

1985.007

Keenan Hohol', #127 411,
UKR 499, section B1,
Dr. P. Rolland
April 24, 1985.

Ukrainian Death Rituals - in Canada

- 1) in your information concerning the source persons you should have indicated origin of family, etc. (Bulcovyna, Halychyna, Volyn etc.). The coin custom may be a remnant of Bulcovyn, or other.
- 2) you perhaps should have questioned your informants as to whether they know why certain things were done.
- 3) A reference to traditional funeral rites may be in order here. - I'm not ~~sure~~ sure.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the various Ukrainian rituals, customs, and beliefs associated with the occurrence of death. This project is limited to the information collected almost entirely from one family, covering a time span of approximately eighty years. In effect, this diachronic study shows that many of the folk beliefs that were prevalent in the first half of this century have disappeared in the latter half. This is attributable to many factors, most of which will be discussed below.

The five individuals presented here (in order of eldest to youngest) were interviewed for the purpose of this study: Anne Reinbold, Dr. Harry Hohol' and his wife Alexandra, Rev. Deacon Demjan Hohol', and John Serink (the only informant not related to the Hohol' family). The first three informants provided information pertaining to the beliefs and practices evident in the Two Hills County area (Alberta) from approximately 1908 to 1950, in addition to contemporary information relative to the Edmonton area. The last two informants primarily gave contemporary information about the burial practices in the Edmonton area. Unfortunately, none of the interviews with the

informants were recorded on cassette tape. This was so because the collector's judgement advised him against intimidating certain informants by recording them, or the informants refused to be recorded (Deacon Hohol'), or as in the case of John Serink, the interview was conducted unintentionally. Nonetheless, only minimal information (such as voice tone) was lost by having to resort to note-taking as a collection method.

In general, this project was successful in fulfilling the expectations of the collector. The great diversity and knowledge of the informants was more than sufficient to allow the collector to reach the conclusions about to be presented. However, this study is by no means exhaustive for a number of reasons. Most importantly, the fact that this project was required in order to meet the demands of a university folklore course (UKR 499) immediately implies that a deadline was established for this paper. This had the effect of prohibiting the actual amount of folkloric research needed for an exhaustive study to be conducted.

*what is a
unintentional
interview*

*what
were the
expectations of
the collector?*

Analysis

As already indicated in the introduction, the following is a discussion of the various Ukrainian customs and beliefs related to death. Death itself can be defined both as a rite of separation (from this world) and as a rite of initiation (to heaven). For this reason, Ukrainians found it necessary to make sure that the dead were buried and commemorated with a great deal of respect. Many of the customs which exist even to this day (some occur commonly and others not at all) may seem relatively superstitious and old-fashioned, yet, they are very important to those who retain them.

- act rather than rite

- not a full-blown approach
- not only here

When a person was approaching death in the "old days" (from 1900 to approximately 1940), it was customary for that person to be laid down on a bench in the house. A candle was then lit on the dying person's chest. Prayers would be said by the dying, the immediate family, and by a priest (if one was available) until the death of the person. (Which prayers were said is not exactly clear, but then again, liturgics is not the purpose of this study.) Nonetheless, the Lord's Prayer would certainly be recited because it is common to all Christians) (App., Interview #2 p. 16).

When death finally occurred, the corpse was washed with warm water (irrespective of whether or not the body was going to be embalmed) by specific ladies in the community, not related to the deceased if possible. This task was performed so that the deceased would be clean when upon reaching the Kingdom of Heaven. Of course, this washing was also done to keep the odor of the decaying corpse to a minimum. Next the closest relative or spouse of the deceased would dress the corpse in his/her very best clothing. Sometimes, if the deceased was an unwed female (apparently without regard to age), she would be dressed in formal wedding attire.

- are you sure!

✓

!!!

The body having been prepared, remained in the house until the morning of the funeral. In the interim, a short prayer service was attended by close friends and relatives. This prayer service goes by many names, the three most common of which are: Velykyj parastas, Panakhya, Litijavdomi spočyloho.¹ Immediately following this prayer service (which was held in the evening), numerous family and friends would participate in a wake, or "all night vigil" (App., p.17) which lasted until dawn the next morning. In this vigil, the Book of Psalms is usually read.

