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"From House to Funeral Home": Changes in Funeral Rituals in Rural Slovakia

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Abstract
This paper examines how the introduction of death-related buildings, such as the funeral home in rural Slovakia, alters the ways and frequency of contact with the dead body and, in turn, influences the course and certain aspects of funeral rituals. It presents a case study based on long-term ethnographic research, analysing data collected over three years in a village in the Horehronie region of the Slovak Republic with a predominantly Roman Catholic population. Through analysis of ethnographic data, the study argues that the establishment of the funeral home and the related shift in the space where the body is kept before the funeral changed the course and some elements of funeral rituals. The funeral home not only serves an essential function in the funeral process but can also gradually become a space and symbol associated with the dead, death, and the afterlife; it also embodies and reflects religious beliefs and norms that can shape both collective and individual behaviours and emotional states.

Key words
Transformation of funeral rituals – funeral home – death – dead – Slovakia

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Introduction[1]

The study of death, along with the ideas, practices, and rituals associated with it, is a well-established field of research in the social sciences and humanities, particularly in sociocultural anthropology and ethnology.[2] The anthropology of death, as a specialised branch of anthropology, examines how individuals and societies around the world respond to death, conceptualise death and the afterlife, and participate in various practices and rituals following death.[3] The topics of death, funerals, and the associated rituals and customs have been extensively examined within Czech and Slovak ethnology. Numerous regional and local monographs exploring this subject began to be published in the early 20th century, with a significant increase in publications occurring in the latter half of the century. More recent works have specifically focused on funeral rituals, offering valuable ethnographic materials, insightful analyses, and discussions on theory and methodology.[4] In much of ethnological work in Slovakia, especially in the twentieth century, a descriptive approach largely prevailed. However, as Jágerová observed, the study of funeral customs, as well as religion in general, has not been sufficiently developed in twentieth-century Slovak ethnology, a shortcoming that may be linked to certain limitations in ethnological research during the socialist period.[5]

1 When preparing the text, Grammarly was used exclusively for linguistic and stylistic correction (corrections of grammar, spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure), without interfering with the factual content of the work, its argumentation, interpretation of sources, or conclusions; all content decisions and the final form of the text are the sole responsibility of the author.

2 ARIÉS, Philippe: *Dějiny smrti*. Praha: Argo, 2020; BLOCH, Maurice – PARRY, Jonathan (eds.): *Death and the Regeneration of Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982; ENGELKE, Matthew: The Anthropology of Death Revisited. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 48, 2019, n. 1, p. 29–44; HUNTINGTON, Richard – METCALF, Peter: *Celebrations of Death*. London – New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

3 ABRAMOVITCH, Henry: Death, Anthropology of. In: Wright, D. James (ed.): *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015, p. 870–873; UHRIN, Michal: Pohrebné rituály: klasické inšpirácie a súčasný výskum. *Antropowebzin* 18, 2024, n. 1–2, p. 29–30.

4 BEŇUŠKOVÁ, Zuzana: *Občianske obrady na Slovensku*. Bratislava: VEDA, Ústav etnológie SAV, 2017; BOTÍK, Ján (ed.): *Obyčajové tradície pri úmrtí a pochovávaní na Slovensku s osobitným zreteľom na etnickú a konfesionálnu mnohotvárnosť*. Bratislava: Lúč, 2001; JÁGEROVÁ, Margita: *Posledné zbohom – Súčasné pohrebné obyčaje*. Nitra: Univerzita Konštantína filozofa v Nitre, Filozofická fakulta, 2008; JAKUBÍKOVÁ, Kornélia: Rodinné obyčaje. In: Botíková, Marta (ed.): *Tradície Slovenskej Rodiny*. Bratislava: Veda, 1997, p. 161–188; JAKUBOVSKÁ, Kristína: Ritualizácia ako prostriedok utvárania kolektívneho obrazu smrti. In: Gabašová, Katarína – Jakubovská, Kristína – Maiello, Giuseppe – Palitefka, Jozef – Reiser, Michal – Soukup, Martin – Soukup, Václav (eds.): *(De)tabuizácia smrti vo filozoficko-antropologickom diskurze*. Nitra: Univerzita Konštantína Filozofa v Nitre, 2016, p. 109–124; NAVRÁTILOVÁ, Alexandra: *Narození a smrt v české lidové kultuře*. Praha: Vyšehrad, 2004; NEŠPOROVÁ, Olga: *Funerary practices in the Czech Republic. Funerary international series*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2021; NEŠPOROVÁ, Olga: *O smrti a pohřbívaní*. Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2024.

5 JÁGEROVÁ, Margita: *Posledné zbohom – Súčasné pohrebné obyčaje*, c. d., p. 9.

Death is one of the most profound moments in an individual's and society's life, and rituals have marked it since time immemorial.[6] Sacred and secular buildings frequently serve as sites for collective rituals, such as funerals or masses, that strengthen social bonds within the community.[7] Additionally, these structures can represent clusters of symbols that elicit strong emotional responses associated with the sacred, the pure, the moral, and the afterlife. Simultaneously, symbols relate to rituals and are linked to axiomatic norms that govern the behaviour of religious groups.[8] Emotions like admiration, wonder, and awe are often linked with such places. Furthermore, a sacred building can symbolise and embody religious ideas and axiomatic norms that influence both collective and individual behaviour and emotional states.[9] Therefore, religious ideologies and beliefs, including those related to death and the dead, can be internalised through and mediated by material objects.[10] Similarly, Dubisch proposes that the dead and death can be memorialised through various physical spaces and objects, such as churches, cemeteries, items associated with the deceased, and funeral homes.[11]

While we explore the role of funeral homes in rural Slovakia, in particular, and physical objects, practices, and ideas related to death and the dead in general, it might be instructive to consider the concept of death-scapes—material expressions within the landscape of death-related practices.[12] Death-scapes encompass durable markings of the landscape (e.g., cemeteries or funeral homes) and manifestations of death-related artefacts and practices, such as the scattering of ashes. [13] Death-scapes are profoundly shaped by the meanings the living

6 XYGALATAS, Dimitris: *Ritual: How Seemingly Senseless Acts Make Life Worth Living*. New York: Little, Brown Spark, Hachette Book Group, 2022, p. 251.

7 BAHNA, Vladimír – TALMONT-KAMINSKI, Konrad: Rituals Kneaded with Societies, Societies Kneaded with Rituals. *Slovenský národopis* 70, 2022, n. 2, p. 176–185.

8 TURNER, Victor: *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970; TURNER, Victor: *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974; TURNER, Victor: *Průběh rituálu*. Brno: Computer Press, 2004; UHRIN, Michal: Victor Turner's Theory of Symbols: The Symbolism of a Religious Site and Object in a Rural Environment in Eastern Slovakia. *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe* 13, 2020, n. 1, p. 21–41.

9 CLARK, Andy – CHALMERS, David: The Extended Mind. *Analysis* 58, 1998, n. 1, p. 7–19; HUTCHINS, Edwin: Material Anchors for Conceptual Blends. *Journal of Pragmatics* 37, 2005, n. 10, p. 1555–1577.

10 UHRIN, Michal: Cooperating Toward a Common Good: A Case from Rural Slovakia, Village of Nová Bošáca. In: Doering-Manteufell, Sabine – Treiber, Angela – Drascek, Daniel – Alzheimer, Heidrun (eds.): *Jahrbuch für Europäische Ethnologie*. Leiden: Brill, 2025, p. 143–144.

11 DUBISCH, Jill: Death and Social Change in Greece. *Anthropological Quarterly* 62, 1989, n. 4, p. 189–200.

12 TEATHER, Elizabeth Kenworthy: The Case of the Disorderly Graves: Contemporary Deathscapes in Guangzhou. *Social & Cultural Geography* 2, 2001, n. 2, p. 185.

13 HUNTER, Alistair: Deathscapes in Diaspora: Contesting Space and Negotiating Home in Contexts of Post-Migration Diversity. *Social & Cultural Geography* 17, 2016, n. 2, p. 247–261.

ascribe to them.[14] They are regarded as a profound site of place-making, where the living find a 'spatial fix' for grief and memorialisation.[15] Last but not least, death-scapes can be defined as the material representation of death-related practices in the landscape.

Against this conceptual backdrop, the construction of the funeral home in the village of the field of research can be seen as an example of a new part of a death-scape emerging within the local landscape. The funeral home was constructed in the village of field research in 1999 and officially opened on 1 January 2000, approximately during the period when funeral homes were being established in the Horehronie region. The modernisation of rural areas in the Horehronie region involved not just the construction of funeral homes, but also the development of funeral services, social service facilities, kindergartens, primary schools, health facilities, and other essential infrastructure. This transformation took place during the socialist era and continued afterwards. The specific dates of funeral home construction vary across municipalities in the region; therefore, the changes I will discuss did not happen simultaneously in all municipalities.[16]

This paper presents a case study based on longitudinal ethnographic research. It examines how the construction of buildings, such as a funeral home, altered the ways and frequency of contact with the dead body and, in turn, modified the course and certain aspects of funeral rituals, including practices, ideas, material objects, and the conceptualisation of the relationship between the living and the dead.[17] However, it is important to recognise that the building of funeral homes was just one of many factors, not the sole one, that influenced funeral rituals and attitudes towards death and dying.

The empirical analysis will be grounded by the following classification of pre-death, death, and post-death related practices: 1) acts associated with the process of dying (such as death prevention or facilitation, and farewells from family and community to the dying); 2) acts related to preparing the deceased (ritual preparation of the body); 3) acts involved in removing the body and returning it

14 MADDRELL, Avril – SIDAWAY, James: *Deathscapes: Spaces for Death, Dying, Mourning and Remembrance*. London: Routledge, 2016; HUNTER, Alistair: Deathscapes in Diaspora: Contesting Space and Negotiating Home in Contexts of Post-Migration Diversity, c. d.; BUŽEKOVÁ, Tatiana: Right Place, Right Behaviour: Deathscapes as a Moral Space in the Context of Alternative Spirituality in Slovakia. *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 96, 2025, p.115–38.

15 HALLAM, Elizabeth – HOCKEY, Jenny: *Death, Memory and Material Culture*. London: Berg, 2001; HUNTER, Alistair: Deathscapes in Diaspora: Contesting Space and Negotiating Home in Contexts of Post-Migration Diversity, c. d.

16 For comparison see JÁGEROVÁ, Margita: *Posledné zbohom – Súčasné pohrebné obyčaje*, c. d.

17 HESZ, Ágnes: The Story of a Funeral Home: Ritual Modernization and its Reception in a Transylvanian Village Community. *Revista română de sociologie* 27, 2016, n. 1–2, p. 39–53; JÁGEROVÁ, Margita: *Posledné zbohom – Súčasné pohrebné obyčaje*, c. d.

to nature (burial, cremation); 4) memorial ceremonies (memorial mass, remembrance during holiday seasons).[18] In this article, I will explore how the content of these phases changed due to the displacement of the dead body following the construction of the funeral home. I will primarily focus on the first two classificatory points, as they were most notably affected by these shifts.

