

Me and my mausoleum: The latest in funeral fads

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [May 30, 2006](#) issue

On Sunday drives some 40 years ago, our family would travel up and down Des Plaines Avenue, which cut through Jewish Waldheim Cemetery in Forest Park, Illinois. It often took quite a while because of the traffic. Children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the people buried there remembered the sites and the people they honored. Jews are known for their respect for the dead and have stipulated rituals for showing it.

Today the traveler is not likely to find many autos or living human beings in those cemeteries that occupy two sides of the road, though 175,000 people are buried in plots created by West Side Chicago synagogues. After 1875, some 300 congregations and other groups bought burial space and fenced it off. Only 15,000 Jews live in the Western suburbs near the cemeteries.

Some of those buried are notable. There is a headstone for Avrom Hirsch Goldbogen, who died in a plane crash in 1956. He was also named Mike Todd, and was briefly married to Elizabeth Taylor. Clara "Where's the Beef" Peller (d. 1987) lies here, a sign that some burials are fairly recent. One of the O'Banion gang has a marked site, as does one of the members of Bugs Moran's gang who was killed in the St. Valentine's Day Massacre in 1929.

The monument you cannot help noticing even at 35 mph is Egyptian-styled and marked "In Memoriam to Ida Balaban Katz," part of a famed theater-owning clan.

About 174,995 others, all of them once upon a time important to families and often to the community, go unremarked. Many of the fences and gates and arches have fallen. (You can see photos at graveyards.com/IL/Cook/Waldheim.)

The conviction that families should show respect for their elders, especially when they suffered as much as did late-arriving immigrants who came after the 1881 pogroms, deserves admiration. The time comes when each mortal, having flourished

like a flower in the field, “is gone, and its place knows it no more” (Ps. 103:16).

Families remembering a place is one thing. Building a mausoleum for oneself is another. The newest fad among the superrich who need the tax cuts to benefit the economy is to build grand mausoleums to honor themselves. Guy Trebay reported in the *New York Times* (April 17) that a “small but growing number of Americans . . . have erected that most pharaonic of monuments to life-in-death, the private family mausoleum,” whose cost can run into the millions. The reporter talked to Ed and Nancy Peck. “Mr. Peck says he decided he did not want to spend eternity underground.” He explained, “I did not want to be in the ground covered with weeds and whatnot and totally forgot. I don’t like the idea of dirt being dumped on me.”

Nancy Lohman, co-owner of Florida cemeteries for folks like the Pecks, provides theological justification: “The mausoleum says, ‘I’m really significant in this world,’ . . . and this is one way to communicate that to the community.”

Thomas Lynch, writer and funeral director, comments: “It’s in keeping with the McMansion mentality of boomers. . . . Real estate is an extension of personhood.”

Recently I saw an aerial view of the excavated ruins of Babylon. Alas, the city’s splendors were made of mud, and what looked durable was carted off by plunderers and European museums. Now U.S. helicopters pulverize the fragile ruins and marines leave graffiti. “Hi, Vanessa. I love you.” Vanessa’s name we know. The people who honored themselves with their monuments to themselves are forgotten. Nothing lasts.

I did not finish quoting Psalm 103: “But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him.”