✓

The events described thus far openly contrast to contemporary funeral arrangements. If people recognize the fact that they are dying, they usually go to a hospital to try to prevent it, and certainly, no candle is placed on the chest. Furthermore, today's health laws stipulate that the corpse must be embalmed. In the old days this did not prevent the village ladies from washing the body

maybe not check -

←

first. But now this practise has all but disappeared. The body, of course, does not remain in the house, and it is usually transported to and from the funeral home, and the church, by funeral service companies.

*abalone is
a tradition
for m*

However, inspite of the fact that contemporary society seems to shun old traditions (especially the all-night vigil), some examples of old customs do exist including even the all night vigil, albeit on rare occassions. In 1983, an all night vigil took place in Edmonton for a young man who was well known in the Ukrainian community (App., p.14). The vigil was attended by close friends and family, all of whom wore a black band on their left arm. In fact, some of the people wore the band right up until the 40-day commemorative service (sorokovyna). Needless to say such practices are very rare today.

On the morning of the funeral the body is taken to the church for the Pokhoron (Funeral service). It is important to note that this service (in addition to the parastas, and panakhydy performed at the cemetery, sorokovyna, and rokovyna) has many different variations which are dependent upon the age of the deceased, the status of the deceased (lay person or clergy), and the time of year (if the service falls after Easter, then Khrystos Voskres is sung).² If the body is not mutilated or overly deteriorated, the family usually allows the casket to be left open so that people may view the body or touch it for the last time. Some people followed the practice of throwing coins in front of the casket as it was carried out of the church at the conclusion of the Pokhoron (App., p.16).

*||| this
was
being
exposed*

Although the Pokhoron has remained relatively unchanged for the last seventy years, the attitudes and emotions of the participants

have undergone drastic changes. For example, where emotions of grief were once openly displayed by family and friends (regardless of age and gender), such actions are now viewed as weaknesses. People watch the immediate family during the Pokhoron to see "how well they're taking it." Obviously, such hypocrisy diminishes the relevance of the service. Similarly, in spite of the fact that the coffin is usually left open to enable people to have a last look at their friend or relative, many people only glance at it briefly and later comment on how "grotesque" or "blue" the body looked. Although these were attitudes and views relative to death and deserving of proper sociological and psychological examination, the people who prefer to retain the old attitudes (of comfort with death) are extremely cynical about them. They see the new attitudes as a result of the growing agnosticism of society, and thus refer to them as being hypocritical (App., p.⁴¹⁵14).

The funeral procession from the church to the graveyard used to serve more purposes than merely transporting the body to the graveyard (as is now the case). In some instances the funeral procession went to the homestead of the deceased before going to the cemetery. The body was taken all the way around the homestead, the procession stopping at each of the four corners to pray. Then the body was taken to the entrance of the house (but remaining outside) where a short Panakhya was performed. Thus, having given the deceased a chance to say farewell to the homestead, the procession continued its journey to the graveyard, stopping at every crossroad for a short prayer. Of course, these rituals varied from community to community.

Finally, at the graveyard another short Panakhya is performed and the casket is lowered into the grave. In the old days, people used to throw coins into the grave so that the deceased would be rich in the next world. This ritual occurs very rarely today, as it has been replaced by the practice of people taking a blossom from the spray of flowers on the casket (for the sake of remembrance). When the body is lowered into the grave and Vičnaja pamjat' is sung, this usually causes (consistent with times of old) many people to "break down" and show their emotions (App., p.14).

