

Religious Holidays and Ceremonies as Points of Remembrance of the Dead: The Case of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day in Slovakia

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Abstract

Since the 20th century, commemorations of the dead in Slovakia have most often been associated with holidays such as Easter, Christmas, and All Saints' Day, known as *Dušičky* – a triduum of festive days consisting of All Saints' Eve on the 31 October, All Saints' Day on 1 November, and All Souls' Day on 2 November. This article analyses diverse practices associated with the cemetery, graves, the church, and homes conducted during this period of remembrance of the deceased. The article explores the deathscape (the material expression in the landscape of practices relating to death) of the village connected with the religious holiday, and the deathspace (the spatiality of death involving the landscape, attitudes, and habitual practices of the church, the home, and the cemetery). The article is based on field research conducted between 2023 and 2025 in a village in central Slovakia with a predominantly Roman Catholic Slovak population.

Key words

religious holiday, remembrance of the dead, All Saints' Day, All Souls' Day, cemeteries

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Introduction¹

Commemorating the deceased through ceremonies is regarded as a sign of respect and reverence. In Slovakia, honouring the deceased is associated with specific dates and calendric rituals (or calendric ritual periods – Rappaport 1999) during the year that are recognised by the entire local and religious community and individual dates that hold significance in relation to particular deceased persons (Jágerová 2001: 25). Up until the 20th century, most major and minor religious holidays and ceremonies often functioned as a point of remembrance of the dead in time and space. The most well-known examples in Slovakia were the carnival season (*Fašiangy*) (Jágerová 2001, 2023), Easter, and Pentecost holidays (*Turíce, Rusadlá*) (Horváthová 1986), the Feast of Corpus Christi, the Feast of St. John, All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day (*Dušíčky*)² (Popelková 2014; Zajonc 2014; Zajonc – Popelková 2013; Popelková – Zajonc, 2022), and the Christmas period (Beňušková 2014). Since the 20th century, the three main holidays related to the dead have been Easter, All Saints' Day, and Christmas. In addition to these fixed periods in religious time and space, there are individual points of remembrance, such as marriage anniversaries, anniversaries of births, deaths or funerals, name days, and other days that hold significance in relation to the deceased and their living relatives.

This article analyses commemorative practices and rituals during the triduum of the religious holiday of All Saint's Day, known as *Dušíčky* in rural Slovakia. The cemetery and church act as a cultural representation of common patterns and values in society but also reflect the changes in the culture and religion (Tanaš 2020; Carrassi 2023; Cook 2011), and, therefore, the article will also explore the deathscape (the material expression in the landscape of practices relating to death) of the village connected with the religious holiday period and analyse the deathspace, meaning the spatiality of death involving landscape, attitudes and habitual practices of the home, the church and the cemetery. Based on long-term ethnographic research

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- 1 In the preparation of 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 The term “*Dušíčky*” serves as a plural diminutive form of the word *duša* (soul). In the context of this holiday, it does not refer to the literal size of a soul. Instead, it signifies the positive, emotional, and affectionate connection that the living have with the souls of the deceased. This relationship underscores the importance of expressing reverence and respect for the deceased.

in rural Slovakia, it will focus on the diverse practices associated with the home, the church, and the cemetery observed during this holiday period.

Field research

The data were collected during long-term ethnographic research in a village in the Horehronie region of central Slovakia from 2023 to 2025 (Jágerová 2008; Mjartan – Plicková 1974). The population of the village was slightly less than 2,400 inhabitants (Sčítanie obyvateľov, domov a bytov 2021). I conducted 79 ethnographic interviews with 82 interlocutors, of whom 63 were women and 19 men. All the research participants were Roman Catholics born between 1930 and 1985. Their average age was between 55 and 60 years old. Of the total number, ten were still employed, while the rest were retired. Those who were retired had previously worked primarily in mechanical, manufacturing, and agricultural sectors. Those who were still working during the research were employed in public administration, industry, or agriculture, either directly in the village or in the surrounding region. The data and conclusions presented in this article primarily relate to residents of the Roman Catholic faith within the specified age group. Pseudonyms are used when referring to the statements of the research participants. The codes for the interlocutors indicate the fictional first name, gender self-identification, and year of birth.

One of my goals during the field research was to capture not only reflections on practices and rituals during the holiday period but also to pay attention to the actual behavioral manifestations of people living in the village. To achieve this, I conducted participant observation during the 2023 and 2024 holiday periods, spending several hours each day in the cemetery and church, observing the villagers' practices and activities. In addition, during the field research, I conducted participant observation in cemeteries, at funerals and religious rituals, at various ceremonies, at folklore festivals, and in everyday life.

Theoretical framework and historical background

In European, Central American, and South American cultures, 1 and 2 November are special days when people visit the graves of the saints, the beatified, their ancestors, family members, and close friends. The purpose of visiting cemeteries at the end of October and the beginning of November is to fulfil both commemorative and religious needs (Tanaš 2020: 91). In Slovakia, this period is called *Dušičky*. It consists of the triduum of festive days consisting of All Saints' Eve on 31 October, All Saints' Day on 1 No-

