

Right Place, Right Behaviour: Deathscapes as a Moral Space in the Context of Alternative Spirituality in Slovakia

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Abstract: The paper addresses spiritual ideas and practices associated with the dead in the urban environment in Slovakia, a country with a predominantly Christian population, in relation to the transformation of cultural and religious worldviews which took place there in the 1990s. I consider how individuals who experienced the change of the political regime as adults and adopted new spiritual ideas reflect on the transformation of their worldviews, in particular in relation to the dead. I focus on the role of the space where the living and the dead act and communicate. In interpreting their accounts, I employ Mary Douglas' ideas about cosmology as a moral order, combining them with the approach to the study of human cognition known as distributed cognition. I also use the term deathscape, understood as the material expression in the landscape of practices relating to death. I argue that my interlocutors' experiences with the dead reflect their individualities as well as their specific life trajectories, but despite their diversities, they all share a moral dimension manifested through spatiality. In this, the idea of the universal energy characteristic of alternative spiritual currents is essential, as it unites the living and the dead in one community. This allows the reciprocal interaction of the two worlds and produces a feeling of the continual presence of the dead in the lives of the living. Thus, all accounts point to the same idea: the dead are part of society.

Keywords: alternative spirituality, spiritual energy, space, morality, deathscapes, Slovakia, fall of communism

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of anthropological research, space has been identified as an intrinsic element of culture (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003). In all societies, people create a symbolic orientation schema and ascribe meanings to things in accordance with their place in the universe. Recent research on the human mind has demonstrated that space is central to human cognition, as it provides the framework for thinking about objects and events and underlies more abstract conceptualizations of time, kinship and social relations (Brown 2015: 294). In the context of organised religions as well as in the context of spirituality outside religious institutions, the symbolic cultural order includes the image of the Otherworld inhabited by incorporeal beings and the souls of the dead, and the investigation of folk stories has demonstrated the importance of the supernatural dimension of various cultural landscapes (Valk & Sävborg 2018).

The concepts of the dead and the Otherworld in a given culture can differ in terms of individual experiences as well as in relation to changes in general cultural worldviews. In Europe, the dominant Christian religion has gradually given way to secular non-religiosity as well as to a type of spirituality which is distinguished from Christianity (Tromp & Pless & Houtman 2020). The latter is often labelled as “New Age”, “post-Christian”, “alternative” or “holistic” (e. g., Heelas 1996; Heelas & Woodhead 2005; Houtman & Tromp 2021).¹ In this paper I consider spiritual ideas about the dead in the urban environment in Slovakia, a country with a predominantly Christian population, in relation to the transformation of cultural and religious worldviews which took place there in the 1990s. After the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, the materialist and anti-religious orientation of the Marxist ideology that was the dominant official worldview during the socialist period was replaced by a plurality of religious and spiritual currents (Ališauskienė 2017; Smoczyński 2016). In Slovakia this was manifested in two ways: a return to traditional Christian forms of religiosity (especially Catholicism) and the spread of new ideas and practices (Tížik 2006). Since then, the popularity of the latter has been growing.²

During the transformation of the religious milieu, the people who had been born and grown into adulthood under socialism already had some ideas about the afterlife and the dead, both religious and secular. I will explore what various people who experienced the change of the political regime as adults and adopted new spiritual ideas think about the transformation of their worldviews, in particular in relation to the dead, and will focus on the role of the space where the living and the dead act and communicate.

I will present the preliminary results of the ethnographic research which I have carried out since 2023 in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia. I argue that in the spiritual milieu the spatial aspect of the ideas about the dead and the afterlife has a significant moral dimension supported by the notion of the universal

spiritual energy connecting the living and the dead. I will also demonstrate that practitioners of various spiritual techniques reflect the influence of the political change in the 1990s on their spiritual experiences mainly in relation to new sources of information about spiritual teachings and opportunities for meeting people with similar interests.

