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**RURAL FUNERALS – YESTERDAY AND NOWODAYS
(BASING ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE VILLAGE
OF SMARDZÓW)**

**WIEJSKIE POGRZEBY WCZORAJ I DZIŚ
(STUDIUM PRZYPADKU WSI SMARDZÓW)**

DOI: 10.15611/pn.2018.534.10

Summary: The aim of the study was to try to obtain answers to the following questions: What changes have appeared in the funeral ritual in Polish countryside in the last 60 years and: Can these processes be included in the crisis of death? The research was carried out among women residents of Smardzów, situated 24 kilometres north-east of Wrocław. There were 12 interviews carried out. A research technique used in order to obtain interesting data, constituted an interview with a standardised number of questions. According to the answers of many responders, it is possible to find a lot of changes in funeral rite. Those answers indicate the crisis of death. We no longer deal with death as a public event, people rather die alone in hospitals, not surrounded with their family at home. The funeral celebration has been limited dramatically. The most attention is given to the organization of a funeral feast. All these phenomena are part of the concept of the crisis of death.

Keywords: funeral ritual, rural communities, rural areas.

Streszczenie: Celem badania było uzyskanie odpowiedzi na pytania o to, jakie zmiany pojawiły się w rytuale pogrzebowym na polskiej wsi w ciągu ostatnich 60 lat i czy procesy te można uwzględnić w kryzysie śmierci. Badania przeprowadzono wśród mieszkanki wsi Smardzów, położonej 24 kilometry na północny wschód od Wrocławia (12 wywiadów). Na podstawie odpowiedzi respondentek odnotowujemy wiele zmian w rytuałach związanych ze śmiercią. Śmierć nie jest wydarzeniem publicznym, ludzie raczej umierają samotnie w szpitalach, a nie otoczeni rodziną w domu. Uroczystość pogrzebu została radykalnie ograniczona. Najwięcej uwagi poświęca się organizacji stypy po pogrzebie. Wszystkie te zjawiska wpisują się w koncepcję kryzysu śmierci.

Słowa kluczowe: rytuały pogrzebu, społeczności wiejskie, obszary wiejskie.

1. Introduction

Currently we are dealing with two co-existing processes: the crisis of death and the renaissance of death [Kolbuszewski 1997]. According to Glenns Howarth, the fundamental problem of sociology is to solve the issue how societies behave in the face of mortality [Howarth 2008, p. 15].

In a classic publication of Geoffrey Gorer, the author presented a specific modern attitude of societies towards death [1979]. Many authors who represent different fields of knowledge have approached this issue and it is possible to mention a few concepts such as: reversed death [Aries 1989], conspiracy of silence [Kielanowski 1975], deconstruction of death [Bauman 1998], denial of death [Hayslip 2003], dying of death [Walter 1994].

From the sociological point of view, the article tries to take part in a broad discussion over the crisis of death and more specifically over cultural and moral changes towards death, with particular reference to changes of the funeral ritual that appeared in the Polish countryside.

Despite a lot of cultural, social and economic changes that the countryside goes through, it is still being described by sociologists as a collectivity with bonds of community in the understanding proposed by Ferdinand Tönnies. In countryside communities it is possible to distinguish several levels of the order inside a community. These are: 1) family community, 2) neighbours community, 3) local community. One of the fundamental features of communities is the permanent presence of tradition, past and culture among them. Communities reveal their existence and activity by different social practices including rites of passage; practices that aim to fill the needs and enforce cohesion inside a group.

The diversity of forms of rites of passage [Gennep 2006], including funerals and their function [Ostrowska 2005, p. 235] in social life is broadly documented in thanatological literature. This article presents changes in the funeral rite basing on the experience of three generations of women residents in Smardzów. The issue of the way of behaving from the moment of death until funeral, then the process of funeral, funeral feast and remembering the deceased at the graveyard – all of these elements have gone through lots of changes in the recent several dozen of years. In my opinion, the existing publications appeal to countryside communities on an insufficient level. An ample and rich research material concerning funeral customs, rituals and beliefs in the countryside area, a material presented in Commentaries to Polish Ethnographic Atlas vol. 5 [*Komentarze...* 1999], embraces the time period until the 70s of the XXth century. Some information concerning peasant death in the borderland area was published thanks to Justyna Straczk's research [Straczk 2013].

2. Aim, methods and the area of study

The aim of the study was to try to obtain answers to the following questions: What changes have appeared in the funeral ritual in Polish countryside in the last 60 years, and: Can these processes be included in the crisis of death which affects contemporary societies?

The following specific questions have been highlighted: What customs accompany the period between death and funeral? (How is it celebrated nowadays and how was it in the past?) How has the funeral ceremony of a member of a countryside community changed? Especially three questions are important. How does the day of the funeral look like until funeral mass? How do the liturgy of a funeral, the march to a cemetery and laying the coffin in the grave proceed? How does the funeral feast look like? The studies have been conducted by a qualitative method. A research technique, used in order to obtain interesting data, constituted an interview with a standardised number of questions and the research tool was the interview questionnaire made independently with a lower level of standardisation [Przybyłowska 1978]. The interviews were carried out in order to make an interlocutor use her own ideas, put those ideas in their context and extend or shorten the answers for certain questions [Helling 1990, p. 23].

The research was carried out among women residents of Smardzów. It is a village with a population of 470 people, situated 24 kilometres north-east of Wrocław. People that became residents of Smardzów had come there after World War II from different parts of Poland and from Eastern Borderlands (*Kresy Wschodnie*). The church was built 30 years ago, nobody decided to build a cemetery – majority of deceased are buried in Oleśnica – a town located four kilometres from Smardzów.

The choice of the research sample was nonrandomised, the so-called snow ball principle was used in order to reach specified group of people. It was intended to reach women respondents who had deep knowledge of traditions that accompanied funerals. The oldest and middle-aged respondents combine participation in the Congregation of Mothers of the Rosary, the only organization that, in addition to the parish council and altar servers, operates at the church.

There were 12 interviews altogether, 4 interviews per 3 age groups. The first group of respondents constituted women more than 65 years old. They still remember times when they lived in Smardzów. The first residents of the village came in majority from – what they call – *centrala*, meaning the area of Tarnów, Rzeszów and the area of Lviv. Then, there were interviews carried out with women responders in the age group of 40-50 years old who were already born in Smardzów and spent their whole lives here. The last group of responders were women in the age group of 20-30 years old. Middle-aged and younger women participate in a holy mass once a week, and the oldest females participate in a holy mass a few times per week. Such a choice of responders from three age groups was caused by a necessity of obtaining a continuity of generations and understanding changes in funeral rites.

3. Customs related to the moment of death and funeral according to answers of the oldest women responders

Roch Sulima writes that dying in the folklore was double, twofold; pagan and Christian, among family and neighbours and in church. On one hand, it was an act of dying in front of a community, departing and heading towards ancestors of the community, towards the residence of first parents, establishing (renewing) the contact with underworld, the connection between the world and the underworld in the moment of dying. On the other hand, there appeared Christian traditions and rituals, universal in their character – church rites [Sulima 1992, p. 71].

In the rural funeral rites the aspect of local community is easily seen in the foreground. Illness and death were not individual events because they always used to happen in the eyes and in front of the whole village. The oldest Smardzów women residents begin their stories telling how people behaved in case of an illness in the moment when one person from the household was sent to the parish to ask the priest to come. Four oldest responders lived in towns with no church. Then the trip to the parish to meet a priest was related with a special preparation of the cart called *półkoszka*. Apart from the seat for the carter there were no other seats, so a bunch of straw covered with the best blanket substituted the seats in order to bring the priest to the ill person in a dignified manner. *On a way to the ill it was obligatory to maintain silence for the carter and the priest because the priest was caring Jesus in the Holy Sacrament* (R1). People whom the priest was passing, near a field or near a road would kneel down, seeing him but also the sound of the small bell fixed to the cloth would remind of paying respect to the Holy Sacrament.

The death of a member of family was full of prohibitions and orders. From the moment of death the life of a family was dramatically changed. The deceased could not be left alone. There was a must to wash the deceased as soon as possible and it was either the closest family or the female neighbours who took care of it. They were always women who took care of deceased women. In the village there lived also people who *professionally* (R2) took care of that; they could always be asked for help in such circumstances. The deceased was dressed in the best and special outfit. Many times the outfit for the funeral had been prepared long before the moment of death (R1, R2, R3).

Before WW II and long after there was a custom that a deceased lied in the house, so it was a necessity to take care of the room where a deceased was lying. While waiting for the coffin to come a deceased usually lied on specially prepared and covered planks. Everybody tried to do their best so that the funeral would take place on the third day after the death at the latest. During the day family and neighbours took turns to keep vigil near a deceased so that he/she would never be left alone. In the room where a deceased was lying all the mirrors and windows were covered so that daylight would not enter. Over the head there was a cross, two burning candles, holy images – for example images of a saint patron of a deceased or of Virgin Mary.

A common tradition was when during the first night a family and neighbours came and prayed until midnight: they recited the rosary, recited different litanies, sang religious songs, remembered the deceased. During the last night before funeral everybody tried to stay near the deceased until morning. Very frequently it occurred that the majority of the village appeared in a house of a deceased. Every person willing to come had a chance to visit the house at a convenient time and say farewell to the deceased. *Sometimes it occurred that a farmer who was rich and distinguished in a village was visited by probably every member of the community* (R4).

There were a lot of social and cultural functions of keeping vigil near a deceased. The whole life of a deceased was remembered, his/her presence in life of the family, neighbours and community. People remembered important and less important events from life, they wanted to remember him/her just as he/she was for people, relatives, children and grandchildren. From the stories we learn that for example a strict father could become a gentle grandfather.

A funeral day itself looked exactly as church documents described it [*Obrzędy...* 2005]. It was divided into three parts. Around noon a priest came and prayed over the body of a deceased inside the house. The family said their farewells to the deceased the last time – a touch of a hand, a kiss and if one was scared or did not want to touch a cold body of a deceased it was possible just to say goodbye with a head bow. Then the lid of a coffin was closed and the deceased was taken out of the house. Most frequently a coffin was carried on shoulders by neighbours, *always with feet first* (R3), when leaving the house, at the doorstep the coffin was symbolically pulled down and pulled up three times which meant that *the deceased says goodbye to this house* (R3). After reaching the gate of the farm the coffin was put on a specially prepared cart covered with a carpet. Then the funeral procession led by a priest constituted a march on foot towards a church which at times was over a dozen kilometres away. The first person to march was holding the cross, the next ones flags and flowers, then a priest was walking, followed by the cart with the coffin and the family always marching behind it.

Speaking of the liturgy itself – the oldest ladies remember that it was held in Latin, *priest was not standing back to the altar, like nowadays* (R4), but towards the altar and back to the people gathered in the church. There was no conciliar altar, the colour of vestments was different too: always black. A priest was wearing an obligatory headgear, the only ornament of vestments were silver accessories. As one of responders explains: *black means hopeless and purple means that there is hope that God can be appeased and can receive the deceased* (R1).

During the funeral everybody sang funeral songs praying for the deceased. The organist was playing an important part, for he chanted particular songs and was able to respond in Latin to what the priest was saying. After the mass everybody went to cemetery where the last prayers took place and the body was put into the grave. The participants came back home on foot. After the funeral there were no funeral feasts, only a small treat for those members of family that came from far away.

The above description of common behaviour was related to *those who lived an honest life and after death deserved a dignified funeral* (R3). Special cases in the village constituted people who did not respect common religious norms. If for some reasons two people lived together unmarried for many years and suddenly they called a priest to one of them in need, there were clear conditions that the ill had to meet in order to be able to receive sacraments. Such a person had to swear, in the presence of witnesses that he or she would not come back to sin. There were cases of those who fulfilled their oaths but there were also persons who broke the given word. The latter case was described by one of responders with details including who and when behaved that way and also *how tragically he ended his life losing his mind* (R1). Of course that situation was related by everyone to coming back to sinful life and such an event was interpreted as *God's punishment* (R1) which a sinner deserved. Also other responders said that long before *people used to fear more God's judgment after death* (R4). That is why frequently when people sensed the coming death, *conflicted neighbours reconciled* (R3). People used to believe in the existence of hell. *Earlier (before WW II) people used to believe more in hell than nowadays. Now they say that there is hell on earth, for those who would believe in hell. Because nowadays people are wiser than God* (R2).