vember, and All Souls' Day on 2 November (Bužeková 2024: 5; Horváthová 1986; Popelková 2014; Zajonc 2014: 215–224). This period is also referred to as Remembrance Day, a holiday dedicated to commemorating deceased family members (Horváthová 1986; Ariés 1920; Tanaš 2020; Zajonc 2014). The first day of November, a holiday commemorating and honouring the memory of the deceased, was initially dedicated to saints who did not have individual feast days in the church calendar (Chorváthová n.d.a). In the Roman Catholic Church, 2 November is dedicated to remembering the dead. This commemorative day was established in the catholic tradition in the 10th century. Since the 13th century, it has also been a religious holiday dedicated to honouring the souls in purgatory. Masses, prayers, and other good deeds can aid their release from purgatory. As a result, masses and other communal prayers for the deceased held in a church or a cemetery on this day are considered particularly effective (Chorváthová n.d.b.). This religious holiday has always incorporated folk religion and secular elements, as well as aspects of vernacular religion, which are reflected in beliefs, rituals, and social traditions (Horváthová 1986; Tanaš 2020).³ The cultural code surrounding this holiday is fixed yet geographically diverse and undergoes regular modifications due to socio-economic changes (Tanaš 2020). In recent times, it has taken on a new dimension, increasingly blending with Halloween, which is celebrated on the night before 1 November (Zajonc – Popelková 2013; Popelková – Zajonc 2022; Tanaš 2020; Zajonc 2014; Dubisch 1989).

Three kinds of space (the church, the cemetery, and the home) play a substantial role during the *Dušičky* holiday period. Most rituals, memorial ceremonies, ritualised practices, prayers and communication with the deceased occur in these spaces. The cemetery and church serve as cultural representations of societal values and common patterns, but they also reflect changes in culture and religion. These observations can also be applied

3 Vernacular religion can be defined as a “realm of discourses, beliefs, and practices that challenge (though often implicitly) the hegemony of institutional authorities...Vernacular religion is often defined against folk religion, not as a mere terminological alternative, but focusing on personal, lived, and individualised expressions of faith within or on the margins of institutional religion, rather than on traditions parallel to institutionalised religion” (Bahna 2025: 373). It needs to be said that the definition of vernacular religion and folk religion, the conceptual relationship between these terms, and their relationship with official (doctrinal) religion remain important academic questions even today; it is beyond the scope of this article to address them in detail (for a discussion, see Bowman – Valk 2012; Kapalo 2011; Primiano 1995; Valk 2022).

to the home, which is shaped by societal and cultural changes. However, these changes differ to some extent, primarily because of the home's more private nature. I will examine these aspects in detail later.

This article will explore the concept of deathscape, which refers to material expressions in the landscape associated with death-related practices (Teather 2001: 185). Deathscapes can also be viewed as durable markings of the landscape (e.g., cemeteries, monuments) and manifestations and artefacts of death (Hunter 2016: 248). Deathscapes are not only spaces associated with the dead and dying but are also constituted by the meanings attributed to them by the living (Maddrell – Sidaway 2016; Hunter 2016). Finally, deathscapes are intense sites of place-making, where the living find a “spatial fix” for grief and memorialisation (Hallam – Hockey 2001; Hunter 2016), while they are also associated with structural and symbolic power in the social, cultural and political sense. The second concept that frames the interpretation of empirical data is deathspace. Deathspace involves the spatialities of death, including landscapes, attitudes, and habitual practices. These habitual practices may include physical, symbolic, social, ritualistic, personal and collective, behavioural and ideological manifestations. The two concepts of deathscapes and deathspaces have been applied by many ethnographers exploring, among other themes, the spatialities of death and the dead, as well as the relationship between the dead and the living (e.g., Heng 2022; Hunter 2016; Maddrell – Sidaway 2016; Shields 2005; Teather 2001).

The concepts of deathscape and deathspace will be explored in relation to three types of spaces: the church, the home and the cemetery. I will analyse the diverse practices associated with the church, the home and the cemetery (graves) that are carried out during the *Dušičky* holiday period. Subsequently, I will show that, even within these spaces, there are both similarities and differences in the practices carried out. Finally, I will examine their role as individual deathspaces and their role in the context of the overall deathscape of the locality, especially during this holiday. Each of the three spaces mentioned above, which are interconnected to some extent in terms of practices and rituals, will be analysed in a separate section.

The space of the church

Religious monuments and sacred buildings hold significant value for any religious community. Sacred buildings often serve as venues for collective rituals, which promote social cohesion among community members. Additionally, these structures may represent clusters of dominant symbols that evoke strong emotional responses linked to the sacred, the pure, and

the moral. Emotions such as admiration, wonder, and awe are frequently associated with such places. Moreover, religious ideologies and beliefs, including those related to death and the dead, are internalised through and mediated by material objects (Uhrin 2025: 143–144; Uhrin 2015, 2020a, 2020b). In a similar vein, Dubisch (1989) argues that the dead may be memorialised through various physical spaces and material objects, including churches, cemeteries, and items associated with the departed that remain in the homes (Dubisch 1989). In the following paragraphs, I will focus on the role of the church as a place of commemoration and ritual practices during All Saints' and All Souls' Days. One of the research participants, Andrej, situates the church's space within the broader religious context.