In the first part of the paper, I will consider the conceptual tools which I employ to interpret the results of my fieldwork. Subsequently, I will investigate the ideas about the dead and the Otherworld presented by four interlocutors with different family background and spiritual views. In this, I will pay particular attention to spatiality. In conclusion, I will discuss the results in relation to relevant scholarly works.

SPIRITUALITY, COSMOLOGY, AND DEATHSCAPES

The term “spirituality”, which is widely used in the public milieu, has proven to be difficult to define and operationalize from the scholarly perspective. As Dick Houtman and Paul Tromp (2021: 35) argue, the main reason is that it manifests itself in a myriad of different ways and social contexts, both within established religions and beyond. These scholars propose the Post-Christian Spirituality Scale consisting of seven logically interrelated ideas that they consider central to the spiritual worldviews in Europe: 1) Personal spirituality is more important than allegiance to a religious tradition; 2) Every person has a higher spiritual “self” that can be awakened and enlightened; 3) There is some sort of spirit or life force which permeates all life; 4) The divine does not originate outside, but within every person; 5) The one and only true religion does not exist, but there are truths that one can find in all religions of the world; 6) The cosmos is a living entity; 7) The entire universe springs from one universal spiritual energy (Houtman & Tromp 2021: 55). Therefore, despite the diversity of spiritual ideas, they share a common feature: the spiritual self “is conceived as laying hidden behind, beyond, or underneath the mundane self and it is believed to be intimately tied up with a universal force or energy... that holistically pervades and connects ‘all’, that is, nature, society, and the cosmos” (Houtman & Aupers 2010: 6). As Yael Keshet (2009, 2011) has noted, the concept of energy is also used as the embodiment of the intangible knowledge and serves as a linguistic bridge between spirituality and science, thus rationalizing and legitimizing spiritual ideas.

The notion of energy which is understood as an important characteristic of the spiritual or sacred sphere can be linked to the ideas of Mary Douglas (2001 [1966], 1996 [1970], 2003 [1992]) who continues Durkheim’s argument concerning the contagious nature of sacred things. According to her, in any society people create symbolic classifications of the world that determine “the normal” and “the right” in all domains of human life: “In all places at all times the universe is moralized and politicized” (Douglas 2003 [1992]: 5). She introduces

the notions of purity as a symbolic expression of this moral order and impurity indicating its violation. In the religious and spiritual sphere, these terms are linked to people's perception of what constitutes contamination and refer to the distinction between the sacred and the profane (Douglas 2001 [1966]: 21–22). Cosmology serves as a symbolic orientation schema which determines the assignment of things to their right place and helps people to relate to one another in time and space. The spatial aspect is particularly important: "The idea of society is a powerful image... This image has form; it has external boundaries, margins, internal structure. Its outlines contain power to reward conformity and repulse attack. There is energy in its margins and unstructured areas" (Douglas 2001 [1966]: 115). Things that people consider as anomalous and transgressive of normal bounds are denoted as "unclean". Thus, the notion of pollution indicates a violation of social norms and at the same time can signify a potentially dangerous, contagious sacred sphere.

Douglas's ideas about the construction of the symbolic order that includes spaces and places correspond to the approach to the study of human cognition that was introduced by Edwin Hutchins (2006) and referred to as "distributed cognition". It assumes that because humans live in constant interaction with their physical and social environments, cognitive processes are not confined to individuals' minds but are distributed across people, their physical surroundings and symbolic settings. Hutchins argues that there are three basic kinds of such interaction: interaction with social others, interaction with the material environment and interaction of the present with the past. I will interpret the individuals' accounts of their experiences with the dead along these lines.

