

Old people in Podgora have been very much appreciated because of their life experience and wisdom. Older men have always had special places where they gathered and talked, most important of which was *Guwno*, a terrace in the middle of the village, with stone benches placed around a fountain. Sisarić describes *Guwno* as "Agora, where the old men of Podgora (Archons), senators, wise men and sophists hold sessions on Sundays, criticizing, trying to outwit each other, joking, and mocking" (3).

After the Second World War, the socioeconomic situation changed, agriculture and fishing were no longer the main sources of profit. Many people left Podgora in search for employment and better living conditions. With changed social relations, the social position of old people changed. Although the respect for old people today has somewhat diminished, the strong spirit of communal responsibility for those in need still survives in Podgora. The elderly still occupy an important

place within a family and it is still considered to be a shame to place them into retirement homes. When someone is seriously or even deadly ill, there are always relatives, friends, and neighbors to offer a helping hand.

In Podgora, a lot of respect is paid to the dead members of community, as well. The town takes pride in its funeral and mourning customs. Before burial, the body is washed and clad and all orifices are closed (the anal orifice with old rags or wax). The house is also specially decorated. Everybody comes to express condolence, offer help, and keep vigil by the body. This custom has remained unchanged for centuries (4).

The children participate in the ceremonies as well. The parents talk to them openly about death, letting them to go freely around the house and see the deceased person, and hold the wreath ribbons during funerals. The children would often imitate their parents and play funerals. Even today, psychologists believe that this is very good for children's mental life (5).

Lamentation was one of the customs performed mostly by women. It was the obligation of the mother, wife, daughter, sister, and daughter-in-law of the deceased. They were sung while taking the deceased out of the house and at the open grave, and were interrupted only by night and during the service in the church. They were in octosyllabic verse, praising somebody's virtues: goodness, courage, honesty, wisdom, or beauty. The women would send their regards to other dead members of the family, but they would also refer to people present at the funeral. Some women continued to lament several months after funeral – every day out of the window of the house. According to B. Đaković (4): "Lamentation is one of the oldest elements of funeral and mourning customs. It was known in the old Egypt, Greece, Rome, India, Japan, China, but also in the old Slaves, Germans, and other people." Italian priest, Alberto Fortis in his "Journey through Dalmatia" writes: "The family members cry and lament after dead person before it is tak-

en out of the house, and at the moment when the priest comes, the loud cries are repeated just as it is the case in our country" (6). Nowadays in Podgora one can rarely hear lamentations, although they were common until the earthquake in 1960s. A good lamenting was praised for years, whereas bad was ridiculed. It was a great shame if there were no lamentations at the funeral. Lamentations were even sometimes funny. There is an anecdotal story about a woman who cried: "Give me a glass of brandy so that I may die immediately." Someone quickly approached, offering her brandy in a rather small glass. She refused and went on: "Bring me a large one, so that I may die at this very moment."

The dead person was kept in the house a day or two, and even three or four days in the past. In the morning of the funeral day, a member of the family would bring the cross and the common coffin from the cemetery, as well as lime to seal the grave. Half an hour before the funeral, the bell would toll for the first time to announce that the dead person had started its last journey. All villagers gathered in front of the dead person's house fifteen minutes before the funeral. The priest came to say blessings and prayers for the soul of the dead. The bell would toll again. The family kissed the dead person. Wrapped in a sheet, it would be transferred into the coffin and closed with the cover. This was the time for the funeral to start.

According to the folklore, when carried out of the house, the dead person was to be taken with the legs forward to prevent his or her return. The coffin was carried by young strong men of the family: sons, sons-in-law, brothers, grandsons, nephews. Only if there were not enough family members, the dead person could be carried by somebody else. The master of the funeral arranged the procession. First went the cross – carried by one of the boys of the family. After the cross went men, flowers, singers, (earlier members of the brotherhood) priests with altar boys, and then the coffin. The coffin was followed by

the family, relatives, with women and young girls at the end. The widows or sick women would wait at the windows and start to lament when the procession came near, sending regards to the dead members of their family.

Up to the 1950s, in Podgora there were two brotherhoods: of the Holy Sacrament and of Saint Cyril and Methodius. In the 17th century, there was one more brotherhood – of the Lady of Conception (7). At least one member from every family belonged to one of the brotherhoods, and some of them to both. The members of the brotherhood used to offer support to the grieving family, especially to widows with children, for whom they used to collect money. At the funeral of a deceased member of the brotherhood, every member carried a lit candle. The wife did not go to the funeral, but followed him by lamentations from her window.

If a newborn baby died, it would be dressed in white, laid on a small bench, covered with white veil and in the morning taken to cemetery by its father. Some other members of the close family would accompany the father. If a school-boy or schoolgirl died, the whole class would go to the funeral, including their teacher. The mothers never went to funerals of their children. For small children (up to the age of 10) there are small, so called angel's graves. There are six such graves in front of St. Tekla's church. People would refer to a dead child as our celestial boy or our celestial girl.

The cemetery of Sutikla (St. Tekla) is the place where predecessors of all indigenous citizens of Podgora are buried. One can still see very old stone tombs, with only symbols and very seldom somebody's name inscribed on them. Almost all tombs belonged to tribes – groups of several related families with the same family name, larger of which had 2 or 3 common tombs. A deceased could be buried in the common grave only after 6 months had passed since the last burial. In the eve of the funeral, the tomb was opened and if there was not enough place for

the dead person, the previous corpse would be slightly moved. In the old times, the dead would be buried wrapped only in a white sheet, which had a symbolic meaning. Even today, when buried in old common tombs from the 17th century bodies are wrapped only in a sheet because of the narrow opening of the grave.

In the dead person's house no meals were prepared for 8 days, and in the old days even for 30 days. The adults would bring their meals from outside, while the children would go to their neighbors. This same custom still lives but now only for 2 or 3 days. In the dead person's house the window shutters remained closed for 8 days after the funeral and no laundry was done or hung out in a visible place. The oil candles were lit, mirrors and pictures veiled. The house was not to be painted, pot flowers removed, cakes baked, and eggs brought to church for blessing. No agricultural works were to be done, except olive picking.

Up to the 1960s, evening prayers would be held in the house of the deceased. The praying would start immediately after the funeral and would usually last for 8 evenings, attended by other villagers. The prayer was lead by a fore-prayer, a man good at praying. When the prayers finished, the people would stay a while longer in the house discussing news, everyday matters, and even tell jokes. In case of a death of small child, no prayers took place.

When a husband died, the widow would wear mourning till the end of her life. The black scarf (*vaculet*) was the most important part of her clothing. It had to be tied under her chin. She would also stop decorating herself. She could wear the wedding ring, earrings with a black stone, and later on a short string of black Murano beads. This custom started to disappear around the middle of the 20th century. After the death of parents or one of the siblings, women wore mourning for three years. When a child died, the mother wore mourning for several months or several years, depending on the child's age. Some

women were not widows but they wore mourning permanently because of other deaths in the family. Only women and girls wore mourning, and men usually put a piece of black ribbon on the lapel. Earlier in history the widowers would remain unshaved for some time.

Many of these funeral and mourning customs in Podgora are still practiced, but are likely to disappear with ongoing modernization. This essay is an attempt to preserve them in written memory.

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