



# Funerary Practices in the Czech Republic

**Olga Nešporová**

Funerary International Series

# FUNERARY PRACTICES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

# Funerary International

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# FUNERARY PRACTICES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	ix
<i>List of Tables</i>	xi
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xiii
<i>Foreword</i>	xv
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xix
<i>Map of the Czech Republic</i>	xxi
1. Introduction	1
2. History	5
2.1 The Eighteenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries	5
2.1.1 Demography and Epidemiology	7
2.1.2 Burial Sites	10
2.1.3 The Funeral Directing Industry	14
2.2 The Cremation Movement	15
2.2.1 The Czech German Cremation Movement	16
2.2.2 The Czech Cremation Movement	18
2.2.3 The Interwar Period	21
2.3 The First and Second World Wars	24
2.3.1 The First World War	24
2.3.2 Influenza Pandemic	25
2.3.3 The Second World War	26
2.4 The Communist Period in Czechoslovakia (1948–1989)	27

2.4.1	The Promotion of Civil Funerals	30
2.4.2	Infrastructure	30
2.4.3	The Occurrence of Secular Funerals	32
2.5	Following the Velvet Revolution in 1989	34
2.5.1	Continuity in the Funeral Industry	35
2.5.2	Religion and Secularisation	36
3.	Demographic and Legal Frameworks	39
3.1	The Demography of Mortality	39
3.2	Czech Legislation Concerning Death	43
3.2.1	The Registration of Deaths	43
3.2.2	Social Funerals	46
3.3	Principal Legislation Concerning Funeral Directing	47
3.3.1	Trade Licence	48
3.3.2	Advertising Regulations	49
3.3.3	The Regulation of Funeral Fees	49
3.3.4	Planning and the Environment	51
4.	Crematoria and Cremation	53
4.1	Development since the 1950s	53
4.1.1	The Period of Communist Rule (1948–1989)	53
4.1.2	The Post-communist Period (after 1989)	58
4.2	Cremation Rates since the 1950s	59
4.3	The Functioning of Crematoria	61
4.3.1	Running a Crematorium	63
4.3.2	The Cremation Industry	64
4.3.3	The Cremation Process	65
4.4	The Disposal of the Ashes	66
4.4.1	Placing the Ashes in a Grave or Columbarium	68
4.4.2	The Scattering of the Ashes	70
4.4.3	The Digging in of the Ashes under a Piece of Lawn	71

4.4.4	Ashes Outside Cemeteries	73
5.	The Funeral and the Funeral Ceremony	77
5.1	Types of Funeral	79
5.2	The Typical Funeral: Secular Funeral with a Civil Ceremony	82
5.2.1	The Time between Death and the Funeral	83
5.2.2	Ordering a Funeral	84
5.2.3	The Death Notice	85
5.2.4	The Funeral Ceremony	87
5.2.5	Dress Code	91
5.2.6	Funeral Tea	91
5.2.7	General Facts about Secular Funeral Ceremonies	92
5.3	The Religious Funeral – Roman Catholic	94
5.3.1	Religious Affiliation	99
5.4	Cremation without a Funeral Ceremony	100
5.5	DIY Funerals	101
6.	Funeral Costs	105
6.1	The Costs of Funeral Services	106
6.1.1	Minimum and Average Prices	106
6.1.2	Direct Cremation	109
6.1.3	Social Funerals	109
6.1.4	The Funeral Grant	110
6.2	Cemetery Costs	111
7.	Burial Sites	115
7.1	Burial Sites in History	115
7.2	Statistics on Contemporary Burial Sites	117
7.3	War Graves and Memorials	118
7.4	Burial Sites	120
7.4.1	Appearance	120
7.4.2	Dedicated Areas for the Placing of the Ashes	122

7.4.3 Graves	123
7.4.4 The Lease of Graves	126
7.4.5 Legislation	127
7.4.6 Conservation and the Funerary Heritage	129
7.4.7 Well-known Cemeteries	129
7.5 Natural Burial	130
8. Commemoration	133
8.1 The Visiting of Cemeteries	133
8.2 Roadside Memorials	136
8.3 Virtual Commemoration	139
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>141</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>153</i>

# LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1.	The First Crematorium in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in Liberec.	18
Figure 2.2.	The Pardubice Crematorium Constructed in the Czech National Rondo-Cubism Style.	23
Figure 2.3.	Monumental Crematorium in Prague Strašnice, Opened in 1932.	24
Figure 2.4.	A Secular Funeral Hall in Jičín.	33
Figure 4.1.	The Development of the Crematoria Network in the Former Czechoslovakia.	54
Figure 4.2.	The Crematorium in Zlín.	57
Figure 4.3.	The Crematorium in Kladno.	57
Figure 4.4.	A Cemetery Wall: Columbaria Niches with Glass Doors.	69
Figure 4.5.	Digging in of the Ashes under a Piece of Lawn.	72
Figure 4.6.	Small Homemade Urn Grave in a Garden.	75
Figure 5.1.	Charts Displaying the Proportions of the Main Types of Funerals in Different Parts of the Czech Republic: Percentages.	80

Figure 5.2.	Own Funeral Preferences According to Age: Percentages.	82
Figure 5.3.	Death Notices on the Notice Board.	86
Figure 5.4.	Coffin Resting on a Catafalque during Funeral Ceremony.	88
Figure 5.5.	Funeral Procession Leaving the Church.	97
Figure 5.6.	Lowering the Coffin into the Grave during a Religious Funeral.	98
Figure 7.1.	Lawn for the Digging in of the Ashes at a Cemetery in Litomyšl.	123
Figure 7.2.	Technical Scheme of a Grave.	124
Figure 7.3.	Graves with Headstones with a Space for Urns.	126
Figure 8.1.	Cemetery in Autumn on the Occasion of All Saints and All Souls Days.	134
Figure 8.2.	Roadside Memorial Commemorating a Traffic Accident Victim.	137

# LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1.	Average Life Expectancy at Birth by Gender From 1875 to 1980.	8
Table 2.2.	Cremations in the Czech Lands in the First Half of the Twentieth Century.	22
Table 2.3.	Religious Affiliation in the Czech Lands According to Census Data 1921–2011: Percentages.	29
Table 3.1.	Development of Mortality Indicators in the Czech Republic (1980–2017).	40
Table 3.2.	Place of Death in 2017: Percentages.	41
Table 4.1.	Cremations in the Former Czechoslovakia and Today's Czech Republic in Selected Years (1950–2018).	59
Table 5.1.	Declared Church Affiliation and Religious Faith in the Czech Republic.	95
Table 6.1.	Funeral Costs, 2016.	107
Table 6.2.	Prices for Cemetery Services and Equipment, 2016.	112

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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DIY	Do it yourself
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679
ČSÚ	Český statistický úřad [Czech Statistical Office]
ÚZIS	Ústav zdravotnických informací a statistiky ČR [Institute of Health Information and Statistics of the Czech Republic]
WHO	World Health Organisation

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# FOREWORD

Even though the Czech Republic is only a small landlocked country situated in the middle of Europe, it is well known due to its rich history and numerous interesting historical sites, its beer and high number of successful sports players. It is also famous for having one of the lowest levels of religiosity in the world. Moreover, the country is also outstanding in terms of its funerary culture which is characterised by one of the highest cremation rates in Europe, a high proportion of secular funerals and a significant proportion of cremations with no funeral ceremony. The current situation in this respect is very much a legacy of the country's historical and cultural development, stemming particularly from practices introduced in the first half of the twentieth century that were purposely reinforced during the Communist era in the second half of the century.

As a social anthropologist, the author is naturally most concerned with the current situation with respect to funerary practices; however, she is well aware that no satisfactory account can be provided of the situation today without considering the historical background. Thus, the first chapter is devoted to the major developments that affected the funeral industry during the twentieth century, the most important of which were the advent of the cremation movement, the nationalisation of the funeral industry following the onset of

the Communist era and the growing popularity of cremation without a ceremony.

As one long time participant in the funeral industry (born in 1925) commented in 2018 when asked whether she had witnessed any particularly abrupt changes in funeral practices during her lifetime:

‘Those Communists eradicated religion.... This I see as the worst thing about the Communist era; not even during German rule [the Second World War Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia] did this happen - funerals were conducted as normal. They [the Communists] just wanted [funerals to be held] without priests. They promoted that cremation idea!’<sup>1</sup>

The book then moves on to provide information on the current funerary cultural context including relevant legislation, cremation, the most common form of funeral, funeral costs, burial sites and commemoration. All the most important topics are covered in an attempt to provide the reader with similar information as that provided by the other books in this series, bearing in mind that the structure and the emphasis of the various chapters necessarily differ from country to country.

The author’s interpretation of the current Czech funerary situation based on historical as well as contemporary research is that the historical legacy is of key importance. This legacy concerns both the various institutions and practices that have been established and their perception by ordinary Czech citizens. One of the most important factors here consists of the negative reactions of many as a result of the mandatory nature of many funerary practices introduced during the Communist era. To date, the import of funerary practices from abroad has been of minor significance due mainly to the very low level of

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<sup>1</sup> Face-to-face interview with a funeral professional from central Bohemia, 18 May 2018. The author’s own field research.

immigration to the Czech Republic; however, it is only reasonable to expect that the situation will change in this respect in the short to medium term. The current state of the Czech funerary culture is a mixture of approaches with the involvement of both the state and the private sectors; moreover, religion occupies an almost insignificant position and new secular practices are emerging only very gradually.

Olga Nešporová

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# MAP OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC



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## INTRODUCTION

The Czech Republic, a land-locked state in Central Europe, formed part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until 1918 when the new state of Czechoslovakia was established. The present-day Czech Republic made up the western and most developed part of the new country, the extensive German minority of which was expelled after the Second World War. The eastern part of the state consisted of today's Slovakia which, prior to the Second World War, also included Carpathian Ruthenia (which today forms part of Ukraine). In the second part of the twentieth century (1948–1989) Czechoslovakia formed part of the Eastern Bloc with a Communist government and a command economy. The Czech Republic in its present form came into existence in 1993 following the peaceful separation of Slovakia from Czechoslovakia as the result of a political decision agreed by parliament.

Due to its history and geographical location, the Czech Republic is one of the most advanced and economically stable states of the former Communist Bloc. It has been a member of the European Union since 2004. Nevertheless, the

Communist regime exerted a huge influence on the funeral culture, the legacy of which remains strong. The Czech Republic is made up of three main regions, Bohemia in the west, Moravia in the east and Czech Silesia in the north-east. The inhabitants of all three parts of the country use the Czech language. The total population is just over 10 million inhabitants, more than one million of whom live in the capital city, Prague (Praha). A further one million inhabitants live in the next five largest cities, each with more than 100,000 inhabitants. Two fifths (39%) of the population live in towns with more than 5,000 and less than 100,000 inhabitants and the same proportion live in towns and villages with less than 5,000 inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> With the exception of Prague, there are no major sociocultural differences between the urban and rural populations. The last three decades have seen the significant growth of suburban settlements surrounding the country's largest cities, while more remote areas are witnessing depopulation due to a lack of employment opportunities.

The Czech economy has been dependent on foreign financial capital, innovation and technology for the past 30 years or so following the post-communist transformation from a centrally planned state economy to a market economy in the early 1990s. From the outset, the labour market strategy was based on a low-wage, low-unemployment trade-off designed to maintain relatively full employment in the economy. Unemployment reached a maximum of 9% of the labour force in 2000 and increased once more during the economic recession of 2010–2013, to around 7% of the

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1 ČSÚ (2016). Počet obyvatel v obcích ČR – k 1. 1. 2016 [Population of municipalities – 1 January 2016]. Praha: Czech Statistical Office <https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/pocet-obyvatel-v-obcich>, acc. 4 Oct 2019.

labour force.<sup>2</sup> Following the end of the recession, the economy has enjoyed uninterrupted growth, and the Czech Republic had the lowest unemployment rate of any OECD country at 2% of the labour force in Q2 2019.<sup>3</sup> However, despite the favourable macroeconomic conditions and constant wage growth, wage levels continue to be well below those of Western European countries. The welfare system is based on the compulsory payment of social and health insurance contributions and is considered to be relatively generous. The Czech Republic has one of the lowest levels of poverty in the OECD.<sup>4</sup>

The Czech Republic is a multi-party democracy led by the President, Prime Minister and Parliament. As of 2020, a total of nine parliamentary political parties were represented in the Parliament, which consists of two chambers, the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. The Czech Republic is divided into 14 self-governing regions which are further divided into around 6,200 partly self-governing municipalities. Both municipalities and regions are administrated by democratically elected councils.

