

FUNERARY PRACTICES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Funerary International

Series Editor: Julie Rugg, University of York, UK

The study of mortality is now an established academic endeavour which is rapidly expanding in scale and in disciplinary reach. One missing element is a repository of basic facts about funerary practice in each country and the broader legal, governance and denominational frameworks for those practices which might serve to set more detailed research in context.

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FUNERARY PRACTICES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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

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FOREWORD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Olga Nešporová

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MAP OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC

