

Memorial Requests

by Barbara H. Cane, Attorney at Law

When Mr. Cohen died it came as a shock to the family. In some sense it should not have. After all, he was 85 and had been in a nursing home suffering from Alzheimer's disease for over a year. Before his illness he used to observe that "immortality doesn't seem to run in the family" and was quite matter of fact discussing the ultimate fate we all share. But when the phone call came, the news was sharp, painful and unexpected.

Mr. Cohen's son realized just how short a time twenty-four hours is to make all the necessary arrangements for a funeral. He felt thankful that his father had spoken so frankly about his wishes to him and to his stepmother. While Mr. Cohen had not spelled out every detail, at least he had given them enough guidance to make the decisions which had to be made. First, while Mr. Cohen had not been religiously observant, his Jewish heritage informed his outlook. When it came to ritual matters, one might say that "the synagogue he chose not to attend was Orthodox". Mrs. Cohen felt very strongly that the desire her husband had expressed for a "traditional Jewish burial" meant just that, so when the funeral director asked if a shomer (guardian) should be engaged to watch over his body at all time, the answer was "yes" without hesitation. The same was true about the decision to have the Cheva Kadisha (holy society) wash the body according to religious law. Other responses were consistent with these choices: the body would be wrapped in a simple shroud, no embalming or adornment would occur.

Many years ago Mr. Cohen's father had purchased a family cemetery plot, and Mr. Cohen who had honored his own parents by taking responsibility for their burial, had given his son the deed to the plot, a sketch of the graves, and the phone number of the cemetery. What a relief to have this information instead of just the vague notion that many people have that the cemetery is "somewhere on Long Island" or "out in Queens"! The sketch showed Mr. Cohen's spot next to his first wife, who died about twenty-five years ago. He and his second wife (herself a widow) had decided that each would be buried next to their first spouse so there was no bad feeling on this point. As for choosing a casket, Mr. Cohen had told his son that a plain wooden box, the model "one step up from an orange crate" as he put it, would be fine. How grateful he was for his father's direction! In his grief, the description of pillows and plush linings in the fancier models had enormous (and unexpected) psychological appeal, but his father's words guided his decision to honor traditional simplicity.

Despite her own poor health, Mrs. Cohen had no doubt that she would be present at the grave side. The rabbi assured her that a simple graveside

service would fulfill her obligations. A service at a funeral home, synagogue or other location before the one at the cemetery was permissible, he explained, but not required. Mr. Cohen's children delivered eulogies from the heart and other relatives and friends added their words to those of the rabbi.

Kim Andrews, the Cohen's neighbor and friend, observed that the shiva calls and other expressions of condolence were truly a comfort to the mourning family. In the weeks which followed, Mrs. Andrews thought more about her own situation. When her mother died a few years ago, decisions were made in a rush, more money was spent than was appropriate (despite financial problems), and the family was still not comfortable with the arrangements. She and her husband come from different parts of the world, different traditions and different personal and religious sensibilities. They have no "family plot" nor consensus about what is proper. They have never explicitly discussed these matters with each other, much less with their children. Once Mr. Andrews made an offhand remark that he "wants to be cremated and have his ashes scattered in the sea." The Cohen's example, and the unexpected heart attack of their 55 year old neighbor, made Mrs. Andrews start thinking. She has made an appointment to look at a cemetery plot and begun to research cremation and other options. Most important, she has asked her husband to set aside time so they can have a frank discussion about these questions and how they might resolve them.

Lucia Santorelli, an interior decorator, listened attentively to the thoughts of her friend Kim Andrews when they discussed the Cohen funeral. She knew her family would want the type of funeral which was traditional in her Catholic family: a wake with a beautiful and open casket, mass cards, and lots of flowers. She also realized that she would want any donations in her memory go to build the collection of art history books at her local library. As she reflected upon how diverse the people whose homes she had helped decorate in the last year, and how little could be assumed about what each person's wishes would be regarding making arrangements for their "final resting place", she met with her lawyer. As part of her planning, she created a sheet of "Memorial Requests" and thought it would be a useful document for everyone. The form her lawyer gave her had a space to specify preferences for burial, place of service, officiant, choice of casket style, place of interment, charitable donations, and other details important to her. Once completed, she would give her "Memorial Requests" to her sister and best friend, the people likely to carry out her wishes. Not only would it be a practical aid for those who must make arrangements at a time of grief, but a list of "Memorial Requests" would give survivors the comfort of knowing they had fulfilled her wishes. The ability to accept the fact of death is a blessing.

Each of us can help those who will mourn us by accepting our own mortality and guiding our loved ones through the practical and spiritual steps to accept it.

c. 2004 Barbara H. Cane, Law Office of Barbara H. Cane 845-353-7314 or 212-864-6401. info@canelaw.net; www.canelaw.net