Events during and after the Second World War and the closure of the country's borders during the Communist era led to the formation of a homogeneous Czech population with a very low proportion of foreign minorities. Czechs (including

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2 ČSÚ (2019). Základní charakteristiky ekonomického postavení obyvatelstva ve věku 15 a více let [Basic characteristics of activity status of population aged 15 or more]. Praha: Czech Statistical Office. [https://vdb.czso.cz/vdbvo2/faces/cs/index.jsf?page=vystup-objekt&pvo=ZAM01-B&skupId=426&katalog=30853&pvo=ZAM01-B&str=v467&u=v413\\_VUZEMI\\_97\\_19](https://vdb.czso.cz/vdbvo2/faces/cs/index.jsf?page=vystup-objekt&pvo=ZAM01-B&skupId=426&katalog=30853&pvo=ZAM01-B&str=v467&u=v413_VUZEMI_97_19), acc. 22 Sep 2019.

3 OECD (2019). Unemployment rate (indicator). doi: 10.1787/997c8750-en, acc. 22 Sep 2019.

4 OECD (2019). Poverty rate (indicator). doi: 10.1787/0fe1315d-en, acc. 22 Sep 2019.

Moravians and Silesians) form around 97% of the population according to the last census of 2011; the rest of the population is made up of Slovaks (2%) and other minorities, the largest of which consist of Ukrainians, Poles, Vietnamese, Germans and Russians.<sup>5</sup>

The Czech Republic is one of the most secularised countries in the world. Only one-fifth of the population declared any type of religious faith in the census of 2011, while slightly more than one-third stated that they were atheists. Just under half the population – 45% – declined to answer the question on religion.<sup>6</sup> The degree of secularity of the Czech nation, which was high as early as at the beginning of the twentieth century, was encouraged under Communist Party rule in the second half of the century. The Roman Catholic Church, by far the largest church in the country, currently has around 1.1 million members while the second and third largest churches (both Protestant), the Protestant Church of the Czech Brethren and the Czechoslovak Hussite Church, had 52,000 and 39,000 believers respectively according to the 2011 census.<sup>7</sup> The eastern part of the Czech Republic (Moravia and Silesia) has a higher proportion of Christians than Bohemia and is also more traditional with respect to funerary practices. The number of Jews is a mere 4,000 or so, while other non-Christian denominations have memberships of several hundred at most. Many Czechs feel an aversion to organised churches, and belief without belonging to a church is common.

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5 ČSÚ (2014). *Sčítání lidu, domů a bytů 2011 [Population and housing Census 2011]*. Praha: Czech Statistical Office. <https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/scitani-lidu-domu-a-bytu-2011>, acc. 4 Oct 2019.

6 ČSÚ (2014). *Sčítání lidu, domů a bytů 2011*.

7 ČSÚ (2014). *Sčítání lidu, domů a bytů 2011*.

## 2

# HISTORY

### 2.1 THE EIGHTEENTH, NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

The end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century witnessed the introduction of new regulations governing the disposal of the body that were strongly influenced by the Enlightenment movement through its emphasis on both rationality and the importance of hygiene. Reforms were put in place by Queen Maria Theresa and her son Joseph II. The implementation of many of their regulations and decrees into practice was slow, often taking a number of decades. Some even had to be abolished due to strong popular opposition.<sup>1</sup>

A distinct line was drawn between the living and the dead during the nineteenth century with the emergence of a new ‘medicalised’ approach to death aimed at banishing the dead

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1 D. Tinková (2011). Exodus zemřelých: Počátky medikalizace smrti v pozdně osvícenských Čechách [Exodus of the death: The beginning of the medicalization of death in the period of the Enlightenment]. *Sociální studia*. 8(2): 35–55.

from the world of the living to specially created places for the deceased. At the same time, secularising tendencies were emerging in society which acted to both weaken the Christian emphasis on the salvation of the soul and strengthen the significance of the body. Despite enlightened attempts to encourage the population to see the body principally as ‘dangerously unclean’ and to introduce practical measures that respected this approach, evidence suggests that the beginning of the nineteenth century was a period in which the majority of the ordinary population began for the first time to see the body itself as important. The level of sensitivity concerning the remains of important persons as well as close relatives and loved ones increased significantly. It was the century that saw the flourishing both of a new funerary culture and a view of cemeteries as the focus of an emerging cult of death. The popular funerary culture began to follow a totally different path to that imposed upon society by the Enlightenment movement with its overriding emphasis on hygiene.<sup>2</sup>

Dying itself became more secularised as documented by a study of last wills written at the end of the nineteenth century which reveals that they had ceased to take the form of acts of reconciliation with God and had assumed a purely legal character. The rites that traditionally accompanied dying such as the farewell gathering and the last blessing were largely abandoned and children were excluded from the dying process for the first time. The location of death also became less important and dying in hospital was no longer considered to be degrading.<sup>3</sup>

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2 Tinková, *Exodus zemřelých*.

