

Funeral Ceremony Songs of the South Bohemian Blata in the Second Half of the 20th Century¹

Lubomír Tyllner

Considering a binary opposition of laughter vs. crying (happiness vs. sadness) I would like to focus on the opposite of laughter; that is on crying, or sadness respectively, and on things related to this: the death of a person and a funeral. This topic has been marginalized, nearly a taboo, because who wishes to explore sadness and crying, if there are numerous happier topics for a scholar.² The death is, surprisingly, not omitted in folk songs. However, there the end of life is made more poetic in lyrics about beheaded lads, in songs about the battles of Austerlitz (Slavkov in Czech)³ or Sadová⁴, about gallows and bloody trails along the banks of the Morava. There are many songs like that and we usually perceive them as a metaphor, like an image that changes the reality of death and dying. A funeral and a funeral ceremony, which is a topic that will touch all of us one day, have not been object of too much of scholarly interest so far. The reason is simple: the humans try instinctively to get off the mind their traumas, even if they are natural and collectively shared elements (to use the term from cultural anthropology).

The death and the funeral are transitive rituals, which differ in each case; there can be a simple intimate farewell in the company of closest people (the way writer Jiří Mucha buried composer Vítězslava

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2) For one of the exceptions, see Navrátilová, A. (2004). *Narození a smrt v lidové kultuře*. Praha: Vyšehrad.

3) Known also as The Battle of Three Emperors; it took place near Slavkov u Brna on December 2, 1805. It is one of the most famous battles of the Moravian region. The Russian and Austrian allied forces stood against Napoleon's French army.

4) It was also called the battle by Hradec Králové, or the battle at Chlum; it took place on July 3, 1866. It was a crucial battle of the Austro-Prussian War.

Kapránová, or poet Vladimír Holan his daughter), or a real media show, as we witnessed at the funeral of the king of pop Michael Jackson. In any case, a funeral, as well as a birth or a wedding, represent a collective experience, which links the present and the absent generations. These events have an important role in the strengthening of the feeling of belonging (or not belonging) to the community. A funeral ritual has always existed in various forms, depending very much on confession.

One of such rituals, connected with the Catholic religion, took place in the South Bohemian Blata region even in the beginning of the 1970s. The whole ritual and its musical vehicles did not pretend anything (unlike many contemporary funeral rituals); they were strictly determined functionally, and for at least two centuries they have followed a strictly kept pattern, as evident from sources. To honour the death person by such a ritual meant not only to follow a Catholic canon, but it was also a manifestation of a respect towards the community of the deceased. "A dead person does not leave the community, on the contrary he (she) becomes a permanent, though invisible, part of it."⁵

Omitting an appropriate ceremony expressed doubts about a dead person or a community. However, these doubts within society have gradually emerged, as is evident in the Czech lands today. A complete transformation of the formerly agrarian provinces and an introduction of the alternative ways of burials meant a subversion of this tradition in the countryside. Unfortunately, its bearers were not even aware of such tradition, because they inherited it and took it for granted.

Due to the above mentioned transformations, as well as de-Christianisation which touched even the so far conservative south Bohemia, the profession of the master of funeral ceremonies has died out because nobody took it up. A traditional way of the ceremony, which I recorded on a tape recorder in 1976,⁶ was one of the very last ones, and in

5) Scruton, R. (2002). *Průvodce inteligentního člověka po kultuře*. (An Intelligent's Person's Guide to Modern Culture). Praha: Academia, p. 9.

6) Recorded examples were played at the presentation of the paper in Náměstí nad Oslavou.

its final phase it merged with contemporary civil ceremonies. Luckily, I have managed to gain a valuable manuscript, a song book written in an old cursive script, from the last master of ceremonies Václav Peterka.⁷ Its subtitle explains that this is: 'A hymn-book, which includes various songs, jeremiads and prayers that can be sung at funerals of both adult and juvenile people. It was written down by teacher Tomáš Kukla in Borkovice in 1840.' However, Václav Peterka, a native of the same community as teacher Kukla, of Borkovice, used for his ceremonies a transcript of the original manuscript, a 1920s copy in normal font. He took over his duties at funerals from his father, together with a duty of a best man at weddings. So as to the materials from funeral ceremonies, I have gathered three forms, or better, examples of three stages of a development of the ceremony: a) the original hymn-book from 1840; b) a partial transcript from the 1920s; c) a field recording of the 1976 ceremony.

