

## **Travels with Anzie: Treating Death in France**

October 2021

Last Saturday Anzie and I went to the funeral of a friend's wife. As we get older we attend more funerals. This one in particular was very different. It may well give us a picture of what funerals may be like in our country in the future.

Viviane was the wife of Jacky La Rocha. We met as team members at a pub Trivia Night almost two years ago. Viviane was diagnosed with cancer shortly after that. When we visited her at home, she wasn't doing well. Finally, after a two-year battle, she succumbed. We really weren't sure how to express our condolences. We called Jacky and left a message of our sympathy. We were surprised to get a call-back. Jacky invited us to the funeral. We called friends Roger and Beatrix to ask if we could accompany them to the service, which was to be held in Bezier, about a half hour's drive from Pézenas. The service was to be held at a crematorium

Of course we were expecting a church. Instead, we arrived at a modern, expansive, single level building with hundreds of people milling outside. Roger and Beatrix introduced us to some people who Roger said we had met before. We carried on conversations in French and English as we waited for the doors to open.

When they opened we followed Roger as the crowd moved in and then, stopped. We noted that there were 12 rooms with different names, some named after provinces in France, other famous (?) surnames we didn't recognize. There was an electronic panel that kept rolling with the names of the deceased and the room their service would be in. There were six services that morning. An announcement came over the loud speaker that Viviane's service was about to start. We entered a large room with benches for about 200. The room was plainly decorated: all white walls and ceiling. Above our heads was the only evidence of color: four terra cotta bas reliefs of cavorting cupids. At the front was a podium and two large doors.

A young woman came to the podium, and announced that Vivienne had been catholic and that she was authorized by the Archbishop of Bezier to conduct the service. She then faced the large doors, which opened to expose a room about the size of a garage. The back wall was a curtain. Could the furnace be close by? In the center was Viviane's coffin on a trolley. Two young men in black wheeled the trolley into the front of our room, next to the podium. The doors closed automatically, and the service began. Members of the family put flowers and lighted tea candles on the coffin. The rest of the

service was like any other: family members spoke about the loved one; Jacky spoke, amid tears, with his two sons flanking him. Music accompanied parts of the service, broadcast over a speaker system.

At the end, the leader said her final words and removed the flowers and candles; the large doors opened; the coffin was swallowed up, and the service ended. We spoke to Jacky outside. He said he wanted to see us before we leave end of October. And that was it.

Never before had we heard of a funeral service conducted at a crematorium. Have you? When son Pete died in upstate New York, the closest crematorium was in Connecticut. I found listings for two crematoriums in the mid-sized town of Bezier. Friend Roger surmises that the difference in popularity of cremation between our two countries is in direct proportion to the popularity of religion. In France, religious practice is very low. He believes that it's much stronger in the States. Growing up with strong Catholic parents, I was taught that cremation was a no-no. I was somewhat amazed when my father stated that he wanted to be cremated. "It will be the first time in a long time that I'll be warm!", said he. My mother negated his request. We (Katy, Tim and I) argued long and loud but, in the end, we bowed to our mother's wish.

That was in 1991. We heard no arguments about Pete's cremation four years ago. I'm wondering if the funeral service we attended here in France is a harbinger of the future in our country.

What do you think?

A la prochaine,

*Chuck & Anne*