“This faith of ours is disappearing a little bit, I would say, among young people. What can I say? I can tell by my children, because I mention it three or four times to my daughter and my sons, but they don't want to go to church, and if I don't want to have a problem [disputes]⁴ in the family, I'm not going to do it by force. I hope that, though they don't take it into their hearts now, someday they'll figure out that prayer helps us many times, almost all the time. I'm a religious person; I'll say it plainly. It wouldn't even be Sunday for me if I didn't go to that mass, because I feel so relaxed. I know that Sunday is dedicated to our God, and I feel relaxed. Nothing bothers me, I don't rush away, I don't go anywhere. I know that we're having lunch and that we've been thanked for the whole week's work. We've been given health and strength for the day, and we can visit family in the afternoon. We also have a day of rest, as the Lord has ordained it.” (Andrej-M-1959)

According to Andrej, the number of members of the Christian religion is declining not only in general but also within the research community, and he believes that the importance attributed to religion is also decreasing. Andrej expresses gratitude for his faith and reports feeling mentally and physically relaxed after attending a religious service. Among the interlocutors, attending church at least once a week on Sundays is considered a “minimal” expression of faith. Andrej also discusses the tradition of visiting the cemetery after the Sunday service, which is common within the community. Many participants mentioned that it is customary to visit the

4 Where an interlocutors' statement includes words in parentheses, they have been added by the author to provide context. This context is often necessary for a full understanding of the statement, as it may lack clarity without the complete interview and the circumstances under which it was conducted.

cemetery after the service, pray at the graves of deceased loved ones, and seek the priest's blessing for the deceased. Another research participant, Pavlína, expressed similar views:

“After mass, we are more connected to God. After mass, we are blessed, and we also pass on the blessing to the deceased, so we bless the graves and then light candles. But it is done on Sundays as well [not only during religious holidays]. We are still in communion with the dead. [through] praying, they can at least get something. We hope that prayer helps them reach the right place [heaven], and we help them. They need help even today. A soul may be waiting in purgatory and needs prayer. We don't know where they [the souls] went. They may have gone to purgatory because they had hidden sins and didn't confess. You know, these are incomprehensible, immense mysteries.”
(Pavlína-F-1942)

In Pavlína's statement, there is a reminder of the importance of being close to God after a service, as well as the practice of offering prayers for the deceased at their graves. She emphasises that prayers dedicated to the departed should not be confined to feast days; they should also be offered on Sundays and ordinary weekdays. During the interview, she explained her belief that the souls of the departed require prayers, because their fate after death remains uncertain. Since it is not always clear whether a soul will ascend to heaven, remain in purgatory, or descend to hell, the research participants emphasised the importance of continuously praying for the souls of the deceased. Purgatory is often described as a transitional state devoted to purification. It is a “place” for souls who, at the moment of death, are in a state of grace but have not yet fully paid for their sins or attained the level of purity necessary to experience the vision of God or enter heaven (Carrassi 2025: 64; Le Goff 1984).

Prayers for the souls of the deceased can be performed in churches, cemeteries, and at home. According to the majority of the interlocutors, prayers are one of the most effective means of connection and communication with the deceased. In this regard, Ctibor spoke of honouring the dead not only during holiday periods, but also on ordinary days.

Ctibor-M-1955: “In the cemetery, also in the church, but also at home, one should serve [pray]. In our village, it was always customary, and it is not like that now, that there were three masses [during the feast of All Saints], but that the second of November, on the feast of the souls, there were three masses for the souls in purgatory.

It was always a full church. I remember that, as a boy, I even used to be an altar boy at the masses. Well, after those masses we went to the cemetery, together in procession, all the people [and the priest]. There was always a communal prayer afterwards, that's the way it was."

Ethnographer: "*How often do you pray?*"

Ctibor-M-1955: "*A short prayer depending on how busy one is with work and one's duties, but one always has to find that minute when you pray to God and also remember those who are no longer with us, but especially for family, my children.*"

Ctibor's comments indicate that although honouring the dead is particularly emphasised during religious festivals, it should not be confined to these occasions. Respect for the deceased should also be included in daily prayers on ordinary weekdays. The deceased remain an integral part of the everyday lives of the living through prayers and remembrances, and memories evoked by photographs and other objects associated with the deceased, by deliberate reminiscence, or in dreams. These practices, however, are not limited to this particular time of year but represent a year-round expression of reverence and respect for the deceased.

The space of the home

The home serves as a space for both individual and, to a considerably lesser degree, collective religious practices and rituals, especially during festive seasons. During *Dušičky*, various activities related to honouring the deceased are commonly observed within the home. The interlocutors said that they recite prayers at various times during the day, with the morning and evening being the most frequent, and that these prayers are dedicated to deceased family members, particularly souls believed to be in purgatory. These prayers are essential for souls to achieve salvation at the time of judgment (Carrassi 2025; Le Goff 1984). Remembering the deceased and expressing respect and praying for them are considered essential parts of this holiday period.

Novenas play an important role in the holiday periods of various feasts, including All Saints' Day, All Souls' Day, Easter, and Christmas. A novena is a Roman Catholic devotion that lasts for nine days and typically involves prayers aimed at seeking special favours or graces (Amoruso 2019: 1–2). Novenas can take two primary forms: collective and individual, which can be combined in personal practices of faith and conducted privately or

publicly. As a public devotion, novenas are often prayed during times of mourning or as spiritual preparation for a saint's feast day, and most often in churches. When practised privately, individuals or groups pray novenas with the intention of obtaining an urgent grace or favour, or to express gratitude for a grace already received. The structure of novenas can vary significantly across religious groups and denominations, states, and regions within states. Some involve prayers for nine consecutive days, while others may be observed on the same day over nine consecutive weeks or during other periods that are multiples of nine. A novena may consist of a single prayer repeated each day, or it may feature a different prayer for each of the nine days (Amoruso 2019: 1–2; also Cooney 1990; Griffin, 1990).

