

Evolution in Funeral Practices in Paris, France



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This article explores the evolution of funeral practices for isolated and marginalised people in Paris, particularly through the work of the Collective Les Morts de la Rue France. Over the past twenty years, cooperation between civil society and the municipality has contributed to more dignified and humane burial practices. The article highlights how inequalities experienced in life can continue after death and the importance of addressing them collectively.

The French law (Art. 2213-7, 2223-17, and 2223-19 of the general code of territorial collectives) obliges municipalities to proceed at their own expense with the burial of persons lacking sufficient funds and/or without close family (next of kin) to take care of funeral arrangements. These persons must be «decently buried without religious distinctions».

Burials are carried out in the 'common burial ground' of cemeteries, and for a minimum of five years during which the family can claim the body to arrange a funeral or move it to a family burial site.

In France, mass graves have been prohibited since 1804, but the term continued to be used in the communal code until 1991. It was then replaced by 'common ground' or 'fraternity ground'. In those areas, municipalities usually bury people without close family or without financial resources. Every municipality organises the burials in its own way, and several cities have established agreements with charities to make sure the funerals are as dignified as possible. Since 2004 in Paris, the Collective Les Morts de La Rue has had an agreement with Paris City Hall, to be made aware of homeless people's funerals and to make sure everyone has dignified burials.

The Genesis

In the early 2000s, social workers and people experiencing homelessness noticed the high number of homeless people's deaths in Paris. They had difficulties knowing when the burials would take place, to be present and pay homage. When the Collective was created in 2004, the founders received an agreement proposal from the Paris municipality: providing funeral assistance for isolated people. The Collective accepted for 2 reasons:

- To be informed of burial dates to try to contact those close to the deceased (family, friends, charities, etc),
- To ensure dignified burials, with personalised homage, for everybody.

Not all those isolated people had experienced homelessness. A large proportion of the people buried by the city were people living in retirement homes or apartments, but without family

members organising the funerals. However, agreeing to accompany those deaths was not only a civic gesture but also a source of information about homeless people's deaths.

How it Works

The Collective is informed by the morgue and the Paris Funeral Services a few days before the body of a deceased person, for whom public services have not found any relatives, is released.

Upon receiving the identity of the deceased, the relatives outreach team from the Collective searches for that person's loved ones (family, neighbours, friends, etc.). The first goal is to notify those who have not been informed of the death and to tell them the date and place of burial. The second reason is to collect details about the lives of the deceased from people who knew them, allowing volunteers to personalise and enrich the tribute they're preparing. The Collective reaches out to hospital administrative services, social services, charities, police stations, and building managers, as well as friends, ex-spouses, neighbours, neighbourhood shopkeepers, etc. Work that often proves fruitful and, when successful, means that relatives can be physically present or present through messages passed on to the volunteers.

The convoys are collective, and they take place on Tuesdays from the city morgue and from the mortuary chambers of the various Parisian hospitals on Wednesdays. The hearse carries four coffins at a time, but an individual time for remembrance is respected when transporting the body in the mortuary chamber and during the cemetery burial. Two volunteers from the Collective accompany each convoy. They are present at the morgue or at the hospital mortuary chambers to remember the deceased people and accompany the transportation of the body. They then go to the Thiais cemetery with the hearse and pay tribute to the person who died, during the burial. They read a text they have prepared or a poem and place a flower on the grave in the name of the Collective. In addition, a written record of the funeral is kept for each of the deceased persons, for families who sometimes only learn of the death afterwards. They can then be told what happened, which text was read, what flower was placed, what the weather was like, etc. It can help them with their grief. On another note, the Collective can be informed of any irregularities during the burial from those transcripts.

In the 2010's, the volunteers accompanied between 200 and 250 deceased people each year. Since 2020, the number of people accompanied by the Collective has risen sharply, from 242 in 2019 to 340 in 2020. This number has not been reduced since then. In 2025, volunteers from the Collective

paid tribute to 346 people, with 104 convoys. Of those 346 people, 110 had experienced homelessness during their lives. In half the cases, the Collective Les Morts de La Rue was able to contact some family members, friends, or charities.

The Evolution of this Action over the Years

The Collective Les Morts de la Rue has been carrying out this mission for over twenty years, with improvements possible thanks to feedback from the volunteers present at the burials, which was then shared with Paris City Hall.

Before this agreement between the Collective and the municipality, the convoys took place every Monday, and 8 people were buried the same day. No names were written on the graves, just numbers. It was not allowed to place flowers on the grave or to be present during the burials. The inequalities shocked and led social workers and people experiencing homelessness to call for action. In 2003, names were finally written on tombs. At the same time, the country experienced an intense heatwave that led to numerous deaths, especially among the elderly. Therefore, the municipality was confronted with a rising number of isolated people who had died. Then, a Deputy Mayor witnessed a burial, and this experience left a deep impression on her: the name was on a label, and the person's weight was written on the coffin to optimise the loading of the coffins into the hearse. With her help, actions were taken, and the Paris City Hall asked the Collective Les Morts de La Rue if they would consider being present at each burial of isolated people without relatives.

The Collective reflected not only on that offer, but also on how to organise secular funeral rituals and to ensure that those funerals were as dignified as any other funerals. A selection of secular readings was compiled. When volunteers started this mission, the deceased people they were accompanying were taken from the morgue to the hearse through a different exit from the one used for other deceased people. A call was made to change this. No moment of contemplation was scheduled at the morgue or at the hospitals for those who cannot go to the cemetery, but also no opportunity to pay tribute to those who died. At the time, gravediggers were dressed in work clothes. The Collective also asked not to have the weight written on the coffins and to have two convoys of four persons each, and not one convoy for eight persons.

Now, volunteers or relatives have a moment at the cemetery, but also where the body was brought after the death, to say a few words about the person. The hearse transports 4 people maximum. At the cemetery, gravediggers wear formal attire.

While these improvements are, in some cases, merely symbolic, they are important not only to close ones, but also to the professionals (grave-diggers for instance). By exchanging with professionals and by involving them to make sure the burials were as dignified as possible, it also gave greater meaning to their work and contributed to a more humane approach. The burials evolution for isolated people in Paris was developed in collaboration with the municipality. Paris is not a unique example of this cooperation in France, where other charities carry out similar work, sometimes for a longer time.

In conclusion, it is important to ensure that the inequalities affecting people in life do not continue after death.