

Grandpa's Grave

I can understand that Eugenie has a lot of questions after seeing the picture of Grandpa's grave, since she must have had something else in mind, but believe me, there is no doubt about it because this is the tombstone of our grandfather Francisco Gonsalves Serrão, who was born in Madeira in 1853 and died in Surinam on December 15th 1917. As a matter of fact the whole family who lives in Surinam knows that he was buried on this cemetery in the district of Surinam on the corner of the Welgedacht A weg and the Pad van Wanica. This is about 14 km south of Paramaribo, which is the capital of Surinam.

Ever since I was a young girl, the place of this grave was pointed out to me many times by my mother and also by aunt Georgina. At that time the cemetery was inaccessible because of high thick bushes and trees and was closed for burials. My mother was always complaining about this inaccessibility, whenever we passed this spot on our way to aunt Georgina, who was living very close to this cemetery.

When aunt Georgina died on October 27th 1982, I was in Surinam and so I was able to attend the funeral together with my brother Carlos and his wife. She was buried on this same cemetery, which was now cleared of bushes and was again open for burials. It is a small cemetery and was crowded with people, so we didn't get a chance to look around. Shortly after her death Dirk and I moved back to Holland with our children.

Dirk and I returned to Surinam in 1995. Our children had completed their study and stayed living in Holland, so it were just the two of us who went back to my place of birth. In this year Dirk celebrated his 60th birthday in Surinam, so our son Jan came over to help us celebrate. We drove him around to all the well-known places and also stopped by this cemetery to have a look and we soon found aunt Georgina's grave, who was buried next to her husband Frederik Nederbiel who died on december 24th 1930. As we turned around we saw the tombstone of our Grandfather, who was buried very close by their grave. So this is how I saw our Grandfather's grave for the very first time.

I don't know why your mother never told you, that you were born on the same day that her father died ten years earlier. I think that your mother was not in Surinam when their father died. Your mother was given away to Tia at an early age, just like how my mother and the baby Rosa were given away to Portuguese friends after the death of their mother. Our Grandfather must have been unable to take care of all of his six daughters. So I think your mother must have been in Guyana and did not experience the death of her father in the same way as her sisters did, who were with him in Surinam. Maybe she did not know the exact date of her father's death. If I am wrong I would like you to correct me.

My mother was born on June 28th 1901 and she was 16 years old when her father died in 1917. So the date on his tombstone is correct as it matches with what my mother always told me. Aunt Georgina, who was born on October 18th 1896, was already married and was pregnant with her first child when her father

died. In the last months of his life when he was ill he was living with aunt Georgina. After my mother got the news that her father was ill she left the people she was staying with to be with her sick father,
If your mother said that her father was from Lisbon, she was wrong about that, because all of her other sisters said that he was born in Madeira; they even wrote it on his grave.

I agree that the name Gonsalves is a common Iberian Peninsula sur-name, but Serrão is special. Besides our family I have never heard of this name in Surinam.

Then the question why he was not buried next to Grandma is simple to understand if you know the situation of the country in those early years of the 20th century. The roads were all dirt roads and there were hardly any cars or buses. A lot of traveling was done by donkey car and the death were buried by a carriage that was pulled by two horses. The mourners walked behind this carriage. Grandma died when they were living in town so she was buried in town. When Grandpa died he was living about 14 kilometers south of Paramaribo, so the easiest thing to do was to bury him close to where he was living. This cemetery is adjacent to a church that still exists and this is the church where they were living close by and attending masses. In town the cemeteries are on their own and usually have a small chapel for funeral services. I hope that my explanation has been clear enough for you to understand why Grandpa was not buried next to Grandma.

On your question if I can send you a picture of Grandma's grave; the answer is no. This is not because I don't know where she was buried, but just because this cemetery does not exist anymore. My mother had also pointed out this cemetery to me. Actually it was about four blocks away from where we used to live. This cemetery was cleared at the end of the 1940s and a big school was built on this spot. I don't know what happened to the tombstones.

Now about our mother's half brother Francisco Jr. I don't know when he died, but he surely didn't die at the age of 25. He was 12 years old when he left Madeira with his parents in 1891, so he was born in 1879. My mother was born in 1901, so he was 22 years older than my mother. In 1925 when your parents got married, he was there in Guyana because he is to be seen on their wedding-picture. In 1940 when my brother Robbie was a baby, (he was born on October 8th 1939), we were living in the country next to aunt Georgina, when Francisco Gonsalves Serrão Jr. paid us a visit. I can remember this very well because of all the commotion that occurred when Francisco's wife fell off the stairs. He was married, but according to my mother, they had no children and never lived in Surinam. He must have moved from Guyana to Venezuela, because that's where they were living when they paid us a visit in Surinam in 1940. To find his grave, we would have to know in what town or village he lived in Venezuela, maybe in Maracaibo. Who knows!

When I return to Surinam, I will try to get a copy of the death certificate of grandpa; that is if it is not burned in the several fires that occurred in Surinam in the past decades.

Date: April 30th, 1999
Bonaire, Netherlands Antilles

Edith

P.S

We had moved back to town in 1942, when my brother Carlos was 7 years old, so he could go to school in town.