Obituary : Franz Joseph Rempfler : 7 August 1915 - 28 May 2009

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Taking home the dead

Ali Furat has anything but a nine-to-five job: his work involves repatriating the bodies of deceased Muslims to their homelands.

Furat handles around 400 repatriations each year and says that despite getting satisfaction from the job, the sense of sadness and loss is always there.

In the 12 years since he founded the company, business has grown to the point where he no longer bothers to add pins to the map of the world on his wall. Today, he has contacts on every continent. Autumn and winter are the busy seasons, since more people die at that time of the year.

Furat, who is married to a Swiss, began the job almost by accident. He was part of a committee in Switzerland overseeing a fund for the repatriation of Turks. But Muslims from other countries were coming to him for advice, especially when dealing with the authorities. Eventually in 1997 he decided to set up a business.

"I get a certain pleasure from being able to help people at a difficult time. When a woman loses her husband, for example, first there is grief, followed by stress and panic. How do you get a body back to a small village somewhere in Anatolia?"

This is where Furat steps in with his four employees. They take over the ritual cleansing and dressing of the body and deal with the formalities for its repatriation.

His company repatriates Muslims from all over Switzerland to their homelands, but he does business with other religions too.

"We have already sent a Jew back to Turkey, a Mormon woman to Spain and recently a Catholic to Kosovo," he said. "The Muslim community provides our core business, but we deal with everyone."

Furat's company also repatriates Swiss who have died abroad. It those cases his work involves close collaboration with the foreign ministry, insurers and local partners.

"I have a sad job," Furat admits. "For some people, death is an end to everything. Others believe they will see each other again after dying. But we don't know what to expect."

The worst for Furat is when a mother loses a child, no matter the age. He has never forgotten a scene at Bern's University hospital, when a 72-year-old man died. At his side was a very elderly woman, stroking his hair, talking and crying. She was 94 and had lost her son. He cannot get used to such moments and tries to avoid them. "My heart should be made of stone," he admits. He says most people want to be buried where their family lives and where they grew up. He has met many Turks who moved to Switzerland in the 1960s to work but who want to be laid to rest in Turkey.

Furat wants to be buried in Switzerland though, in the Muslim section of a local cemetery. His wife and two children live here.   *from swissinfo*

Franz Joseph Rempfler
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Franz was born in Enggenhütten near Appenzell, as the fourth of thirteen children. His parents had a farm with six cows and a few pigs. After 7 years of half day schooling he worked in Schwägalp for two summers and for a farmer in Thurgau. After the Rekrutenschule he found himself an apprenticeship as a cheesemaker. In his first year he learnt to make Appenzeller, then, in Jonschwil, he made Emmentaler, Tilsiter and Gruyere. Just before the war Franz went to the Molkereischule Rüti and passed the Master cheesemaker exams. Franz loved cheesemaking, but there was no future in it for him in Switzerland, as his family didn't own a Käserei. When one of his former apprentices emigrated to New Zealand and wrote glowing reports back home, Franz decided to emigrate, too, in 1954.

He found a job as a cheesemaker in Featherston, but as much as he loved his trade, he did not like the cheese factory there; it wasn't up to his standards. Although the pay was good, he despaired and left after a year. After a few years in various jobs he had saved enough to buy his own poultry farm and he was his own boss. He worked hard all his life, but he always enjoyed work and took great pleasure in doing everything well.

Franz was a great gardener. He looked after his begonias and his roses in his own garden and in friends' gardens as if they were his children. Until a year before his death he looked after the garden around the Swiss Clubhouse. Franz was also a generous sponsor of the Swiss Club Samichlaus. He had many good friends who had become his New Zealand family.

In summer Franz liked to go swimming, and his swimming season was longer than everybody else's. Apart from worn-out knees and a worn-out shoulder he was fit and healthy into his nineties.

The Wellington Swiss Club and his many friends will always remember him.

HM/tb