In the village the research was conducted in, novena prayers are observed during several religious holiday periods. Ctibor, provided a detailed description of the novena prayers:

“We have always been Christians here. In our country, it’s customary to pray the novena primarily in churches, but also in families’ homes. I remember even as a boy, we used to go to pray in the evening. We also prayed in the houses because it’s a remembrance and a preparation for [the feast of All Saints’ and All Souls’ Day]. We always pray [novena prayers] before the major feasts, whether it’s Easter, starting just before Palm Sunday, and also nine days before a major feast day. We used to go to this neighbour, and she used to be in the church [the churchwarden]. She had a room ready, and there were just chairs, just on a simple table, a cross, candles were burning, no decoration or anything. It was a mournful feast of those saints. The table was covered with just a tablecloth, and we went around that table and started praying. First, a prayer together, always [from a prayer book] for that date. Then, the rosary was prayed, from start to finish. After the rosary, she sang a song, then a common prayer for all the families. And that was every night [during the novena].” (Ctibor-M-1955)

Ctibor noted that prayers of the novena were typically conducted during periods before religious holidays and feasts, primarily in church and, in some instances, in the space of homes. Ctibor described these prayers as modest and conducted with reverence and remembrance for the saints and the deceased. Generally, it was a single person who led the prayers; in Ctibor's case, it was a woman who served as the churchwarden. Ctibor continued in his description of the prayers as follows:

Ethnographer: *“Were these prayers prayed in more than one house?”*

Ctibor-M-1955: *“Yes, they were, always in groups. Sometimes, even twenty people would gather, including the whole family. So, there were even twenty people in that room. Mostly from within the street, they [people living on the same street] met, each street already had its [own prayer groups].”*

Ethnographer: *“How does it work nowadays?”*

Ctibor-M-1955: *“Hmm. [silence] We still sometimes do it with [with immediate neighbours] we still pray this... but only occasionally... my aunt was praying. This one [novena] is also prayed during the Christmas season. We’ve mentioned this before [during the earlier part of the ethnographic interview]. That Bethlehem journey. That’s something similar, too. That was also nine days before Christmas, the Bethlehem journey is prayed. So, it’s also like... as the world used to be. Before All Saints’ and All Souls’ Day, we’re used to going to pray [together].”*

Ctibor noted that collective prayers in individual homes have become very rare in contemporary society. Today, they appear in local communities in two primary forms: first, as devotions prayed collectively on church premises, and second, as personal prayers offered by individual residents in the village. Aside from Ctibor, only a minority of interlocutors spoke of these collective prayers in homes. Most interlocutors reported not recalling these prayers being performed, and if they had, they had never experienced them collectively in someone’s home. They more frequently mentioned novenas, either as individual prayers or as collective devotions in church. Nevertheless, although some interlocutors discussed collective prayers for the deceased, they rarely referred to their performance during holiday periods. For example, Agáta recalled:

Agáta-F-1943: *“It used to be that our grandparents used to worship more by going to pray, like on the first anniversary [of a death]. On the thirtieth day [after a death], like on a birthday or a name day or both. So, by doing that, they commemorated the deceased by going to the house [where the deceased lived], and there they prayed together for him. When they remembered him, they also prayed for him; now they do so mostly in the cemetery rather than in the house. They meet there, and they light a candle, and they pray in the cemetery.”*

Ethnographer: *“So did your parents or grandparents use to do that?”*

Agáta-F-1943: *“Like, they also worshipped more by meeting in the house. Well, they had a little get-together, but the young ones don’t do it anymore; they mostly go to the cemetery. They say a prayer in remembrance, so they say a prayer, because that soul needs a prayer. We will be judged in the next world for our deeds. Also, the songs we sing: We remember the souls in purgatory; let us help them; they will help us, too, when we are dying.”*

These holidays are increasingly celebrated as occasions for the living as well. This is evident in the increasing number of visits by family members residing outside the village. Thus, in the lived experience of it, this holiday is both a celebration of the living and a tribute to the dead. Interactions among the living, which take place in the church, the cemetery, and in homes, are as integral to the holiday as the commemorative religious practices for the dead.

The space of the cemetery

The cemetery can be characterised as a ritual space where religious and secular burial and commemorative ceremonies are performed (Tanaś 2020: 93), but it also fulfils other roles. The cemetery is also an important place for a community’s religious and cultural identity (Carrassi 2023: 155). Reimers insightfully noted that funerals performed in cemeteries and graveyards serve as communicative symbolic practices, which construct and reflect individual and collective ethnic and cultural identities (Reimers 1999). For these reasons, among others, the space of cemeteries has received the attention of sociologists, anthropologists, historians, and geographers (Aries 2020; Botík 1999, 2001; Cook 2011; Hallam – Hockey 2001). These researchers primarily focused on burial practices, the spatial arrangement of graves, the selection of cemetery sites, aesthetics, and the social status of individuals after death. Konecki argues that the cemetery space can be viewed as a cultural representation of a society’s common patterns and values. Additionally, changes within this space can metaphorically reflect the evolving culture, serving as a form of cultural text (Konecki 2021: 831). Sociocultural anthropologists and ethnologists have focused on the rituals and ritual practices performed in cemeteries, and their varied cultural and social aspects related to the lives of the diverse communities that bury their dead there (Botík 2001; Bloch 1971; Bloch – Parry 1982; Engelke 2019; Jágerová 2008; Palgi – Abramovitch 1984). Finally, Konecki points out that although cemeteries and burial grounds have garnered attention, there is still a lack of research on: 1) how people experience these spaces, and

2) the feelings they evoke in visitors (Konecki 2021: 831). Following Konecki, I aim to contribute to this underexplored area by providing insights into how individuals experience cemetery spaces and the emotions these places evoke in visitors, with a focus on the period around All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day.

During the period of All Souls' Day and All Saints' Day, from 1 to 8 November, the faithful of the Catholic Church can obtain plenary indulgences for the souls of the deceased who are in purgatory. These indulgences can be obtained not only during this period but also during the week leading up to All Souls' Day, from 25 to 31 October (Cabatbat 2022; Kurian 2011). When describing this holiday period, most interlocutors mentioned the desire to obtain indulgences. To receive these indulgences, one of the following prerequisites must be fulfilled: a visit to the cemetery with prayers for the deceased, reception of Holy Communion, confession (which may be done once and does not need to occur on the specific days), and prayers for the intentions of the Holy Father, such as the Our Father and Hail Mary. During the pre-holiday and holiday periods, a local priest outlined the conditions for obtaining indulgences through religious rituals.

All the research participants stated that, before the holiday period, family and relatives are expected to clean, tidy and decorate the graves appropriately (which will be discussed further below). The importance of this was emphasised by research participant Filip:

“The feast of All Saints’ and All Souls’ Day. It’s a feast day; even after a night shift, you have to go [to visit the graveyard, light candles, and pray]. We all have sins... We have to pray for the salvation of souls... The graves must be tidy, and some bouquets must be there. The graves must always be tidy, the letters must be restored, and it mustn’t be ugly, whatever it costs.” (Filip-M-1969)

Filip pointed out that, on the first day of November, regardless of personal fatigue or workload, it is necessary to visit graves, light a candle, pray and thus pay one's respects to the deceased. He emphasised the importance of looking after the graves of the deceased, not only during the festive season. He also mentioned that if the letters on a gravestone become illegible, they should be restored. He believes this is important, as it shows respect for the deceased, which, in this way, is communicated to both the living and the deceased. Without a name on the headstone, it is easier for people to forget the individual, which is obviously undesirable. Beáta also mentioned this issue:

“What happens during All Saints? You already know that there are no graves like that there anymore [unkempt and unattended]. Even the committee goes there, and the municipal office, too, and some workers [municipal office workers]. They walk through the cemetery, examine the graves, and write [and place] cards on them [as a reminder to clean the graves]. But who doesn’t have a proper grave [properly attended to with lit candles] during All Saints?”
(Beáta-F-1949)

Beáta, like other interlocutors, stated that no graves are left unattended to before All Souls’ Day, as this would be perceived as disrespectful to the deceased and as a failure to comply with local norms. However, during my ethnographic research, none of the interlocutors referred to the deceased communicating their dissatisfaction to the living in the instance of unkempt graves during the holiday period. In addition to reminding people of the importance of attending to individual graves, as Beáta mentioned, the municipal office is responsible for maintaining the cemetery’s common areas. This includes mowing the lawn, tending the greenery, and removing rubbish. However, municipal employees do not maintain individual graves; this responsibility rests with the deceased’s living relatives.

In preparation for the festive period, the process of tending the graves primarily involves clearing away any wild plants and replacing old wreaths, ornamental flowers, and old candle holders with new ones. From the ethnographic interviews, it was not possible to determine who was primarily responsible for attending to the graves, in terms of the gender, religiosity, or age of the living relatives. Other factors, such as the number of living relatives in the area, the relationships between those relatives, and other characteristics also played significant roles. However, during the fieldwork and during the pre-holiday and post-holiday periods, it was predominantly adults, especially those middle aged and older, who took the time to look after and honour the graves.

Attending to the graves of relatives before All Souls’ Day is not only considered a sign of respect and reverence for the deceased but also a morally correct act. This is clear from Beáta’s statement above, since she indicated that there was some monitoring of the condition of graves and gravestones before the holiday season. The proper maintenance of graves is enforced in three ways. The first, as is evident from Beáta’s statement, may be a warning from the local authority staff written on cards placed on individual graves. This method is visible to all visitors to the cemetery at the appropriate time. The second source of normative pressure is from other members of the local religious community. This is manifested, for example, in the dissemination

of information in the form of gossip about graves that do not meet the required standards of upkeep and those responsible for them. There is also a third, somewhat indirect way of exerting control, which involves religious authorities and the media stressing the necessity of maintaining graves and cemeteries in order to honour the memory of the deceased.

Taken together, the statements of the research participants suggest that the mechanisms mentioned above are likely sufficient to ensure the proper upkeep of graves, not only during holiday periods. During the 20th century, the maintenance of graves became a key criterion for assessing the moral standards of families in the public perception of village and religious community life (Jakubíková 1997: 188). Jakubíková argues that, until the second half of the 20th century, cemeteries in rural areas were only partially attended to and relatively anonymous, because the names of the deceased were recorded in a matrix. Graves were marked only with wooden crosses, which often deteriorated over time, or lacked personal information about the deceased. Gradually, this perspective changed, as not only the grave's location but also its arrangement became a sign of the social status not only of the deceased but also of the deceased's family. This was furthermore connected with the increasing attention devoted to the decoration of graves. Jakubíková observes that during the 20th century, graves became increasingly individualized – and began to include information about the deceased, along with praises and thanksgivings, often with religious motifs. Around the middle of the 19th century, flower decorations had begun to spread to rural areas due to the influence of urban culture (Jakubíková 1997: 183). One significant change mentioned by all the interlocutors was the way grave decorations during the holiday period have changed. Many interlocutors recalled that in the early part of the second half of the 20th century, homemade crepe paper flowers and young fir branches were commonly used to decorate graves. It was not until the last few decades of the 20th century that artificial flowers and plastic wreaths became popular for this purpose. The exact onset of this change is, of course, impossible to pinpoint, as the various modes of decoration were certainly intermingled in real time. Akácia said:

“Once upon a time, graves were decorated with crepe paper flowers and fir tree branches. Now it's mostly wreaths and flowers. People have come to appreciate the aesthetics of graves. Also, we always go to the graves on Sundays after church service to pray. We light a candle, and we always do it there to make it nice.” (Akácia-F-1950)

In Catholicism, there is a widespread custom of lighting candles when visiting churches, graves, holy and pilgrimage sites, and various small sacred objects and shrines (Nir 2022; Oosthuysen 2016). The lighting of candles on graves is one of the most widespread customs associated with the All Saints' and All Souls' holiday period. The interlocutors indicated that, until about the 1970s, simple wax candles, approximately 10 centimetres high, were commonly used. These candles were without any decorative features and were typically set directly into the ground beside the graves. When these candles were lit, it was customary for individuals to stay and pray until the candles went out naturally. When comparing past practices to the present, the research participants observed that, nowadays, people sometimes pray briefly at individual graves and do not fully engage in spiritual and religious contemplation. While they acknowledged that modern candleholders, long-burning candles, and candlesticks make it impractical to wait for candles to burn out, they believed the brevity of prayers was not solely due to this change. Instead, they suggested that it might stem from a hurried mindset, a lack of focus, and an inclination to spend more time socialising with family, acquaintances, and friends. One interlocutor, Cecília, described the lighting of candles as follows:

“It is a sacred time to honour the deceased. We remember them... Whenever someone dies, we light candles... it is always such a solemn occasion... we say a prayer... it is such a solemn occasion, you know, and a celebration for the souls... Candles are lit for the saints, but also for all the deceased, even those who have no one left to pray for them, and we light candles for all the dead souls. When you come to the grave, you greet them with the sign of the cross. You greet them and give them the blessing [that you have received from the priest].”
(Cecília-F-1952)

An important aspect of this period is communication with the deceased (Caraveli 1986; Dubisch, 1989). As Cecília's statement indicated, this communication most often occurs through prayer. Prayer can be understood as an intentional, ritualised way of connecting with and communicating with the dead. Concerning the cemetery, these prayers are offered at the graves of the deceased. Upon arriving at each grave, individuals bless the grave by touching it and making the sign of the cross on the gravestone. This gesture conveys the priest's blessing upon the deceased souls, especially when people have arrived immediately after a mass. They then recite one of several prayers in silence, such as Our Father, a Hail Mary, the Rosary, or other prayers. After praying, they typically spend a moment in silence to

remember the deceased. Once the prayers have been completed, they bless the grave once more before moving on to the next one. This procedure is repeated at each grave visited. In the words of Agáta:

“We pay our respects to the deceased. We pray the Our Father, Hail Mary, and litanies to all the saints. You are connected to the deceased, because you are at the grave, and the soul feels it and knows that you are praying for it. That is the feeling, the feeling that the soul is near the grave and that you are there with it.” (Agáta-F-1943)

Agáta’s statement reflects a common “belief” in the local community regarding the nature of the soul. Many interlocutors believe that the closest connection one can have with the soul of a deceased person is at their grave. In this context, the grave denotes a specific location. In contrast, the cemetery serves as a broader space where the souls of the departed are thought to reside, at least in part, and where communication with them is most accessible. This view of the soul contrasts with official Catholic doctrine. However, it is well known that religious laypeople often hold a variety of “supernatural beliefs” from different sources that may conflict with one another. Unlike religious experts, laypersons do not typically verify the consistency or compatibility of these diverse ideas (Barrett 1999, 2004; Bužeková 2004; Jágerová 2001, 2008).

Many research participants also highlighted the fact that this holiday period has changed over time. They not only discussed changes in decoration and the maintenance of graves, but also the broader shifts in the respect accorded to the deceased and in their treatment. This is well illustrated by the description provided by one of the interviewees, Andrej:

Ethnographer: *“Could you describe how you celebrate All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day?”*

Andrej-M-1959: *“This is a great feast for Catholics, but it is clear not only for Catholics, right? That cemetery is crowded [during the holiday]. You say a prayer for your deceased every day. And sometimes I would say they overdo this a little bit with those, with those... with such expensive things [decorations].”*

Ethnographer: *“Can you please explain in more detail what you mean?”*

Andrej-M-1959: *“I’ve seen various old photographs that I’ve had of our fathers [the word fathers refers not only to blood relatives, but also to ancestors in general or previous generations living in the village] praying devoutly with one candle. I haven’t seen that in our cemetery [in recent times], that anyone has knelt in prayer. I saw it in those old photographs. Early on, people knelt when they prayed. This has completely disappeared from our villages. So, I was surprised to see how, on All Souls’ Day [in the past], people used to pray so reverently, so soulfully, at almost all of those [graves and photographs]. Yes, fewer decorations and by one candle [they prayed]. There was some kind of flower, but now we have to put so much stuff there that I think some women are more concerned with the pageantry than the prayer.”*

Andrej’s statement suggests that, during the 20th century, in addition to changes in the way graves were decorated, there were also changes in the approach to prayer. He noted that, in the past, people would kneel at graves and pray for as long as their simple candles burned. In Catholicism, kneeling is typically associated with a heightened display of reverence, symbolising not only obedience but also a repentant, waiting servant of God. This raises the question of whether the gradual decline in kneeling during prayers, especially during the holiday period, and the prevalence of standing prayers indicate a shift in the relationship between the living and the deceased. During my field research, I observed very few instances of people kneeling in prayer at the cemetery.