Considering that even the original hymn-book refers to tunes which were generally known (songs which were preserved and passed by for ages), there is an evidence of least two- hundred-year-old tradition. It is also possible that Peterka's duty rose from a practical need of inhabitants of a village without a church or a parish, a priest or an undertaker, where tradition determined that the way of Christian funeral ceremony had to

- 7) Václav Peterka, the last Blata singer over the deceased and Master of Funeral ceremonies, lived in 1896 –1978 in the village of Borkovice; after attending a local elementary school he became a peasant. He worked with his father Josef Peterka, who used to be a favourite best man in the area and represented the institution of the last farewell connected with songs over the deceased. His son took up his both duties around 1922; he acted as the Master of Funeral ceremonies till the 1970s; as a best man, he finished much earlier. His singing was not considered nice and pleasing to the ear by the inhabitants of the area. On the contrary, his singing was characterised by quite derogatory words. Nevertheless, even in the early 1970, local people considered it necessary to organize a farewell ceremony for elderly people especially with Peterka's singing and managing skills. Peterka's voice can be characterised as not trained, and later on also tired; quite instable in higher tones. He did not digress from prescribed texts, he never polished and enriched the written form of the text; he improvised only when using personal dates and background of the deceased. Mistakes in reading from the original written text were also frequent.

be followed. Peterka, as a skilled organizer and good singer, was a perfect man to fit the needs and duties.

From the ethnographic point of view, the field research was a complicated one, because Peterka didn't want to perform his songs outside an authentic situation. When it finally happened (Peterka let me know where and when the funeral would take place), I came across another problem: the surviving relatives in the village of Mažice, where the funeral took place, didn't want any stranger in the house of mourning, which also was a place of the ceremony. Peterka solved the problem by taking me by hand, as a schoolboy, and guided me to a corner of the room, so that I could secretly press the microphone on and record the ceremony.

During the ceremony and singing, which took place in front of an open coffin, closest relatives and neighbours were coming to the house, placing flowers and pictures of saints to the coffin. Singing, crying and praying alternated. When the repertoire was finished and the singer and master of ceremonies in one person was evidently exhausted, he asked the relatives "And finally, say the last goodbye". The intimacy of the farewell was concluded by resolute bangs of a hammer when closing the coffin. The deceased was carried out of the house by his children and other relatives, legs first. At the door step, they swung the coffin three times, saying: "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen". In history a coffin was placed on a horse-drawn hearse filled with straw; since the 1970s a carriage has been replaced by a modern car. A brass band, which waited in the yard, played a trio of funeral marches. The sound of the band was typical by its imbalanced cast with a false high *Es* clarinet. Another characteristic sound of a funeral was the sound of a bell from the nearest chapel. The procession headed straight to the chapel. After several prayers, Peterka asked for forgiveness:

"Here as you can see, the funeral of Josef Dvořák, aged 68, takes place. On behalf of his wife and children, on their request, I am asking you: if he hurt anyone, forgive him in the name of our Lord and for Christian love. And if there is anybody so stubborn who says once, and even twice I will not pardon him, I am asking you for the third

time, for Jesus Christ's pain, forgive him, and if you can, accompany him on his way to eternal sleep.”

The same ritual took place at a cross at the end of the village, where the band finally played a really touching song, “My Little Village in the Šumava Mountains” (in Czech as “Vesničko má pod Šumavou”), in spite of the fact that Šumava is far away from both the Blata region and the village of Mažice as well.⁸ Most of the people then got on a rented bus, and following the hearse, they left for the neighbouring village to attend a church mass and a burial of the deceased to the ground.

As an ethnomusicologist, I could distinguish several basic levels of sounds during the ceremony: ceremonial murmur (which is a very special here, because the intensity of the sound level is very low), ceremonial speech, ceremonial singing, prayers and laments, the performance of the brass band, bell ringing, the singing of the singer at a procession through the village, crying, hammering the cover of the coffin, and the sound of the engine of the hearse.

The most interesting and also the longest part of the ceremony is evidently singing over the open coffin with the presence of the mourning family, relatives and closest friends and neighbours of the deceased. It is important to add that in his late age, Václav Peterka used only three melodies and sang all other texts using them. The versions which are referred to in the oldest hymn-book as general tunes could be reconstructed by a careful comparison (“Zdrávas, hvězdo mořská“, “Rozžehnejme se s tím tělem“, and many others).⁹ Although the ceremony took place outside the church, even in this situation the texts would use official church rhetorics, and compared to funeral laments and moaning, they do not use any personal expressions of sadness and sorrow. In the songs, the Master of Ceremonies often speaks on behalf of the deceased. The texts fulfilled the norms of a Catholic ceremony and

8) Interestingly, the song is of a German origin, composed by Johann Baptist Blodner (1850–1931); Czech lyrics were written by Karel Šimůnek.

9) Such comparisons present a specific research problem, so they are not part of this paper.

that gave them a legitimacy of an alternative ritual without a priest. Personal feelings and expressions were not present; a ceremonial function of Václav Peterka stood over empathy, sorrow and compassion. On the other hand there was no place for sentiment, which elsewhere presents a triumph of bad taste, profanation, superficiality, and cynicism, degrading the last connection of a man with this life.

The above depicted funeral ceremonies finished definitely when Peterka died. Nowadays, a typical farewell in the village can be performed with a priest or without a priest, and a burial to the ground takes place at a cemetery in the neighbouring village of Dráčov; a typical farewell can also take place in a ceremonial hall in the nearby town of Veselí nad Lužnicí.