First, these experiences refer to interactions with the dead as social others: in communication with the living the dead play a role of active social agents. Second, they involve interactions with the material environment, including physical objects as well as practices related to the dead. And finally, experiences with the dead involve interactions of the present with the past, as they are based on people's memories. In the context of my research, the last dimension is important not only in terms of memories of the dead, but also in relation to the change of the religious and spiritual milieu after the political changes in the 1990s: as I will demonstrate, my interlocutors' accounts reflect this change in terms of their ideas about the afterlife as well as practices linked to the dead.

Regarding interaction with social others and the material environment, I will also use the notion of *deathscape*, which I understand in accordance with Elisabeth Teather's (2001) definition as the material expression in the landscape of practices relating to death. As Heng (2020) observes, empirical studies on deathscapes have demonstrated that material objects can be both performative and communicative, becoming a channel of communication with the dead, and in deathscapes the dead or spirits have agency in the Latourian sense of the capacity to have effect and/or to influence the actions and interactions of individuals and events (Latour 2014) through material objects. Teather

also uses the broader concept of deathspace: deathscapes can be interpreted as a spatialisation of the social order, constituting a deathspace as a symbolic system in which “abstract structures such as ‘culture’ become concrete practices and arrangements in space” (Shields 1999: 155, as cited in Teather 2001: 197). Deathspaces are therefore “stages on which people play out their needs to express their beliefs and their acceptance of social responsibility in the context of what is tolerated by the institutions of the state” (Teather 2001: 197).

These theoretical considerations are useful for the interpretation of moral reasoning in the context of alternative spirituality. Ideas about the contagious sacred could be applied to the concept of spiritual energy. The notion of contamination can indicate contact with the Otherworld as well as the violation of moral order. Looking at the ethnographic data through these lenses, I will explore the role of space in my interlocutors’ statements and the deathscapes which include practices related to the dead. At the same time, I will pay attention to how they reflect the transformation of deathscapes after the political changes in the 1990s.

In Slovakia, in public spaces many spiritual circles are invisible, while some of them have become discernible via the media. In my paper, I will consider worldviews of people practicing neo-shamanism, which is based on re-interpretations of traditional healing practices coming from various cultures,³ and Wicca, a neo-pagan syncretic nature-based religion.

I started fieldwork in September 2023. I participated in spiritual gatherings and conducted interviews with people who attend them as well as with those who do not participate in spiritual meetings but have adopted spiritual ideas, combining them with their original worldviews – Christian, atheistic, or other. In this paper, I concentrate on the ideas of interlocutors who were adults during the political changes in the 1990s.⁴

I present the results of analysis of accounts provided by four people with different family backgrounds and religious upbringing as well as different current spiritual views (see Table 1). Identification of their worldviews followed either from what these people explicitly declared (shamanism, Wicca) or from their statements regarding spirituality. The first person is a leader of a shamanic circle; the others are not leading figures in spiritual circles and adhere to broader spiritual views, combining different ideas in individual ways.⁵

Table 1. Interlocutors’ backgrounds and worldviews

Interlocutor	Family and upbringing	Current worldview
Robert	Catholic	shamanism and Slavic spirituality
Teresa	Catholic	shamanism and broader spirituality
Lena	non-religious, spiritual	Wicca and Slavic spirituality
Ela	non-religious	Wicca and broader spirituality

During my fieldwork, in all settings the topics of the dead and the after-life arose spontaneously, in line with a holistic view of the universe and the self that is characteristic of contemporary spirituality, although in individual accounts they were explained in different ways. In the next parts, I will consider 1) a spatial aspect of the interlocutors' descriptions of the Otherworld and their experiences with the dead; and 2) how the concept of energy is used in the practitioners' argumentation.

ROBERT

Robert has been a regular attendant of FSS (Foundation for Shamanic Studies) seminars and events since the beginning of the 2000s. Later, he cooperated with a leader of the FSS branch in Slovakia and, in time, became an FSS lecturer, actively involved in the organisation of shamanic events. Aside from this, he practices spiritual healing through massage, having many clients.