In most cases today, Ukrainians still have a commemorative dinner after burial, much as in earlier times. The dinner can go by two names: Tryzna, or more commonly, Pokhoronyj obid. The people are each given a pomanna (gift) consisting of a small kolač (ritual bread), a candle, an apple, and an orange. All of the candles are lit as the priest says a prayer for the deceased and blesses the kolyvo (a traditional Ukrainian funeral food of boiled wheat), and then everyone sings Vičnaja pamjat' (Eternal Memory) and sits down to eat.³ The kolyvo is eaten first, and then other traditional Ukrainian foods are eaten. This dinner was different in earlier times only in one aspect; alcoholic beverages were provided in some instances. This practice exists today as well, but the alcohol is provided at the house after the Pokhoronyj obid, which is attended only by the closest friends and relatives who are invited. This dinner is important (in its old and new forms) because the community is brought together to console the family of the deceased. Maintaining an aspect of hromada (community) has always been important (and indigenous) to Ukrainians

(but not exclusively
for Ukrainians.)

This Pokhoronyj obid occurs on two more occasions. Forty days after the burial of the deceased another panakhyda is performed (called a sorokovyna) because as Christ ascended to heaven after forty days, so will man. It was believed that prior to this service, the soul of the dead was wandering the earth. Furthermore, if a person had any feelings of guilt associated with the deceased, such feelings disappeared on the day of the sorokovyna. After the service a Pokhoronyj obid would occur just as it did following the pokhoron. The same holds true for the meal after the rokovyna (the commemorative service held one year after the death of the deceased).

The rokovyna was usually a very joyous occasion because it signified the end of mourning. This was the time when close family and friends took off the black band they wore on their left arm. Additionally, this was the time when one could resume dancing, as it was not allowed for an entire year. When one actually began to dance for the first time money was thrown on the floor beneath the person's feet to prevent him from dancing on the soul of the dead (App., p.18). Unfortunately these rituals do not occur commonly today (with the exception of the rokovyna service), because most people do not go into mourning for a whole year.

Ukrainians, that is, Eastern-Rite Christians, continually remember the dead throughout their lifetime, be it in a certain part of a church service (the dead are always prayed for), at Christmas (an empty table setting is provided for the departed), by individual prayer and visitations to the grave, or in the provody service. This service occurs anytime between Easter and Ascension. In effect

✓✓✓

all these synonymous ✓

provody serves the purpose of commemorating and re-uniting with the dead. A panakhyda in memory of all the deceased is held at the cemetery monument, following which the priest blesses each grave individually, simultaneously blessing the food and drink which was brought by the people. After this is completed, the people eat their food (and sometimes drink) at the cemetery and exchange pomanny with each other. Currently, this ritual has followed the example of the other neglected rituals already mentioned, particularly in the urban context; that is, although the service still takes place, people do not eat at the cemetery anymore. ✓

deliberate or wrong
In concluding the discussion, this study reveals that while certain old rituals pertaining to death are still practised (i.e., pokhoronyj obid, the giving of pomanny, and provody), many rituals — have been "put to rest." Furthermore, the rituals which have been retained, exist only in modified form. In a sense, this can be considered a positive development since folk customs and beliefs should undergo dynamic process; an on-going process of change and accomodation to the times. However, the moral contradictions which arise, such as that between Christianity and agnosticism, unfortunately lean in favour of the latter, having the effect of totally destroying certain practices, as opposed to merely modifying them. ✓ ✓

Endnotes

1. Metropolitan Ilarion. Trebnyk. Častyna Perša. (Winnipeg: Trident Press Ltd., 1954) pp. 126-131.
2. Ibid., pp. 126-197.
3. Ibid., pp. 197-198.

Bibliography

- Ilarion, Metropolitan. Doxrystyjans'ki viruvannja ukrajins'koho narodu: Pre-Christian beliefs of Ukrainian People. Winnipeg: Research Institute of Volhyn, 1981. pp. 233-164.
- Ilarion, Metropolitan. Trebnyk. častyna perša. Winnipeg: Trident Press Ltd., 1954. pp. 126-198.
- Lindahl, C., Rikoon, J.S., and Lawless, E.J. A Basic Guide to Fieldwork for Beginning Folklore Students. Bloomington: Folklore Publications Group, 1979.
- Šuxēvyč, Volodymyr. Hucul'sčyna. Tom tretij. L'viv: Naukove Tovarystvo im. Ševčenka, 1902. pp. 241-255.