3 V. Vlnas (2001). ‘Druhý život barokního pohřbu’ [‘The second life of the Baroque funeral’]. In H. Lorenzová & T. Petrasová (eds). *Fenomén smrti v české kultuře 19. století*. Praha: Koniasch Latin Press, 13–22.

The social dimension of death was declining together with the establishment of a new funeral industry which replaced traditional funeral guilds and religious funeral fraternities (see [Section 2.1.3](#)).<sup>4</sup> Only the Jewish community maintained its funeral fraternities (*Chevra kadiša*) up to the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

### 2.1.1 Demography and Epidemiology

From the epidemiological point of view, the nineteenth century has been characterised as the Age of Receding Pandemics, during which life expectancy at birth increased steadily from around 30 to almost 50 years.<sup>6</sup> A significant fall in the incidence of epidemics and the elimination of certain diseases was accompanied by a substantial decrease in infant mortality in the final decade of nineteenth century in the Czech Lands. Life expectancy at birth of 33 years for men and 36 years for women in 1875 had increased to 39 and 44 respectively by 1900 and exceeded the important threshold of 50 years in 1920s (see [Table 2.1](#)). Despite the improvements, however, the Czech Lands significantly lagged behind the industrialised societies of Western Europe with regard to infant mortality, which remained high for most of the nineteenth century at between 250 and 280 per 1,000 live births for infants under one year.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in spite of an improvement at the end of

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4 J. Mikulec (2000). *Barokní náboženská bratrstva v Čechách* [*The Baroque Religious Fraternities in Bohemia*]. Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny; Vlnas, 'Druhý život barokního pohřbu'.

5 D. Stejskal & J. Šejvl et al. (2011). *Pohřívání a hřbitovy* [*Burial and Cemeteries*]. Praha: Wolters Kluwer ČR.

6 A. R. Omran (1971). The epidemiologic transition: a theory of the epidemiology of population change. *The Milbank Quarterly*. 49(4): 509–538.

7 Z. Pavlík, J. Rychtaříková & A. Šubrtová (1986). *Základy demografie* [*Handbook of Demography*]. Praha: Academia, 144.

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**Table 2.1. Average Life Expectancy at Birth by Gender From 1875 to 1980.**

	1875	1900	1910	1920	1930	1950	1960	1970	1980
Men	33	39	43	47	54	62	68	66	67
Women	36	44	46	50	58	67	73	73	74

*Note:* The data concerns only the population of today's Czech Republic. While it is known that the mortality rate in Slovakia and Carpathian Ruthenia was much higher, very few statistics are available from these areas.

*Sources:* Pavlík, Rychtaříková, and Šubrtová (1986), 188; ČSÚ (2018).

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the century, in 1900 the mortality rate per 1,000 live births stood at 225 for infants under one year in the Czech Lands compared to 154 in England and Wales.<sup>8</sup> The incidence of infant mortality was higher in the expanding cities, especially Prague, than in the countryside.<sup>9</sup>

Czech historian Eduard Maur argues that the high infant mortality rate exerted a significant effect on the mentality of the population. People were reconciled to it and, indeed, viewed it as a perfectly natural occurrence. Half of children died before they reached five years of age. Even well-educated people in older age were often unable to recount how many children or siblings they had had. While most parents were comforted by the belief that their young innocent deceased children had gone directly to heaven in the form of angels, the death of an older child or teenager was accompanied by deep

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8 P. C. Jupp & C. Gittings (eds.) (1999). *Death in England. An Illustrated History*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 237.

9 E. Maur (2001). 'Smrt ve světle demografické statistiky' ['Death in the light of demographic statistics']. In Lorenzová & Petrasová, *Fenomén smrti*, 245–254: 250.