Ethnographic setting

The data presented in this paper were collected during long-term ethnographic field research conducted in a village located in the Horehronie region of central Slovakia from 2023 to 2025.[19] This region has been a focal point of Slovak ethnography for nearly a hundred years.[20] The village has a population of just under 2,400 residents, most of whom are Roman Catholics. Employment opportunities in industry and factories established during the socialist era in the second half of the twentieth century have mostly vanished in Horehronie, mainly due to the socio-political and economic conditions of the 1990s. Likewise, the collectivisation of agricultural estates occurred much later here than in other parts of Slovakia, specifically in the 1970s.[21] During my research, I conducted 79 ethnographic interviews with 82 participants, including 63 women and 19 men. The participants had an average age of sixty years, with most falling within the 55–70 age range. The youngest participant was born in 1990 (making them 34 years old at the time of the study), while the oldest was born in 1937 (making them 88 years old at the time of the study). Of these, ten were still employed, while the rest had retired. The retired participants primarily worked in mechanical industries, manufacturing, and agriculture. Those still of working age during the study were employed in public administration, industry, or agricultural facilities either within the research area or in nearby regions. It should be noted that the data and conclusions in this article primarily pertain to Roman Catholic residents in the specified age group. All participants experienced both funeral regimes: before and after the establishment of the funeral home. Ethnographic data on funeral rituals prior to the establishment of the funeral home mainly focus on the latter half of the twentieth century. In this paper, I will use pseudonyms to refer to the statements of the research participants. The codes

18 JAKUBOVSKÁ, Kristína: Ritualizácia ako prostriedok utvárania kolektívneho obrazu smrti, c. d., p. 114.

19 The article is based on research data that is stored by the author and is available upon reasonable request. All additional information concerning the ethnographic research materials is available on reasonable request from the author. Providing data in this manner requires signing an NDA agreement. The ethnographic data is currently being entered into the Slovenian Social Science Data Archives (ADP; https://www.adp.fdv.uni-lj.si/en/), where it will be accessible to a certain extent for scientific and research purposes.

20 MJARTAN, Ján – PLICKOVÁ, Ester (eds.): *Horehronie 2. Kultúra a spôsob života ľudu.* Bratislava: VEDA, 1974; PODOLÁK, Ján (ed.): *Heľpa. Vlastivedná monografia*. Martin: Matica Slovenská, 1999.

21 JÁGEROVÁ, Margita: *Posledné zbohom – Súčasné pohrebné obyčaje*, c. d., p. 16.

assigned to the interlocutors indicate their fictional first names corresponding to their self-proclaimed gender identity, self-proclaimed religious affiliation (RKC for Roman Catholics) and year of birth.

The funeral ritual before the funeral home

In this section, I analyse the structure and form of funeral rituals, including related practices and ideas, prior to the establishment of the funeral home at the research site, which occurred at the end of the 1990s.[22] Before the funeral home was established, certain aspects of funeral rites and related practices were focused within people's homes. Research participant Angelika described the process and practices immediately before and after death as follows:

"When they saw that someone was going to die, that he was already ill, they prayed beside him. The women of the family prayed beside him. A Candlemas [Hromničná sviečka in Slovak – a candle blessed on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord][23] *candle was burning on the table, and they put a cross in his hand, whether he perceived what was happening around him or not. They put a cross in his hand, and everyone prayed. And then they washed him, and if it was a man, they shaved him. They dressed him; they already had it ready* [clothes in which the deceased was to be buried]. *Whether it was traditional clothing, older men wore it; later, they did not. The artisan made the coffins, and they brought one of them, and they placed him in it."* Angelika-RKC-1949

Angelika's description highlights several key activities usually undertaken shortly before death. She mentions that close family members, particularly women, would pray for the dying person, often lighting candles blessed on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord. A cross, one of the most prominent symbols of Christianity, representing hope, suffering, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, would be placed in the dying person's hand.[24] Alongside these symbolic and ritual practices, if death was expected, the individual might be washed and dressed shortly before passing away. In most cases, the immediate family was responsible for washing, dressing, and, if needed, shaving the deceased before the funeral. It should be noted that although all interlocutors discussed preparing the deceased for the funeral, not everyone explicitly mentioned washing, which could be done with wet towels. The family usually arranged to buy the coffin,

22 It should be noted that, due to space limitations, this paper cannot describe in detail the entire course of the funeral ritual before and after the construction of the funeral home. In line with the aim of this text, I will focus in detail on the aspects of the funeral ritual that have undergone the most significant transformations due to the establishment of funeral homes.

23 If the interlocutors' statement includes parts in parentheses, these additions have been made by the author to provide the necessary context.

24 UHRIN, Michal: Victor Turner's Theory of Symbols: The Symbolism of a Religious Site and Object in a Rural Environment in Eastern Slovakia, c. d.

often sourcing it from local artisans or merchants in the town of Brezno. After death, the immediate family washed and dressed the deceased before placing them in the coffin. However, many participants mentioned situations where the deceased had to be laid on a wide board for several hours, especially in cases of sudden death. Even then, families aimed to purchase a coffin as quickly as possible. Whether placed directly in a coffin or temporarily on a wide board, the family ensured the body was properly washed and dressed. In the second half of the 20th century, burial clothing experienced notable changes. Residents at the research site were buried in either traditional folk attire or more modern clothing, such as shirts, jackets, and trousers for men, and blouses and trousers for women. Black remained the preferred colour for these garments. It seems that the practice of burying residents in traditional folk clothing has been gradually declining, with the custom now mainly reserved for older individuals or members of local folk groups. Many participants in the study emphasised that those who wished to be buried in traditional clothing often prepared it well in advance.

Before the construction of the funeral home, a physician was summoned to determine the cause of death, issue a death certificate, and suggest an autopsy if needed. All regulations governing death and burial, both before and after the construction of the funeral home, were set by applicable legislation.[25] However, some ethnographic records show that certain rules, such as the specific amount of time required between death and the funeral, were interpreted and followed with some modifications.[26] Despite this, we found no evidence of such flexible interpretations and applications of the rules in the research area. Interlocutors highlighted that, beyond informing the physician, it was crucial to ensure the deceased received last rites before death. They likewise emphasised the importance of alerting a priest promptly after a death occurs.

The coffin with the deceased was always placed in the most prominent room, usually the living room, though sometimes it was in a different room suited for this purpose. Several participants reported that, at times, limited space forced them to sleep in the same room where the body was displayed. This was especially common in traditional wooden dwellings in the area, which had limited sleeping space. Some interlocutors, particularly women, noted that having a dead body in the room or house could disturb their sleep. Conversely, others said it did not bother them, even when sharing a room with a deceased loved one or friend, as they did not fear the dead person.