Appendix

Interview #1

February 20, 1985

Place: Home of Mr. John Serink, Edmonton, Alberta

Informant: Mr. John Serink

Collector: Keenan Hohol'

The interview was performed unintentionally as a discussion between the collector and informant turned to the subject of the latter's cousin's death. The following is a summary of a few important points (only those, which are relevant to this study) from the discussion.

1. The death of the informant's cousin was extremely tragic because he was only seventeen years of age. The death had a great effect on the informant, as he was very close to the deceased.
2. The informant stayed up all night with the corpse, which was in the church from the time of the Prayer Service, until after the funeral the following morning.
3. The informant was accompanied by close friends and the mother of the deceased.
4. This wake was referred to as an "all-night vigil."
5. Both the Prayer Service and Funeral Service were well-attended, particularly by the deceased former friends, who wore black on their left arm.
6. The informant expressed grief (he cried) only as the casket was laid into the grave.
7. The informant built a cross for the grave by himself because he felt a granite tombstone was inappropriate.
8. At the 40 day commemorative service, the attendance was half of the forementioned services, and the year commemorative service was attended only by close relatives and friends. The informant found this to be very hypocritical.
9. In the winters (of 1984 and 1985), the informant had visited the grave frequently. He again mentioned the word "hypocrites," in reference to all those who came to funeral services, because the only tracks he recognized near the grave were indeed, his own.
10. The informant felt that most people are afraid of death, in addition to those who fear looking at and/or touching a corpse in church. He felt that this could be attributed to the fact,

that the contemporary populace is uneducated in religious beliefs, probably due to each's own unwillingness to learn.

11. The informant closed the discussion with an oft-cited statement (indirect quote): "Most people only need the church for Christmas, Easter, Baptism, Marriage and Death, if at all." Again, he called this "hypocrisy."

Interview #2

April 12, 1985

Place: Home of Deacon Dem'jan Hohol' of Edmonton, Alberta

Informant: Deacon Dem'jan Hohol'

Collector: Keenan Hohol'

Summary of Fieldnotes

- while the dying person is near death, the priest (if available) and family recite various prayers - usually including Otĉe Naš (Lord's Prayer) because it is well known

- no "last rites" are given to Orthodox Christians, because they do not exist

- the corpse is hardly ever left in the church all night for the "all-night vigil," let alone being left in the house. Most people shun the thought of being so close to the corpse these days.

- people try to conceal their emotions at funerals because contemporary society does not advocate open emotional release

- informant said that some people (usually old) throw money into the grave when the casket is lowered into it, or, anytime prior to this money is thrown in front of the casket (not in it). The informant did not know why this was done.

- informant had seen kolyvø given out to those present at a funeral in Winnipeg, by means of one man handing out a spoon full of it to each person as he/she passed by the corpse at the end of the Parastas (Prayer Service).

- generally, however, kolyvø is usually the first food eaten at the tryzna or pokhoronyj obid (commemorative dinner).

- informant said that the practise of giving a pomanna to each person present at the funeral, sorokovyna (40 day service), rokovyna (year commemorative service) has generally been retained.

- in regard to Provody (the blessing of the graves after Easter), the informant stated that if the service takes place in an urban cemetery, no one will eat on the graves because they are too embarrassed to do so. Although this is increasingly the case in rural cemeteries, some people (the old, or the young who try to maintain Ukrainian culture) still eat on the graves. This is done in memory of the dead.

*W- when
about
spring
these
family -*

Interview #3

April 17, 1985

Place: Home of Dr. Harry Hohol' of Edmonton, Alberta

Informants: Dr. Harry Hohol' and his wife Mrs. Alexandra Hohol'

Collector: Keenan Hohol'

Summary of Fieldnotes

- Dr. Hohol' remembered that when his grandfather felt he was going to die, he informed his family, who laid him on a bench in his home, and lit a candle on his chest, and everyone prayed until his death. This was in the early 1930's.

- when he finally died, he was washed by some ladies in the village whose job was to perform this task. Then his body was taken to Vegreville to be embalmed.