Another issue were suicidal deaths. Attempting to commit a suicide was equal to committing a deadly sin. The suicide had no chance to repent for his/her sins and for that reason he/she was condemned. A priest would not participate in funeral rituals. The family deep in mourning many times was very emotional about the fact that a funeral would be held without priest. Such people were not buried on the cemetery but next to it, on not consecrated land. Only the family participated in a funeral. No neighbours took part. In time, the church rigours changed and, in the first place, after great appeals of the family, the priest would come and consecrate the grave. About 35 years ago, for the first time in the history of Smardzów the priest came and consecrated a body of a suicide. There was a mass in the morning (without the coffin). The priest did not participate in funeral procession that started near the house but only consecrated the grave hole. The female neighbours chanting meaningful songs played an important part.

The presented scheme kept changing with time. The first change was a hearse from Oleśnica substituting a common cart covered with carpet. That change was clearly seen as positive, for it made funeral more solemn and serious. After the war (WW II) there was no parish in Smardzów, but in Oleśnica, so people had to walk 4 kilometres the whole funeral procession. After entering the town passers-by stood still, gazed at mourners and a lot of times took their hats off to respect the deceased.

Another change that was partly related to rituals of passage was the development of healthcare. In time, more and more people were using services of the hospital in Oleśnica. Some of the residents were really unwilling towards hospitalisation, intentionally asking their relatives to allow them to peacefully die at home. From the second half of 1970s when another big hospital in Oleśnica was open visiting it

became a norm for residents of Smardzów. Despite that, the percentage of death was comparable, only that it happened more frequently in the hospital than at home. The body of a deceased was kept in the dissection room, near the hospital. The family, only if they wanted, were allowed to carry the body home in *nyska* – a van commonly used those days as an ambulance. Frequently ill people *demanded from their relatives that they would be taken home after death* (R2). Before mortuaries appeared the body of a deceased had been kept at home, most frequently for two nights. A season of the year was an important factor for the choice of the day of burial. *In winter the body could lay at home* (R3) longer, in summer the temperature affected the process of body decay and that is why a funeral was on the third day after death at the latest. In the 1970s time perspective changed and the deceased was brought home one day before the funeral and it was then when a family and neighbours prayed and remembered the deceased. Neighbours were no longer obliged to help the family with their prayers during two or three nights. The deceased lied in a special place – a mortuary. That change surely influenced the process of bonds among neighbours becoming more loose.

Until the beginning of 1990s, if the family wished, a person who died at home was allowed to lie there until the funeral, especially if the weather allowed. It sufficed to talk with a doctor who declared a person dead. Such death circumstances were perceived in a positive way by responders, all the still obligatory rituals could be fulfilled. *A person did not pass away alone but surrounded with family and neighbours* (R3). Though, there were single and worth praising cases during cold months when no one doubted the reason of death (speaking of older people) the majority of people died in hospital and were taken to dissection room.

4. Customs related with the moment of death and funeral according to answers of female responders representing middle-aged and youngest generations

While analysing interviews conducted with responders from middle-age generation it is possible to notice meaningful changes. First funerals that those middle-aged responders remember were described very similarly to how their mothers had described funerals. Because of the fact that a person's death was a sad event, it was obvious that they should not do certain activities or were not allowed to do certain things, for example: *playing laud, skipping, listening to the radio* (R6, R7). Of course life went on, *but nobody cared as much how to organise the biggest funerals feast as they care nowadays* (R7). Female charitable neighbours helped in organising a treat for a family coming from far away.