25 EPI. *Zákon č. 20/1966 Zb. Zákon o starostlivosti o zdravie ľudu*. Available at: https://www.epi.sk/zz/1966-20 (cit. 27. 3. 2026); EPI. *Vyhláška č. 46/1985 Zb. Vyhláška Ministerstva zdravotníctva Slovenskej socialistickej republiky o postupe pri úmrtí a o pohrebníctve.* Available at: https://www.epi.sk/zz/1985-46 (cit. 27. 3. 2026).

26 JÁGEROVÁ, Margita: *Posledné zbohom – Súčasné pohrebné obyčaje*, c. d., p. 162–163.

Many research participants also mentioned that someone among the relatives, close friends, or neighbours, especially men, was always required to keep vigil over the deceased throughout the night, a practice that has disappeared with the construction of a funeral home. Several participants mentioned they cleaned the area where the deceased was laid out, as it became a space for collective prayer and mourning. Any disarray in the house would be viewed unfavourably by those attending the prayers and by neighbours offering their condolences. This gathering was attended not only by close family members but also by others from the local community. Consequently, the grieving family took care to keep the room tidy during these collective activities. Many participants observed that mourners arriving assessed not only the observance of proper funeral customs and the use of suitable clothing and decorations for the deceased, but also the cleanliness of the household itself. The placement of corpses in the most representative room of the house was also documented in other villages in Horehronie.[27] During a specific timeframe, the home's private space, designated for a particular family, becomes a semi-public space for communal rituals and practices. This also included expressions of condolence to grieving families, which were traditionally expected between the time of death and burial.

Practices and customs

Expressions of grief from the deceased's family were expected to take various forms. One common way to show this grief was to wear mourning attire and avoid entertainment. Additionally, no domestic or farm work was allowed in the house or on the property where the death happened, except for feeding farm animals. Moreover, cooking was not permitted in the grieving household, which meant the family would either have to eat uncooked food or rely on support from family members, relatives, or neighbours for meals. Research participant Pavlína describes this period as follows:

"First, they covered the clock, stopped it, and covered the mirror. No one worked in the house. When someone died, no work was done in that house, nor was any cooking. Meat and soups were not cooked because the mourners had no appetite. A neighbour or acquaintance brought food to the woman whose husband had died, or invited her to their home for a meal. The dead man is lying there, and you are going to cook there? Of course not! The family only arranged the funeral." Pavlína-RKC-1943

In addition to the previously mentioned practices and activities associated with death, several other traditions were commonly observed, some of which

27 JÁGEROVÁ, Margita: *Posledné zbohom – Súčasné pohrebné obyčaje*, c. d., p. 65.

Pavlína mentioned above. These practices included stopping the clocks in the house, covering mirrors with black scarves, opening the window so the soul could leave or return to the house and the body, and lighting candles and lamps in the room where the deceased was displayed. In traditional Slovak folk culture, it was customary to stop the clocks at the moment of death, although they could be restarted at various times after the funeral. The clock's stopping symbolised the end of a person's life. The shortest duration of inactivity was the immediate resumption of the clock after the funeral. Some participants reported restarting the clock after 30 days or 1 year, or choosing not to resume it at all, to remember their loss. While some noted that this practice persists, others indicated it has declined. In this case, I believe that the construction of the funeral home is only one of the factors influencing how often this phenomenon occurs.

Another common practice was covering mirrors in the room where the deceased was displayed, linked to beliefs about the soul's presence. Mirrors were covered with black cloths of various sizes. Interlocutors provided various explanations for this practice, which can be summarised as follows: one was that the mirror was covered so that the deceased would not see themselves and could leave without becoming trapped in the world of the living. The other was to prevent the deceased from appearing in the mirror after the funeral. Another common tradition was keeping a burning candle or lamp in the room with the deceased. This practice was rooted in the belief that, after death, a person's soul might drift nearby, and the light would guide it to its resting place before the funeral. Several participants also noted that having a lit light during the vigil helped reduce fear and other negative or ambivalent emotions.

Collective prayers

The funeral was usually held three days after death. On the first and second evenings, when the deceased was already dressed and prepared for the funeral, close and distant relatives, neighbours, and friends gathered around him and performed collective prayers. Interlocutor Andrej described the collective prayers and mourning practices as follows:

"There was always reverence during their prayers. The hymns were sung, the psalms were sung, all kinds of songs like that, you could say. Some of the hymns seemed to me like those at christenings because they were so rhythmic, yet so sad. No one needed to call family or neighbours to pray; everyone had a duty and felt a duty. Even the most distant family felt the duty to go and say goodbye with that prayer." Andrej-RKC-1959

Collective prayers were led by a woman known as a *modliarka* (which can be translated from Slovak as a "prayer woman". This role was always performed by several older women in the village, with individual families always choosing one

of the available prayer women. A special group of songs was the *odoberanky*, which can be roughly translated as "goodbye songs". Although these songs employed established universal phrases, motifs, and melodies, they were always adapted to the deceased's specific life contexts. These lyrics mentioned all the bereaved to whom the deceased was bidding farewell. During my field research, I interviewed two of the women who had performed this role in the village for nearly their entire lives. One of the two, Gizela, described the process as follows:

Gizela-RKC-1938*: I went around the whole village praying for the dead. The whole village came to call me, begging me to come and pray for the dead. We prayed before the funeral. We had to go to the house to pray. We prayed the sorrowful but, we also sang other songs.*

Ethnographer: *What kind of songs were they?*

Gizela-RKC-1938: *We prayed the rosary, the sorrowful rosary. Then I had to sing the song* [odoberanky] *that I had composed. I would show you the book with the songs, but it is with my sister. Later, my sister prayed with me and began singing as well. The book is there, and so are the songs. Nevertheless, the family came to pray twice, and on the third day of the funeral. We prayed the rosary before the funeral, while people were gathering, and continued singing until the priest arrived.*