- both informants remembered that some corpses were not embalmed in the 1930's. Apparently, the smell of the decaying corpses was absolutely unbearable, particularly in the hot summer months.

- both informants recalled "all-night vigils" which were held in the home of the deceased (i.e. Dr. Hohol's grandfather).

- Black clothing was worn by the family of the deceased, in addition to wearing a black ribbon on the left arm. Some people would wear the ribbon for a whole year.

- the deceased was usually buried in his/her best clothes, or, in new clothes

- Mrs. Hohol' recalled the funeral of her high-school friend, who was buried in wedding attire. Even though this was in the 1940's, an all night vigil was performed in the home of the deceased.

- both informants stated that, sometimes, a corpse would have its feet tied together. They did not know why. ✓

-Mrs. Hohol' said that when her mother died in the 1960's, her father tied his wife's feet together with his best handkerchief.

- "in the old days" (1930's and 1950's?) the ^{pallbearers} ~~pall-bearers~~ used to dig the grave. Each was given an unembroidered rušnyk (towel) by the family of the deceased. =

for
the
soul
of
the
dead

- after the funeral had finished in church, the funeral procession would take the body around the homestead of the deceased. At each corner the procession would stop and say some prayers (? in honour of the dead). This would make a funeral a day-long affair. Before leaving the homestead, the corpse would be taken to the entrance of the house, where a short service (?) would be performed.

- when the casket was finally laid into the grave, some people would throw in loose change.

- both informants remembered that there was one woman in the community who was very good at holosinnja (wailing). She used to come to all the funerals in the area (county of Two Hills) to perform her "art."

- kolyvo was eaten at the pokhoronyj obid only after a prayer for the dead was said. During this prayer, each person would light the candle of their pomanna, which would be relit at the end of the commemorative supper. A prayer was said to bless the kolyvo, then everyone would eat.

- both informants recalled that there used to be liquor served at many commemorative dinners. ✓

- there was no dancing or music at these dinners.

- the same format of the pokhoronyj obid would be followed at the sorokovyna (40 day commemorative service) and the rokovyna (the year commemorative service).

- close relatives of the deceased would not dance until after the rokovyna. (This custom is still retained by some people).

- Mrs. Hohol' remembered that when the rokovyna for her mother had passed, her father gave her a handful of coins to throw onto the floor for when he began to dance. This was so that he couldn't be dancing on the souls of the dead.

- both informants said that it is believed that all guilt leaves you when you attend a sorokovyna. ✓

Interview #4

April 18, 1985

Place: Home of Mrs. Anne Reinbold of Edmonton, Alberta

Informant: Mrs. Anne Reinbold

Collector: Keenan Hohol'

Summary of Fieldnotes

- informant recalled as far back as the late 1900's
- in such earlier times, no embalming was practiced at all. The body was washed by specific members of the community, never related to the deceased.
- wherever the body was transported to, it was done so feet first
- ~~black~~ ^{black} clothing and black bands were worn on the left arm of close relatives and friends
- when the body was taken from the church after the pokhoron (funeral prayer service) to the graveyard, the funeral procession stopped at every crossroad and said prayers for the deceased
- the dead were usually dressed in their best clothing
- coins were thrown into the grave when the casket was laid into it
- the commemorative meals following the pokhoron, sorokovyna, and rokovyna were all the same: the candle from the pomanny (food gifts) were lit, a prayer was said for the dead, and for the kolyvo, then after eating kolyvo, other food and drink would be consumed.
- up until the sorokovyna the soul of the dead was thought to be wandering the earth. On the day of the sorokovyna (40 days after death), the soul of the dead would ascend to heaven.
- when asked why the soul ascended after 40 days, the informant replied that Christ ascended to heaven after 40 days also, and since he was human, the same should go for normal men and women.
- all guilt was to leave you at the sorokovyna

- no dancing was allowed until after the rokovyna. On the first occasion that a person danced after this date, money was thrown on the dance floor so that one wouldn't dance on the souls of the dad.

- the informant said that up until the late 1930's, everyone ate on the graves at Provody (the blessing of the graves after Easter)