This page is for you. We welcome submissions of essays, short stories, an excerpt from your book, and opinion pieces. Professional writers, experts, and amateurs are all invited to contribute. Send an email with the subject line VOICES to trina@icondv.com. Include your name, address, and phone number. If your piece is chosen to be published we'll let you know and only print your name.

Tombstone Tourist

By Fredricka Maister

"I HAD THE TIME of my life in Père Lachaise Cemetery," I told everyone when I returned from Paris. Even in the telling I could feel the rush of adrenaline I experienced during my five-hour stroll through the 110-acre funeral park on the eastern edge of Paris.

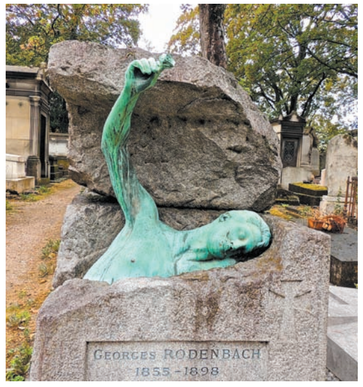
Like a good tourist, during my short stay in Paris at the end of a two-week trip through Brittany and Normandy, I made sure to visit two museums I'd never explored: La Musée Marmottan Monet and Musée D'Orsay. I was awed by Claude Monet's waterlily murals in the Marmottan's basement, especially since I had seen the waterlilies the day before in the artist's garden in Giverny. And how could I not be impressed by D'Orsay with its Beaux-Arts railway station setting, extensive collection of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art, and sweeping views of the Seine and rooftops of Paris?

But odd as it may seem, Père Lachaise Cemetery was the highlight of my trip or, as we Francophiles say, "la pièce de resistance." At the top of my bucket list for years, Père Lachaise did not disappoint. Not only is it the final resting place of The Doors' Jim Morrison but celebrated luminaries of particular interest to me such as Edith Piaf, Oscar Wilde, Molière, Chopin Pissaro, Modigliani, Marcel Marceau, and countless others. Even the unpredictable French weather cooperated during my visit, the ominous skies waiting to open up just as I was about to leave.

Père Lachaise was like a city within a city with winding, cobble-stoned, tree-lined "avenues," "boulevards," "chemins," and even a roundabout. Street signs marked the "divisions" in this non-denominational cemetery with 70,000 tombstones and mausoleums of the well-known, lesser-known and unknown. Monuments ran the gamut from simple and unadorned to ornate and ostentatious.

Even with the cemetery map provided by the administration office listing the "most-searched-for burial places," navigating Père Lachaise felt like a treasure hunt based on luck and chance encounters. Near the main entrance, I was pleasantly shocked to stumble upon my first famous person. Etched on a tombstone were the words "Ici Repose Colette." I had discovered the writer Colette. She didn't appear on the map.

I found Marcel Marceau thanks to an American tourist on her third visit to the cemetery



William Young Georges Rodenbach, a Belgian novelist buried at Père Lachaise Cemetery, has a tomb showing someone coming out of the grave with a rose in his hand. Rodenbach's most famous work was over the death of his wife.

within a week. I had seen the world-renowned mime perform decades ago at New York's Carnegie Hall. "He's to the right of the chapel up the hill," she told me. Since Marceau's tomb bore a Star of David to identify him as a Jew, I solemnly, mime-like, placed a small stone on his grave, as is customary in Jewish tradition. That act made me feel connected to him as a Jew and as an admiring fan who had stopped by to honor his life and remember him in death.

I accidentally discovered Edith Piaf when I noticed a few people congregated around a grave that simply said, "Famille Gassion-Piaf." Engraved on the side was "Madame Lamboukas (the surname of her last husband) dite Edith Piaf (1915-1963)." A long-stemmed red rose lay on top. I could just see and hear Piaf soulfully crooning her signature song, "La Vie en Rose." I later found Yves Montand, Piaf's protégé and legendary actor of French cinema, buried alongside his wife, the actress Simone Signoret, in a nondescript double grave.

In addition to the outside, above-ground monuments were the multi-story columbarium with its endless rows of niches holding the remains of thousands, including Max Ernst, Isadora Duncan, Max Ophuls, and Maria Callas. I searched for Richard Wright to no avail; I kept getting lost among the niches. Even as I descended alone into the dimly lit underground stories of the columbarium, I wasn't fearful or spooked; on the contrary, I felt comforted by the silent community of dead souls who had opted to be cremated.

I took a rest break on the columbarium steps with its view of the fully-functioning crematorium. The irony of watching smoke billow from a crematorium's chimneys on European soil was not lost on me. As a descendant of the millions of Jews sent to the ovens in the Holocaust, I sat in quiet reflection.

I did not want to dwell on the Holocaust; I wanted to hold onto my adventure roaming the cemetery in search of elusive celebrities. However, when I followed the circular driveway leading to the exit, I entered a section with huge, towering monuments commemorating war veterans, resistance fighters, the 147 insurgents shot during the uprising of the Paris Commune in 1871, and yes, the deportees sent to concentration camps like Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, and Dachau. It seemed only fitting to remember and pay homage to the nameless defenders and the defenseless who had no graves to visit. By then, it had started to drizzle.

As I made my way to the exit, a headstone suddenly jumped out at me — Gertrude Stein! I stopped dead in my tracks.

The drizzle became torrential, but I didn't care. I put up my umbrella and stared at the surprisingly austere grave, covered with small stones. Her life partner, Alice B. Toklas, was on the other side of the headstone.

Colette at the beginning and Gertrude Stein at the end — two female literary giants had bookended my visit to "the city of the dead." As a female writer, could I have asked for more?

Floating euphorically, I walked through the gates of Père Lachaise back into the hustle and bustle of Paris. ■

Père Lachaise Cemetery. Photo: Joe Cornish