Robert was born in Bratislava in the 1960s and was raised in a Catholic family. As a child, he attended religious services, but he says that he was forced to do it and did not enjoy going to church. He was more interested in science fiction and adventure literature and movies, especially those related to the traditions of the Indians of North America. Since childhood, he had considered himself a "strange" or "weird" person, different from other people, although he did not know why. That "strangeness" became definable after the fall of the communist regime, when he started to read spiritual literature and meet people with similar interests. Thus, Robert reflects the internalisation and development of his spiritual worldview in connection with the change of political regime. However, for him, it is not only about political discourse; he refers to the negative attitude of Christian authorities and Christian politics towards new forms of spirituality that marked the first decades of the post-socialist era. In general, the shamans that I met were very well aware of the typical Christian image of shamanism as the worship of spirits and demons; this made practicing shamanism problematic in the predominantly Christian environment (see Bužeková 2020). Importantly, Robert describes Christian practice as superficial and even hypocritical, although he tends to interpret some Christian rituals in spiritual terms in relation to Slavic cultural heritage that was absorbed by Christianity. He sees Slavic gods and ancestors in a strongly positive way, as moral spirits who can help Slovak people solve problems.

From the perspective of shamanism (traditional as well as urban), the dead play a principal role in lives of the living: they belong to the Otherworld, the world of spirits and ancestors, where shamans travel to ask for advice and to obtain spiritual knowledge. Referring to the inhabitants of the Otherworld, Robert frequently uses the aggregated categories of "beings" and "souls". They have their "right place" in the complex structure of the world which is divided into lower, middle and upper levels. Souls of the deceased should go to

the roots of the world tree, to the lower level which nourishes the middle and the upper worlds through its power. “Beings” include divine figures, spiritual teachers and ancestors. They can be found at the upper level, but ancestors can also dwell at the lower level.

The concept of the soul for Robert is a bridge between the notions of life and death; death from this perspective is just a transformation of the soul. In this, the moral dimension is apparent:

Many of those thinkers say that the greatest fear of all is the fear of death. There is an allegory – fear of death is fear of being left alone. People focus on that fear and do not understand that it takes from them the dimension of love. Intention is the most important thing. If I nourish the good intention, then it is good, and if I don't, then what remains? Only bad things. I'm just saying that if people paid as much attention to their souls as they do to slandering others and themselves, like – how terrible I am because I can't do this... If we paid attention to the good, imagine, where would we be?

In neo-shamanism the dead are important not only as ancestors represented in a rather general way, but also in terms of specific people, as many people come to shamanic seminars to cope with their grief or to contact the deceased. One of the principal FSS seminars is dedicated to death and dying. Its aim is “to work with the spirits of the deceased in a direct contact with them”, as Robert said, and “to help those souls who want to leave”. In November 2024 I attended this seminar, which was led by Robert. Space played the central role in how he presented “the psychopomp technique”, that is, a spiritual technique helping souls to go “to the other side”. In the beginning of their shamanic practice, each participant had to perform a ritual of shamanic journey in order to find a particular place from which they were supposed to travel to the Otherworld. During the seminar, they learnt to go from this place to the gates leading to the “in-between space” (*medzipriestor*), also called “in-between world” (*medzisvet*), where souls of the deceased stayed before they could proceed to the world of “beings” and ancestors (each participant was supposed to find their own gate). As Robert said at the seminar, souls of people who have done something wrong during their lifetime could stay in the “in-between world” for a long time period, even forever: they want to go to the other side, but they cannot until they solve unresolved issues. The aim of participants was to learn how to help these souls to get to their “right place”. Thus, the “topography of the Otherworld”, as Robert called this spatial scheme, was structured in accordance with moral assessment of the dead’s behaviour. At the same time, participants’ own behaviour was also understood in moral terms, as they were supposed to help the dead and to maintain the world order.