Frequently the issues of hospital appeared in the utterances of middle-aged female responders. They spoke about bringing the body from the mortuary to the house and about the impact of declaration of martial law in Poland on life and functioning of

the village also if it comes to a funeral of a member of village community. The era of hearse and slowly moving funeral procession ended. The body was brought in a car (which was especially adjusted to such transport) from the building of Municipal Services Office to the dissection room located near the hospital in Oleśnica. That change was also caused by the fact that the village is situated near an important route that links Oleśnica and Wrocław and mourners passing in funeral processions constituted a danger on the road. During the martial law it was also obligatory to obtain an almost impossible to gain permission for the funeral procession to march that road. Entering the 1980s the radicalisation of sanitary-epidemiological rules and partly comfort caused more frequent and willing use of services of Municipal Services Office that transported the body to a mortuary. Those who died in a hospital were automatically taken to a mortuary. Such a willing usage of mortuary was explained by the existing in the whole country economic crisis.¹ *It was difficult to buy a coffin, one had to wait until it was produced (R8). It was more comfortable, while waiting to get the coffin, not to watch the deceased lying on a plank covered by a blanket but let the body lie in a mortuary (R9).* In the same place, while getting the coffin there were also services of washing, shaving, hair-cutting and dressing the deceased, *such services were provided by Mr. Jakubowski (R5).*

A decisive moment in life of the village was the opening of church on Easter 1983 in Smardzów. From that moment there was a possibility to bring a deceased to the church in the village. Some of the families did not want to think of a situation when they would not say farewell to a deceased at home and in the church. One day before the funeral the body was brought and the same rituals were practiced as before. In the time preceding the funeral all the formalities had to be arranged (buying the place on the cemetery, digging the grave, paying for the transport of the deceased, ordering the mass, buying flowers, contacting the family, sticking obituaries in different places). On the next day the priest would come to the house of a deceased and the coffin would be taken from the house. In the church in Smardzów there would be a funeral mass for the deceased.

Another situation was when the deceased was brought to the church in the first place, an hour before the mass. The contact between family and neighbours and the deceased was limited to minimum. Such an approach was perceived by responders *as choosing the easy way and not bringing the deceased to the house indicated lack of respect (R7).* That is how particular homes began to be more and more closed towards their neighbours. Automatically, there were fewer prayers and funeral songs that used to accompany the deceased during the vigil at home. After the funeral mass, liturgy was ended, the body was taken to the car and the family's obligation was to take care of a transport for all those who wanted to participate in the remaining part

¹ Polish economy in the 1980s was in a state of acute crisis. The regulation of goods covered a number of food and industrial products. Empty shop shelves were a characteristic feature of the Polish People's Republic economy of the 1980s [Dziurok et al. 2010].

of the funeral at the cemetery. The mass directly preceded laying the body in the grave. After arriving at the cemetery in Oleśnica, right behind the main gate the funeral procession was formed, it moved towards the open grave, the priest said particular prayers and consecrated the cross and flowers. On behalf of the family, he thanked for the participation in the funeral and invited participants to a treat.

The fact that the deceased was not at home proved a comfort for the family who did not have to take care of an issue so important for older generation, meaning: the deceased would not lie alone at home. Middle-aged responders highlight that it was the care for the living what became most important. The family did *their best to organise the after-funeral meeting* (R7). Funeral feasts took place at home or in a village civic centre. Everyone could count on the help of their neighbours that we can describe as *you help me now when I need it and I help you when you need* (R8).

The responders' stories prove that nowadays the whole funeral rite lasts no longer than two hours. In case of a person dying at home, one calls a doctor who writes death certificate. According to the law the body of a deceased should stay at home for two hours. Then an undertakers company, previously chosen by the family, arrives from Oleśnica and takes the body to their mortuary. Those companies provide their services 24 hours a day. The family may order such a company to fulfil all the formalities, too.

The religious character of a funeral becomes less important, a mass is shortened, ordering funeral masses is less frequent, also smaller number of people feel obliged to participate in the mass that has been ordered. From the answers of middle-aged and youngest responders it is possible to grasp answers proving that the number of people who come to a funeral is still important. If this number is big, it means that the deceased was highly respected, especially in the times when participation in a funeral is always related to taking a day-off or trying to find a substitute at work. Also the behaviour of family is judged: Did everyone participate fully in the mass? What flowers were brought?