At the time of the interview, the research participant no longer engaged in these prayer and ritual practices, primarily due to her advanced age and health status. The statement also reveals that Gizela wrote many songs down in a book, and as she grew older and her health declined, her sister increasingly helped her with her prayers and singing. It should also be noted that certain ritualised expressions of grief, such as ceremonial crying, were almost absent from the research interlocutors' statements. At this point, it should be noted that the role of the praying women at the research site was to lead singing and prayers, not to engage in ceremonial crying. According to the research participants, the most pronounced expressions of crying and lamenting should be performed by the closest relatives. For example, research participant Xénia says:

"When someone died, they usually died at home. There was no funeral home; it was only built a few years ago. For three days, the person was laid in a coffin, and people came to pray every evening. Up to twenty or thirty people came to pray for that person. They prayed and cried. People do not cry like that today. When, say, a husband died, his wife had to cry for the salvation of his soul, for example, like this: Oh, oh, what a good man he was! And what a worker! You know, there was so much crying." Xénia-RKC-1953

At this stage, it is worth mentioning that the research participants mentioned crying and lamenting, but not the institution of so-called *plačky* - i.e.,

women whose role was to perform ceremonial weeping. They associated the role of *plačky* with stories told by their grandparents and described it as a practice of the past (the first half of the 20th century), i.e., a practice their grandparents recounted. However, almost all participants in the study described the institution of *modliarky*.

Before funeral homes existed, certain funeral rites were held at the deceased's house or courtyard. A pastor, altar boys, and cantor would perform the ceremonies, while six men—usually relatives or friends—carried the coffin to the church. The procession included family, community members, and flag bearers carrying images of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary. After the funeral mass, the coffin was taken to the cemetery for final rites and burial, followed by a feast—initially held at home until around the 1980s, then later at restaurants. Ethnographic records indicate that offering food or drink to the deceased's soul persisted into the 20th century, such as leaving a glass of alcohol overnight in the living room.[28] Before funeral homes became common, there was no central location for the dead. The corpses stayed at home until burial, serving as a temporary communal space for mourning through prayers and songs. Later, this role shifted to funeral homes, while houses mainly returned to being private spaces of mourning. In the village's symbolic landscape, homes were only temporarily connected to death, whereas cemeteries and funeral homes are seen as permanent sites linked with death, mourning, and the dead. Therefore, before the establishment of funeral homes, ritual phases were spread across the home, church, and cemetery.

The funeral ritual after the funeral home

Practices and customs

Generally, most participants in the study viewed the construction of the funeral home as a positive aspect of village development and infrastructure improvement – I will discuss the negative perceptions later. The positive assessment was primarily shaped by the points succinctly outlined by research participant Agáta.

"So now [after the funeral home has been built], *people will not come to the house. They light the light to show that someone has died in that house and is in the funeral home. Those who are younger now cook, but they do not cook the main meal; they cook only enough to avoid hunger, so there is something to eat. They then go to the funeral home, pray, say goodbye, and go home. The lady comes, cleans up, closes the funeral home, and puts the corpse back in the freezer. It is better from a hygiene point of view, because at home, when he died in the summer, and it was hot, you know what? Suddenly, there were flies*

28 JÁGEROVÁ, Margita: *Posledné zbohom – Súčasné pohrebné obyčaje*, c. d.; STOLIČNÁ, Rastislava: *Kuchyňa našich predkov*. Bratislava: VEDA, 2001.

and a certain smell. The old people could not get rid of it. They had to open the windows, but the flies were already there, and now it is hygienic because they take the corpse, put it in the freezer, and it is clean there. In one sense, they did the right thing." Agáta-RKC-1943

The favourable evaluation of the funeral home mainly concerns hygiene aspects connected to the deceased. [29] Most interlocutors mentioned that building the house of mourning and using refrigeration help slow down the body's decomposition, enabling a more dignified funeral. This is particularly crucial in summer, when heat and humidity speed up biological processes. Before the funeral home was established, participants reported placing buckets of cold water under the coffin table, using fans to improve airflow and hygiene, and sometimes perfuming or using other methods to mask odours.

Agáta's statement also indicates shifts in how ideas and practices related to death are understood and enacted.[30] First, we observed that some practices, such as keeping the light on, persisted in the house as described by Agáta and several other interlocutors. These practices might still be ongoing. Regarding the ban on cooking, Agáta observes that this practice is currently less common among younger generations compared to older ones. However, it is more accurate to see this as a shift rather than a complete abandonment of the ban. Her insights indicate that, although the strict ban on cooking in the village has eased, research participants observed that cooking at the deceased's home before funerals is usually minimal. Some participants mentioned bringing food to the bereaved, a custom that is also decreasing. Others note that many customs and restrictions have relaxed with the rise of funeral homes. Božena expands on this idea:

"They did that before. But now we do not have a corpse [at home] *or* [stop] *a clock.* [Now] *they do not stop anything. Mirrors are no longer covered* [with the black scarf]. *They suddenly take the corpse away, and the light shines for three days. The light is left on; even though it is lying there* [the corpse at the funeral home]*, it still shines. It is left on in the living room, so that it* [the soul of the deceased] *does not get lost on its way home."* Božena-RKC-1946

According to Božena´s statement, clocks are no longer stopped at the time of death, mirrors are not covered, and only the lights—usually in the living room—remain on until the funeral. The bans on manual labour and entertainment should still be observed today.

29 For broader context see BEŇUŠKOVÁ, Zuzana: *Občianske obrady na Slovensku,* c. d.; NEŠPOROVÁ, Olga – TÓTH, Heléna: Communist Funeral Reform in Central Europe (1948–1989): From Religious to Civil Funerals in Czechoslovakia and Hungary. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying* 87, 2021, n. 2, p. 485–503; NEŠPOROVÁ, Olga: *O smrti a pohřbívaní*, c. d.