Remarkably, Robert describes souls as a form of energy and uses a term, “vibration”, which is specific for every individual. He represents the reciprocal interaction between the living and the dead in terms of spiritual energy which can convey the dead’s advice and messages to shamans and at the same time serves as a basis for the shamanic practice, for example, during shamanic dance when practitioners “connect to the energy of ancestors”. At the same time, he refers to the notion of “shamanic soul” or “energetic potential” which can be transferred from a deceased shaman to a living person who is chosen by the ancestors as a new shaman serving the community. The connection between the living and the dead can also be manifested by material objects, especially ritual objects which are very important in practicing shamanism. For example, recently Robert got a gift from a member of the shamanic circle – a new drum which this person designed in accordance with his vision. Robert interpreted this design in relation to his grandfather and emphasised the importance of the link between him and his ancestor.

The concepts of right and wrong in relation to the dead are important during the triduum of All Souls’ Day, All Saints’ Eve and All Saints’ Day, which is called *Dušičky* (Little Souls) in Slovakia.⁶ Robert observes associated Christian customs, which he adopted during his childhood, such as going to a cemetery and lighting candles, but he interprets them in spiritual terms in relation to the traditional Slovak concept of *stridžie dni* (witches’ days) and *Morena*, a figure of Slavic folklore that has been interpreted as a transformed image of the goddess of the Underworld by practitioners and scholars (e.g., Toporov 1993: 211). During this time some beings or “demonic forces” of the Otherworld can get to the wrong place – the world of the living – and can harm people:

The gate to the Otherworld is open then, and those beings, even those that we don’t need here, are able to move around. When the darkness has more power, they can stick to people and work with them.

Notably, “demonic forces” which get to the world of the living are represented as contamination, something that “sticks” to people. Robert’s stories about spirits of deceased people who got stuck between the two worlds also refer to pollution. These souls are contaminated by their wrong deeds, and this contamination should be “cleaned”:

Some of them are still here, they are still cleansing themselves in some way, they still want to pass on something and say something or reconcile with somebody that they’ve done wrong to, so they go to them directly and ask them to forgive them if they’ve done something in that life that they didn’t have time to atone for in their lifetime.

Moreover, the presence of such souls contaminates physical surroundings, and this also should be cleaned. For example, Robert described how he helped his friend who was troubled by a soul of a deceased owner of an apartment where this friend lived. This soul was scattering garbage, unexpectedly turning off a light or a computer, or moving things around – in general, causing a mess. When people contact Robert with similar problems, he performs a ritual called “cleaning”, during which he removes negative energy by sending souls of the deceased who are causing troubles to the other side. In this particular case, the soul of the owner appeared to Robert and explained the reasons of his behaviour, which Robert then communicated to his friend and advised her how to resolve this issue.

To summarize, in Robert’s accounts the places where the living and the dead interact are diverse: they include home settings, places of shamanic meetings and cemeteries. Robert stresses the moral dimension of this interaction linked to the notion of spiritual energy that pervades the universe and connects the living and the dead – in terms of interaction as well as inheritance of a certain “potential” or “vibration”. The concept of energy is also important in relation to the contagious nature of forces from the Otherworld or souls of the deceased who did not get to their “right place”. And finally, material objects convey the presence of the dead in the ritual settings as well as in cases of unwanted presence of souls that are “stuck” in the world of the living.

TERESA

Teresa recently started to attend shamanic seminars organised by Robert. She is a businesswoman with many interests other than business, such as art and organising cultural events. Attending spiritual meetings is a new activity for her, although she characterises herself as a spiritual person.