In the centre of many cemeteries in Slovakia, there are large wooden or metal crosses at which collective devotions and prayers are held during this festive period (Jágerová 2001: 26). In 2023 and 2024, I conducted participant observation at the village cemetery during All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day. On 2 November 2024, a religious service was held outdoors at the cemetery’s upper end, near a newly constructed cross. This day marked the consecration of the cross, which was a significant part of the service. The priest thanked the families and individuals who had contributed to the construction of the cross by name. On 2 November, it is customary for a communal prayer to be held in the cemetery, but that year the entire service was held outdoors. The setting created a mesmerising atmosphere, as participants stood spaced out among the graves. It symbolised the relationship between life and death and adding yet more feeling to the prayers for the souls in purgatory, right there in the cemetery. After communion, some individuals prayed by the graves, further enhancing the symbolism of life, death, and communication with the deceased. Even before the service

began, many people prayed the Rosary, just as they would during a church service. The following day, Sunday, most people returned to the cemetery to pray at the graves of their deceased relatives after the service.

During the holiday, in addition to lighting candles and praying for the souls of the deceased, visits to cemeteries serve multiple purposes. At this time, many residents who no longer live in the area, or who work or study in other parts of Slovakia, return to the village. I often observed groups of people gathering to talk and share the latest news about their lives and the happenings in the village. Additionally, it was possible to observe those who lit a candle at each grave and prayed there. Such practices not only strengthen personal relationships, but also contribute to building and reinforcing social cohesion within the community.

The research participants emphasised that, during the holiday season, it is important to pray rather than talk at the cemetery. However, they also noted that they often encounter family members or friends they have not seen in a long time. Despite these meetings, praying and paying respects to the deceased should always take precedence over socialising.

The transformation of this holiday has been influenced by broader changes in rural areas and globalisation, which can be observed in several ways. For example, as more people migrate to cities for work and study, the significance of these holidays may be increasing, particularly in the context of family reunions. Overall, All Saints' Day, Christmas, and Easter are three key periods when families – both close and extended – gather to visit relatives in the village. As a result, the holiday is no longer solely associated with honouring the dead and visiting cemeteries; it has also become an occasion for family gatherings. This holiday is now not exclusively dedicated to the dead, it also plays an important role for the living, as previously mentioned. It is fitting here to give voice to the interlocutor, Agáta, who said:

“During All Saints’Day. There... There [at the cemetery], they will meet [living relatives], even those who never see each other anymore. Because everybody is scattered all over the world. But on that day, they come to light a candle, and there they meet. Even the living gather there. The family comes together there. They will surely meet there.” (Agáta-F-1943)

Of the three spaces discussed in this article, the cemetery plays the most important role during this festive period, as both individual and collective rituals and practices are performed there. While collective practices and rituals are currently performed primarily in churches, individual rituals and

practices are performed primarily in homes. However, in the space of the cemetery the performance of individual and collective practices converges. It is also the place where the highest number of practices and rituals associated with honouring the deceased are performed during the holiday season, such as praying for their souls, and communicating with them (especially through prayer at graves).

At this point, it is also worth mentioning the intergenerational differences in how this holiday is celebrated. Most of the interlocutors in my study were between fifty-five and sixty years old, so I am unable to compare data from ethnographic interviews across different age groups. However, I can contextualise the information gathered through participant observation. During the pre-holiday and post-holiday periods, it is primarily adults, mostly middle-aged and older individuals, who tend to the graves. The participation of younger people in church services during this period is notably higher than on regular days, as observed during Christmas and Easter. Families often visit graves together, and the rituals and behaviours exhibited by young people closely resemble those of older generations. This pattern also holds for Sunday visits to graves following church services. However, since I do not have any ethnographic interview data from younger generations, it is not possible to analyse their interpretations or reflections on this festive period. As a result, I cannot draw any broader conclusions at this time. Nevertheless, I consider it to be a fundamental issue and therefore a potential direction for future research.

In conclusion, I would like to describe the holiday season as it was experienced by Dana, who was born in 1939, to highlight the changes in how this holiday is celebrated. Dana recalls that in the 1950s and 1960s, some people would beg for alms outside the church on 2 November. Before the festivities began, new soil was brought to the graves, grave boundaries were re-marked, and the graves were cleaned and organised. Wreaths made of fir and rosettes of crepe paper were crafted for decorative purposes. Dana also mentions that at Christmas candles were lit at the table for the deceased, symbolising the hope that: *“Let the eternal light, the light of Christ, shine forevermore [on them]. This is the light that may shine for us as well.”* She also recalled that, when visitors came, it was customary for them to visit the graves or go to the cemetery to pay their respects to the departed and pray for their souls. It was believed that the souls needed these prayers and praying was considered the most effective and appropriate way of communicating with the deceased. However, Dana observed that, over time, many of these practices have gradually been abandoned. Today, the primary customs that remain are visiting the cemetery, lighting candles, and praying for the dead. Based on interviews with other interlocutors and

participant observations, it is evident that the holiday has changed in many ways since its inception and will likely continue to evolve.