30 ARUKASK, Madis: Death and afterwards. *Folklore-electronic Journal of Folklore* 8, 1998, p. 7–20; JAKUBÍKOVÁ, Kornélia: Rodinné obyčaje, c. d.; JAKUBOVSKÁ, Kristína: Ritualizácia ako prostriedok utvárania kolektívneho obrazu smrti, c. d.; JÁGEROVÁ, Margita: *Posledné zbohom – Súčasné pohrebné obyčaje*, c. d.

If someone dies at home, it is necessary to contact the examining doctor (coroner) to obtain a death certificate.[31] In most cases, the body is then transferred to a funeral home, where it remains until the funeral. If a person dies in a hospital or a social services facility, the relevant institution manages these formalities. Around the time when funeral homes were being established in the region, that is, in the late 1990s, the scope of funeral services expanded to include washing and dressing the deceased. However, several research participants stated that they still prefer to dress and prepare the deceased themselves, as they consider it part of the final farewell and a moral duty. Some research participants, by contrast, see funeral services as a welcome change that replaces the role of relatives and family during a period of profound grief. Regardless of their attitudes toward funeral services, the residents of the research area still provide clothing for the deceased; the deceased may have had this clothing prepared during their lifetime, as noted in the previous section. Funeral services currently perform tasks such as digging graves; prior to their establishment, relatives of the deceased dug graves and transported the coffin from the house to the cemetery, a tedious and physically demanding task in some contexts.

As previously mentioned, some traditional practices performed at home remain, while others have vanished or are declining. One notable practice, communal prayers, has changed significantly since the funeral home was established. Traditionally, these prayers took place on the two evenings before the funeral at the deceased's house. Nowadays, however, singing, praying, and mourning—communal activities—usually take place only on the evening before the funeral, at the funeral home just a few metres from the church, after the mass. During these prayers, the deceased is usually taken out of the refrigerated boxes for about an hour and placed in the same spot as the coffin before the funeral. After the approximately hour-long prayers, the body is returned to the refrigerated box by municipal staff. These prayers and songs follow a structure and purpose similar to those conducted in the deceased's homes, often led by one or two women in the village, whom we could describe as modern prayer leaders (*modliarky*).

I believe that constructing the funeral home and transferring the corpse from homes to the funeral home influenced attitudes towards death and the dead. Šalamún's statement aptly illustrates my argument.

"My uncle, my mother's brother was born in 1951, and he died in 1991, he died, and at that time, there was no funeral home, and the body was in the house. I was in ninth grade. I was a young boy, my brother was at boarding school at

31 These procedures are regulated by the current laws of the Slovak Republic: Zákony pre ľudí. *Zákon č. 131/2010 Z. z. Zákon o pohrebníctve*. Available at: https://www.zakonypreludi.sk/zz/2010-131 (cit. 27. 3. 2026).

the time, and the body was placed in the living room, upstairs. As a child in elementary school and as a ninth grader, I carried the body in a sheet. The body was placed in a sheet, and we carried it up the stairs. There was a coffin there. The body was dressed in a suit, including a jacket and tie, and was placed in the main living room. And there they prayed for three days. When I was little, the corpse was in the living room. That is how it was. That is how I accepted it. On the third day, we buried him and had a funeral reception. And that was it. Corpses at home back then. I remember this vividly, because, you see, the men were at work. And now what? I remember that I helped. I helped carry the corpse in a sheet up the stairs to the living room." Šalamún-RKC-1983[32]

In Šalamún's statement, he vividly recounts a time when the corpse stayed in the house until the funeral. His memories detail his personal experience of moving a relative's dead body between rooms where it was laid out. This emotionally intense description is linked to episodic memory because it reflects a significant personal emotional state, specifically related to handling the remains of a close family member.[33] According to Šalamún, this was a significant moment that, to some extent, shaped his perception of death, which he no longer viewed as a taboo or as something from "another world". After the construction of the funeral home, most of the village residents lack such direct experiences, aligning with the trend of depersonalisation and taboos surrounding death and related practices, which has been gradually developing in our European societies since the 20th century.[34]

The stance on the construction of a funeral home

In the previous section, I noted that most participants saw the construction of the funeral home as a beneficial part of village development and infrastructure enhancement. However, some participants also showed ambivalent or somewhat negative opinions. Renáta-RKC-1951's statement further illustrates this complex attitude toward the funeral home, emphasising not only its positive qualities:

32 I would like to thank one of the reviewers who pointed out the inconsistency regarding Šalamún's statement. Šalamún claims that his uncle died in 1991 and that he helped carry the body to the first floor while he was in the ninth grade. Similar inconsistencies can arise in ethnographic interviews. However, what is crucial for the argument of this text is not the factual accuracy of the research participant's statements but the formative impact of those experiences.

33 BOYER, Pascal – WERTSCH, V. James (eds.): *Memory in Mind and Culture*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009; BUŽEKOVÁ, Tatiana: Glueing bits of life together: Autobiographical reasoning in the narratives of women from the rural community in Slovakia. *Ethnologia Slovaca et Slavica* 39, 2018, p. 66–88.

34 ARIÉS, Philippe: *Dějiny smrti,* c. d. It must be stated that this assumption has been problematised in recent years. See, for example, JACOBSEN, Michael Hviid: Spectacular Death—Proposing a New Fifth Phase to Philippe Ariès's Admirable History of Death. *Humanities* 5, 2016, n. 2, p. 1–20.

Renáta-RKC-1951: *So those people kept it together back then. They tried to keep the family together, and there were a lot of people there* [during the funeral]*, including in the yard. It was beautiful. I preferred it to the funeral home.*

Ethnographer: *You mention that you liked it better. Why?*

Renáta-RKC-1951: *Now there is no one to go and pray at the funeral home... It was also different in the past, more solemn. And the procession, when they were still leaving the house, the bells were ringing the whole time, so it was like that.*

Renáta, like the other participants, highlighted the hygienic and practical features of the funeral home during the interview. However, she criticised certain aspects of the funeral ritual that had been altered by the facility's construction. She observed a decline in communal prayer attendance at the funeral home. She noted that when prayers for the deceased were held at the person's home, participation was higher and more diverse. Today, communal prayers at the funeral home are mainly attended by older women. In contrast, in the past, men, younger women, and children also participated, often passively, in prayers at the deceased's home.[35] Passive participation implies that they did not lead the ritual singing or prayers but were present in the house or room where the deceased was laid out. Renáta sees these changes in funeral rituals and pre-funeral practices as reflecting wider social relations, which, she says, are now marked by greater individualism than in the past. This can be linked to the disruption of social cohesion caused by historical, socio-economic, and demographic changes and movements in rural areas over the last century.[36]

Consistent with Hesz's findings, my research likewise indicates that performing various ritual roles during funerals—such as carrying flags, crosses, or candles—strengthens social bonds among those present. Hesz further suggests that families intentionally used these roles to reinforce important social ties. Moreover, community members supported this effort by helping with funeral preparations and participating in wakes and burials.[37] Overall, this indicates that while the local religious community was deeply involved in funeral

35 This is primarily the perspective of older, retired interlocutors; the views of younger generations are different. The younger generation of interlocutors, who represented a minority in the research sample and were born circa 1980, primarily emphasised the positive aspects of post-funeral-home funerals, without mentioning the disappearance of the communal aspect.

36 ANDREWS, Rhys: Religious Communities, Immigration, and Social Cohesion in Rural Areas: Evidence from England. *Rural Sociology* 76, 2011, n. 4, p. 535; ROCHOVSKÁ, Alena – MAJO, Juraj – KÁČEROVÁ, Marcela: Súčasná realita vzťahov na slovenskom vidieku: Vidiecke komunity v ohrození alebo ako kapitalizmus pretvára sociálne vzťahy na dedine. In: CHORVÁT, Tomáš (ed.): *Miestne komunity 3. Odraz spoločenského vývoja po roku 1918 na charaktere a štruktúre miestnych komunít na Slovensku*. Banská Bystrica: Centrum vedy a výskumu Univerzity Mateja Bela, 2014, p. 39–55.

37 HESZ, Ágnes: The Story of a Funeral Home: Ritual Modernization and its Reception in a Transylvanian Village Community, c. d., p. 49.

rituals and practices before the arrival of funeral homes, the advent of modernisation through funeral homes and services, among other factors, has individualised funerals and, in a way, reduced some aspects of their communal nature.

Another participant in the research, Dana-RKC-1939, shares a similar opinion to Beáta. She highlights the funeral home's strengths in hygiene and practicality. Besides the decline in community involvement—also reflected in the reduction of evenings prayed for the deceased from two to one due to the COVID-19 pandemic—she points out another negative aspect: the deceased's absence from the home until the funeral. Dana believes that separating the deceased before the funeral and relocating them to a funeral home leads to a gradual decrease in respect for the deceased. She argues that the absence of the body at home makes it harder to process grief. Overall, she suggests that when the body is not close to the family, such as being kept at home, it can sometimes hinder proper mourning, make it more difficult to accept.

The emergence of funeral homes has significantly reshaped the structure and social meaning of funeral rituals in rural Slovakia. At funeral homes, rituals begin about an hour before the priest arrives, after which the coffin is transported to the church and then to the cemetery (or for cremation). Funeral processions have shortened significantly, reducing community participation. Burial in the ground remains preferred over cremation, despite its acceptance by the Catholic Church since 1963.[38] Another change is the decline of condolence visits to family homes; expressions of sympathy now occur mainly at the funeral home before the ceremony. This shift is seen both as a loss of communal mourning and as relief from social pressure on grieving families. Overall, funeral homes reflect broader processes of institutionalisation and modernisation in rural Slovakia (late 1990s–2000s). While wakes were once held at home or in restaurants, improved services made restaurants more common, valued for convenience but sometimes criticised for cost. Today, bodies are usually moved to funeral homes immediately after death, creating earlier physical and symbolic separation from the community. This distancing aligns with wider 20th–21st century trends of the institutionalisation and tabooisation of death and dying.[39]

Conclusion

Based on an analysis of ethnographic data, I propose that building the funeral home led to changes in the space where the body is stored before the funeral,

38 NAVRÁTILOVÁ, Alexandra: *Narození a smrt v české lidové kultuře*, c. d.; SOUKUP, Martin: Antropologie smrti. In: Gabašová, Katarína – Jakubovská, Kristína – Maiello, Giuseppe – Palitefka, Jozef – Reiser, Michal – Soukup, Martin – Soukup, Václav (eds.): *(De)tabuizácia smrti vo filozoficko-antropologickom diskurze*. Nitra: Univerzita Konštantína Filozofa v Nitre, 2016, p. 68.

39 PALGI, Phyllis – ABRAMOVITCH, Henri: Death: A Cross-Cultural Perspective. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 13, 1984, p. 385–417.

which, in turn, affected the flow and specific elements of funeral rituals, such as practices and ideas associated with death and the dead. Using the classification mentioned earlier, the individual components of the funeral rituals have changed as described below.[40] The first category, the practices surrounding dying, has evolved over time. For instance, praying at the bedside of the dying has gradually become less common in the past twenty years. This decline is partly due to the rise of funeral homes, but also because more people now die outside their homes, in hospitals or social service facilities. Additionally, the place of death—whether at home, in a hospital, or a social home—and whether death is sudden or expected significantly affect the farewell rituals, such as bedside prayers or last rites. These factors impact the mourning process more profoundly than the physical presence of a funeral home.

The second category (acts related to preparing the deceased) in the classification scheme experienced greater change than the first category. As shown in the empirical sections, once the funeral home is established, the body of the deceased is no longer displayed in the deceased's home; instead, it is transferred to the funeral home. At the funeral home, communal prayers for the deceased, traditionally conducted in the person's home, are now held there. The preparation of the body for burial—washing and dressing—can be done either by a funeral service or by the bereaved family, continuing a practice that existed before a funeral home was available in the local community. Although the number of residents using funeral services rises with the opening of a funeral home, some interlocutors prefer to prepare the body for the funeral themselves.

