Funerary Practices in the Czech Republic

Olga Nešporová

Funerary International Series

FUNERARY PRACTICES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Funerary International

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2021

Reprints and permissions service
Contact: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78973-112-5 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-78973-109-5 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-78973-111-8 (Epub)

ISOQAR certified Management System, awarded to Emerald for adherence to Environmental standard ISO 14001:2004.

Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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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!'[1]

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

1 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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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the funding received for the writing of this book via a research grant provided by the Czech Science Foundation (GAČR) as part of the *Changes in funerary rites in Bohemia and Moravia during the twentieth century* research project; reg. no. 19-09208S. The project is being conducted by researchers from the Institute of Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague.

I would like to thank Julie Rugg, the editor of the *Funerary International Series*, for inviting me to write this book; on the one hand, she provided me with guidance and advice on what should be included in the book and, on the other, she allowed me both the freedom to emphasise what I considered important and to apply an approach that reflected my research specialisations and experience in this field. I would also like to gratefully acknowledge the understanding attitude of Philippa Grand while planning the schedule for my work on the book with respect to my other research project commitments. All those involved at Emerald Publishing Limited, especially Sophie Darling and Paula Kennedy, have been extremely helpful and supportive, for which I also express my grateful thanks.

If I consider the research that I have conducted in the field of death studies over the last 20 years or so, it is impossible to individually name all those who have provided assistance and support. Therefore, I will mention just a few of those persons and institutions with whom I have been privileged to work over the last two years of writing this book: Václav Graf, Adam

Hájek, Zdeněk Lechner and David Ruman from TABO-CS spol. s r.o., Julius Mlčoch, Stanislav Motyčka from the Society of Friends of Cremation, Jiří Rak, Katarína Sabová from the Bratislava crematorium, Hana Svěchotová and the Czech Association of Funeral Directors. I am also indebted to numerous other funeral professionals who provided me with interviews and information as well as to ordinary people and academics who shared their thoughts on death, dying and disposal.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Hynek Dřevěný, Jakub Dvořák, Milan Mašek, Věnceslava Pícková and Pospíchal pohřební služba for enriching the visual content of the book by providing photographs and to Darren Ireland for the language corrections. The book includes photographs taken during the conducting of fieldwork concerning my previous research projects at the Charles University and the Institute of Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences. Last but not least, I would like to thank my husband Zdeněk R. Nešpor who not only provided me with patient support while I was working on the manuscript, but also for reading the text and providing me with extremely useful feedback. I particularly acknowledge his input as a historian and specialist on the cremation movement. Of course, I personally accept full responsibility for all the information and interpretations presented in the book.

MAP OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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1

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.[1] 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

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.[2] 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.[3] 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.[4]

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

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, 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.[5]

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.[6] 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.[7] 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.

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.[1]

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

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.[2]

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.[3]

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).[4] Only the Jewish community maintained its funeral fraternities (Chevra kadiša) up to the twentieth century.[5]

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.[6] 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.[7] Moreover, in spite of an improvement at the end of

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). *Pohřbívání 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.

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).

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.[8] The incidence of infant mortality was higher in the expanding cities, especially Prague, than in the countryside.[9]

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

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.