Teresa was born into a working-class family in 1961 and lives in her native city in northern Slovakia. Her grandparents on her father’s side were ardent communists and therefore atheists, but her mother was a Catholic. Teresa was therefore baptised and brought up as a Catholic, although her family was not actively observant and only seldom attended church services. However, she had a course on religion (Catholic Christianity) for her first two years at school. The course was part of the official school curriculum, but it was taught by Catholic nuns and a priest. This combination of socialist and religious education was possible, as it was the time of political reforms in Czechoslovakia aimed at the liberalisation of the socialist society. Teresa does not have fond memories of her religious education, as the nuns would beat the children if they did not behave. Teresa received her first communion, but after the change of the political atmosphere due to the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Army in 1968 the situation regarding religious activities worsened. When her confirmation was approaching, the children at her school were practicing for

the Spartakiad,⁷ and the teachers pressed them to choose between receiving their holy confirmation and participating in this sporting event supported by the regime. Those who chose confirmation would have had problems at school. Teresa went to Prague to participate in the Spartakiad.

During the following period, practices related to the dead were the main religious activity in Teresa's family. Aside from observing customs associated with the main Christian holidays (Christmas, Easter, and Dušičky), they attended church mainly on the occasion of funerals. The atheistic orientation of Teresa's family from her father's side, however, had an impact on this practice as some of her family members refused to attend church services related to funerals. Teresa's father died when she was six years old, and that was a trauma which influenced her entire life. The turning point was when her mother remarried and gave birth to Teresa's sister, paying the baby much more attention than her older daughter. Thus, Teresa became "the second child" and started clinging to memories of her father:

And I felt that I missed him terribly. They told me that my father was so good, cheerful, a musician, an artist, and I also am an artist... All I have are photos. I look a lot like him. And my character is similar, too, from what everyone says... so, it was like we were a twosome. When I left home, I got married. But when my son was two years old, I got divorced and lived alone in a two-bedroom apartment. A young 22-year-old girl. I always kept the doors locked and always had everything under control. Well, one day I left the door open, and I fell asleep. And suddenly, I woke up to a person standing in the doorway. He was telling me: Teresa, you're so big already, and you've already got son... And I was looking at him from his head to his toe. What his shirt was like, his tie, his shoes, how his hair was, how he had everything. And he was telling me not to worry, that he would always be there for me. And I was telling him – where have you been so far, you know how sad I am, and I was crying. And he just stood there and smiled. And when I woke up in the morning, I was crying, tears were pouring out of my eyes. But some part of me opened and I started to communicate with him. And that's still going on to this day. Of course, I told my mom about that, and she was crying because when I described that tie to her, she said that's how we put it in the grave. So I saw him exactly as he was when he left.

That experience was only the beginning: since then, Teresa has been communicating regularly with her father, but also with other dead family members who protect her and help her. Remarkably, this communication is connected to a certain place: she sees him in the right corner of her room together with other family members, including her grandparents. Teresa feels their presence and

“energy” all the time as a powerful protection. She interprets the right corner of her room as a projection of the Otherworld, which she now visits regularly in order to interact with her dead family members. Her journeys take place “in mind”, through spiritual energy. She moves along the vertical axis, which represents the spiritual dimension, by using an elevator that takes her to the “fifth dimension”. There, she meets her family and asks them for advice.

These family members are staying at their right place – the Otherworld. However, there are also people who stay in the world of the living due to unresolved moral issues, such as Teresa’s mother-in-law whom she perceives as a hypocrite. Her soul appeared to Teresa’s son in a vision: she was standing on the bank of the river dividing the world of the living and the Otherworld and didn’t want to cross over, “because she knew what was waiting for her”, as Teresa said. Teresa also experienced an encounter with a deceased “evil woman”, who stayed between the two worlds. It was the wife of her uncle and godfather; she did not take care of Teresa when she was a child. When this woman died, she tried to hurt Teresa:

When I woke up that night, she was sitting on top of me and strangling me. And I was smiling in her face because she didn't have the strength anymore. I understood then that haunting can't come at you if you're strong and protected. I saw them [her protective family members] in that corner, and she held me around my neck, and I was smiling at her. She just flew away and ever since then I see her buried in the ground.