Conclusion

In this article, I analysed commemorative practices and rituals in a Slovak village during the triduum of religious holidays encompassing All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, collectively referred to as *Dušičky* in Slovakia. The ethnographic data presented here can be understood through two theoretical concepts: deathscape and deathspace. The deathscape of the village changes over the liturgical and calendar year. The cemetery is a permanent feature of the deathscape, as it is the site most closely associated with funerary rituals, honouring and remembrance of the dead, and ideas about the afterlife, body and soul, and many other aspects related to death, dying, and the dead. A similar role in the community is played by the house of mourning, where pre-funeral mourning ceremonies are held and collective prayers are conducted on the eve of the funeral. These two sites are thus a permanent part of the deathscape, since their role is primarily associated with death, dying, and the afterlife.

I have attempted to illustrate how the positions of the church and individual homes differ during the festive season in the context of the deathscape of the whole community of the research. The church is typically linked with death and dying only during funeral rituals, holidays such as All Souls' Day, All Saints' Day and Easter, and annual masses for the deceased. However, its role is primarily associated with the celebration of religious festivals and attendance at rituals. Many research participants reported that experiences at church, apart from funeral masses, evoke positive feelings, including elevation, awe, relaxation, and reassurance. In addition to these religious rites, many interlocutors also associated the church with weddings, baptisms, confirmations, and other holidays, all of which are similarly viewed positively.

Individual homes occupy different positions in the deathscape during the All Saints' Day holiday period. They are associated with death, especially when someone who lived in the home or a close family member dies. In such cases, these places also become part of the village deathscape, even if only temporarily. As we have seen, during this period, several practices are performed in homes, relating to honouring, remembering and communication with the dead. The home represents an individual deathscape, and only during the holiday period can it become part of the broader deathscape, albeit to a limited extent. In a sense, holiday periods have their own deathscape, which form part of the general deathscape of the

whole community. During the All Saints' Day period, three deathspaces constitute the dominant components of the holiday deathscape: the cemetery, the church, and the individual homes of the residents of the village.

In all three spaces (the church, the cemetery, and homes), a variety of activities, attitudes, and habitual practices were observed during the festive period. These practices, performed in churches, cemeteries, and homes, include physical, symbolic, social, ritualistic, personal, and collective behavioural or ideological manifestations of ideas related to the dead, death, the afterlife, morality, and religion. Most of these activities focus on communicating with the deceased, praying for their souls, and praying for their salvation. The majority are performed in the space of the cemetery, which represents the dominant material expression of death and dying, and is the place where the deceased are laid to rest. In churches and homes, these rituals and ritualised practices are less frequently performed, and, as with the deathscapes discussed above, these spaces are not permanently associated with death and the dead.

The findings from the field research align with broader trends observed in rural areas of Slovakia, which indicate that the commemoration of the deceased through prayer, mass celebrations, and acts of devotion is intended to alleviate the suffering of souls, particularly those believed to be in purgatory. In addition to traditional remembrances, such as birthdays and name days of the deceased, various anniversaries have also been incorporated into these commemorative practices (Jágerová 2001: 25; Bužeková 2024: 13; Zajonc 2014: 214–225).

The All Saints' Day period is also characterised by intentional communication with the deceased, which takes place most often in the form of collective or individual prayers, or unintentional communication, when the dead may appear, for example, in dreams, although this phenomenon is currently on the decline (Bužeková 2024; Jágerová 2001, 2008; Kiliánová 2010). Today, the holiday remains a time of intense remembrance and reverence for the deceased. However, it is no longer associated with an increased frequency of dreams about the dead. Finally, in a pop-cultural context, this holiday has taken on a new dimension, increasingly blending with Halloween and has become more commercialised. The connection to Halloween cannot be considered significant in the community among which the research was conducted, as elements associated with the Christian nature of the religious holiday (whether in the official or vernacular sense) still prevail. Nevertheless, since the 1980s, the holiday has become increasingly commercialised, which is particularly evident in the growing emphasis on and financial investment in grave decorations (Popelková – Zajonc 2022; Tanaš 2020; Zajonc 2014; Dubisch 1989).

Although the primary aim of this article was not to compare the changes in the celebration of this holiday during the socialist era with those in the post-socialist era, it is appropriate to address the issue briefly. The research participants did not spontaneously reflect on differences in how the holiday was celebrated in the two distinct periods. The changes that I described were not presented in relation to shifts in the state system. When asked directly about the celebration of this holiday under socialism, the interlocutors noted that, in some respects, the emphasis was on commemorating all the deceased rather than on All Saints' Day alone. However, they asserted that this emphasis did not affect the manner of celebrations, specifically the number or nature of church services, outdoor prayers at the cemetery, or visits to and prayers at individual graves. The relationship between the socialist regime, religious freedom, and the celebration of religious holidays is, without question, an important topic for future research.

In conclusion, during All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, cemeteries and churches serve as public ritual spaces where religious, secular, and commemorative ceremonies play an important role. These places serve as venues for events and celebrations that attract local communities at specific times of year. They facilitate socialisation and foster social cohesion within local religious communities. In contrast, individual practices (and, to a much lesser degree, collective ritualistic and non-ritualistic practices) are often conducted at home by family members, kinship groups, and close-knit communities. The cemetery, along with the church and, to a lesser extent, the home, forms part of the deathscape of the village: a profound site of place-making where the living find a "spatial fix" for grief and memorialisation (Hallam – Hockey 2001; Hunter 2016). Each of these spaces also represents deathspace, encompassing the spatialities of death, which include landscape, attitudes, and habitual practices. Therefore, deathscapes and deathspaces not only engage with the dead and death, but also with the memory and remembrance (Heng 2022: 403) of lost loved ones, which, as I have attempted to demonstrate in this paper, often cluster around specific religious holidays.

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