The third category, which covers acts related to the disposal of the body and its return to nature, also underwent notable changes. Before the funeral home's construction, funeral proceedings commenced at the deceased's home on the third day after death; after the funeral home was established, the process moved there. As a result, practices such as striking the house threshold three times with the part of the coffin containing the feet disappeared. Finally, the construction of the funeral home had the least effect on memorial ceremonies, such as memorial masses or holiday remembrances of the deceased.[41] Usually, annual masses for the deceased were held sometime after the funeral—often a year later, on the birth date, anniversary of death, or other special days.

The results presented in this paper are consistent with those reported by Jágerová from the same region but from different municipalities. Jágerová contends that, during the second half of the 20th century and the early 21st

40 JAKUBOVSKÁ, Kristína: Ritualizácia ako prostriedok utvárania kolektívneho obrazu smrti, c. d.

41 UHRIN, Michal: Religious Holidays and Ceremonies as Points of Remembrance Of the Dead: The Case of All Saints Day and All Souls Days in Slovakia. *Český lid* 113, 2026, n. 1, p. 73–98. https://doi.org/10.21104/CL.2026.1.05

century, the locations where funeral rituals are performed have changed. In my view, this shift was also due to the displacement of the dead body from individual homes to funeral homes. In the funeral cycle, the house of the deceased, the streets and areas of the village where the coffin was carried by hand on special boards to the cemetery, the church where the funeral mass was held, and the cemetery where the ritual was completed were now complemented by the funeral home and the venue for the funeral reception (such as a restaurant or cultural centre). Conversely, some locations, like the deceased's house, the streets, and the areas of the village where the coffin was carried, became less significant in the funeral ritual cycle after funeral homes were established.[42] The home of the deceased no longer serves as a venue for collective ritual activities, and until the funeral, it does not become a public space associated with death and mourning; rather, it remains a private space. As noted earlier, certain collective activities are shifted to the funeral home in a modified manner, thereby making it a public place for mourning and a symbol permanently associated with death, the deceased, the afterlife, and mourning.

The funeral home plays a crucial role in the funeral ritual cycle and can also gradually become a symbol within the complex symbolism of these rituals. It concentrates and spatially anchors ideas and symbols related to the dead, death, and dying. Acting as a liminal space, it mediates transitions between social states and helps structure communal responses to death. Before burial, the funeral home is the central location for the ritual process, serving as the main site where the body is kept, rituals are performed, and collective mourning occurs. While the deceased's house was once used for mourning, this role was only temporary and limited to the three days before the funeral. In contrast, funeral homes serve a more stable and socially recognised role as the central venue for collective mourning, mediating the community's engagement with death and marking the transitional period between death and burial. Unlike a deceased person's house, which only temporarily assumed this role, funeral homes become a permanent feature within a death-scape, linked to material expressions of death-related practices that can be both communicative and performative. A funeral home can thus be seen as part of a death-scape: intense sites of place-making where the living, especially the bereaved, find a 'spatial fix' for grief and memorialisation—such as during collective prayers and mourning. Ultimately, funeral homes are a tangible expression of death-related practices embedded within the village's broader landscape.

The funeral home plays a vital role in the entire cycle of funeral rites. Once built, it gradually becomes a space symbolically tied to rituals, social norms,

42 JÁGEROVÁ, Margita: *Posledné zbohom – Súčasné pohrebné obyčaje*, c. d., p. 28.

and emotions like grief and sorrow. I likewise suggest that it is connected to specific religious concepts about the dead, death, and the afterlife. Additionally, it has properties that can influence both collective and individual behaviours and emotions. Overall, religious beliefs and ideologies related to death and the dead are often internalised and shaped by physical objects like the funeral home, as well as by the rituals and practices performed there.

Although funeral rituals have long been considered among the most stable elements of societies, they are still susceptible to change. In this paper, I aimed to demonstrate how the establishment of funeral homes and the related shift in the space where the body is kept until the funeral have influenced several aspects of funeral rituals, as well as the associated practices and ideas.[43] Funeral rituals are shaped by the creation of material objects, such as funeral homes, which impact various aspects of these ceremonies. This encompasses official church procedures as well as local, vernacular practices and customs.[44] The establishment of funeral homes is part of the formalisation and institutionalisation of death and dying, which also includes funeral services and developments in healthcare. Ultimately, the establishment of funeral homes is only one of several factors that shape not only funeral rituals but also broader attitudes towards death, dying, and the understanding of relationships between the living and the deceased.

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Research participants / Interlocutors

The author states that the article is based on research data that is stored by the author and is available upon reasonable request. All additional information concerning the ethnographic research materials is available on reasonable request from the author. Providing data in this manner requires signing an NDA agreement. The ethnographic data is currently being entered into the Slovenian Social Science Data Archives (ADP; https://www.adp.fdv.uni-lj.si/en/), where it will be accessible to some extent for scientific and research purposes only. For this reason, codes such as Interlocutor MU001 are also included in this list, which correspond to the codes in the data package submitted to ADP.

Interlocutor MU001: Anna-RKC-1948
Interlocutor MU002: Albert-RKC-1991
Interlocutor MU003: Alžbeta-RKC-1956
Interlocutor MU005: Andrej-RKC-1959
Interlocutor MU009: Agáta-RKC-1943
Interlocutor MU013: Božena-RKC-1946
Interlocutor MU015: Angelika-RKC-1949
Interlocutor MU028: Gizela-RKC-1938
Interlocutor MU035: Dana-RKC-1939
Interlocutor MU038: Renáta-RKC-1951
Interlocutor MU040: Pavlína-RKC-1943
Interlocutor MU043: Šalamún-RKC-1983
Interlocutor MU044 Vanda-RKC-1960
Interlocutor MU045: Xénia-RKC-1953