Giving the money from death benefit (paid by Social Insurance Institution or ASIF– Agricultural Social Insurance Fund) to an undertaker company, it can offer the funeral feast organisation with that sum of money. After-funeral meetings are more and more frequently organised in restaurants and in places destined for this kind of occasion. For different reasons the family wants to avoid inviting mourners to their house (*a house or flat not big enough, a wish to present in a good way or to show off that they can afford it* (R7)). In the oldest responders' answers there was no mention of a funeral feast for the family, but only a treat for those who came from far away. *In case of a deceased lying at home a special attention was paid to a good* (R2, R3) care of him, hence the help of neighbours was so important when visitors came and kept vigil near the deceased. A solemn atmosphere was sensed, it was a time to familiarise with death, a time for farewells with the deceased. Nowadays people organise big funeral feasts, *sometimes even benders* (R12). The aim of such meetings is not remembering the dead person, but people *make time*

when they did not see one another (R6). The invited talk about different issues, not necessarily related to death or separation with the deceased. The circumstances of neutral ground – *the rented place help during such meetings* (R6). As a funeral feast used to be limited once to a small treat at home, it is now the longest and a lot of times a long hour element finishing the day of funeral. There is an overestimation of some of the elements, just as middle-aged responders highlight; it is not the funeral rite what is the most important but the kinds and number of dishes served during the funeral meeting. Places that offer such meetings race in proposing the menu and attract with their prices. Because of not having enough room at home to receive such a group of people these offers of renting a place are seen in a positive way, but on the other hand such a final of *the special day* (R8) meets disapproval of many. The tone during the funeral: in a procession, at cemetery, during a funeral feast allows more gossiping than remembering the deceased. According to responders, funeral feasts are an occasion to meet relatives and for the family to integrate with the other members of community. Weddings have a similar function, but the difference is that the family invests a bigger sum of money in a wedding, so it is much easier to meet with a bigger part of family during a funeral.

5. Conclusions

One of the aims of the present article is to give reasons for the thesis that rural communities currently suffer from the *crisis of death*. The phenomenon combines a group of processes that take place in the countryside, processes that lead to simplification, limiting the rites related with a funeral. Death which used to be a natural social issue has now become an embarrassing subject. The hospitalisation of deceased people has caused all the living move away from death, so now nobody sees agony or has contact with the deceased. There is not a chance to familiarise with death and its inevitability, just as it used to be before.

The rites of passage have always played a lot of roles in a community's life and nowadays it is possible to claim that they have been dramatically reduced. A death of a relative becomes a hard test for the family, a test which check how the family behaves and which rites they will save and which will be omitted. The involvement of neighbours and other members of community in the funeral rite is now limited to the participation in church service.

In their stories, the oldest residents of Smardzów clearly present an image of a death which was familiarised, a death which had the right place in the life of the community, numerous traditions and customs that had to be fulfilled and destined to alleviate the consequences of death and at the same time secure the after-death destiny of the deceased. Especially the middle-aged generation is able to notice the changes that have appeared in funeral rites in the last sixty years. The youngest female residents know most traditions from stories and indicate that nowadays those traditions are much less frequently practiced. The youngest responders highlight the overestimating of some of the elements of funeral rite.

According to the answers of many responders, it is possible to find a lot of changes in funeral rite. Those answers indicate the crisis of death. We no longer deal with death as a public event, people rather die alone in hospitals, not surrounded with family at home. The funeral celebration has been limited dramatically though many highlight the fact that in the countryside the time of church service is longer than in a town. At the same time funerals take place in more intimate circumstances, less time is devoted to prayer near the deceased and funeral processions disappeared. The central moment of the day is the funeral feast, the family takes care to prepare a sumptuous dinner and leaves the preparation of the deceased to professionals. Undertaker companies are new institutions established on a massive scale and have assumed responsibility for all the activities related with the dead – from the moment of death to laying the body in grave.

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