Teresa ascribes her spiritual transformation to the experience with her deceased father, but the political and religious changes in the 1990s also play an important role in her account. It was the time when she started to learn various spiritual teachings and recognised her special abilities. As she said, “an awful lot of things opened up then and started jumping out at people”. She started to participate in spiritual events and met people with various spiritual interests. She was aware of the diversity of spiritual teachings and selected from them on the basis of her intuition – she realized then that she had abilities to recognize ideas and practices that were “proper” for her.

Reading spiritual books and practicing meditation helped Teresa find answers to the questions she had about her life. The main questions were about her family, in particular her father. In general, the central role in her spiritual transformation was played by the dead and the practices related to them, such as funerals. On these occasions Teresa compared her religious background with these new ideas, and this comparison was not in favour of Christianity.

The moral aspect of Teresa’s accounts corresponds to the spiritual view in which people have obligations towards the universe, and bad behaviour has consequences:

I think after we die, we leave the body here. I think the soul goes somewhere higher. I think that we as souls have a certain task in life. We're going to do the job and either you do it or you don't do it and you go again... I don't know what it's called, whether it's karma or whatever it is, but I know that those who do evil and have those evil souls and those evil intentions and do harm on purpose, it doesn't matter who or what, even animals, it comes back to them incredibly.

In terms of deathscapes, Teresa can interact with the dead at any place. Cemeteries, however, are not proper places for that, as the dead communicate with her every day on various occasions through her mind. They often contact her spontaneously or she contacts them through meditation. Or, rather, as she said, “I do not contact them, they’re just there”. She uses material objects to commemorate the dead, but they are not that important, as she perceives their presence rather through her mind. Although Teresa and her family used to attend church funerals and observe the tradition associated with Dušičky, she sees these practices merely as customs and as something that her dead relatives would expect from her. This behaviour corresponds to the idea of reciprocal interaction between the living and the dead: the dead help and protect Teresa, and she observes customs and rituals which are supposed to oblige them. Unlike Robert, however, Teresa pays more attention to concrete persons, to her family, and seldom mentions such general concepts as “souls” or “spirits”.

LENA

Lena is a regular attendant of Wicca events and the school of natural magic organised by Samuel, a high priest of the Wicca circle (see Bužeková 2024), but she has her own spiritual practice which includes spiritual consulting and healing courses. Before the COVID-19 pandemic she worked at the Norbekov Center in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which offers healing courses to improve eyesight and restore overall physical and mental health.⁸ Since the pandemic she has been employed by Samuel in his magic shop.

Lena was born in Moscow in the 1970s into an ethnically mixed family – her father was Russian and her mother was Slovak. After finishing secondary school, she moved to Bratislava with her family. She and her three sisters did not have a religious upbringing: they did not go to church and did not receive any religious education. Despite this, Lena sees her childhood and youth as having been spiritual, due to all three sisters’ special abilities (seeing auras and clairvoyance), but also due to reading classic Russian literature. According to her, the changes in the 1990s only broadened the range of external sources of information about spirituality, especially literature, but did not cause a decisive transformation of her spiritual life.

Basically, Lena is a “solitary” who does not need a group to fit in. Although she considers any spiritual practice to be potentially useful, she is drawn to the Slavic cultural heritage, *slovanstvo*, because she perceives it as her roots and as the original form of spirituality. She calls herself a *čarovnica* which she considers as a Slavic term for a woman who practices magic. She is involved in the activities of Rodosvet, a “spiritual academy” which promotes “old Slavic tribal spiritual knowledge, teachings, beliefs, traditions, ceremonies, [and] customs”.⁹ She also works with Russian and Ukrainian spiritual teachers such as Vladimir Kurovsky.¹⁰ Despite her respect for Samuel, she does not agree with him on the question of the authenticity of spirituality:

I never identified as Wiccan or anything. Magic is one, we all know that. Here, that coherent tradition is really preserved in Wicca, in part thanks to Samuel, that he brought it here and carries that knowledge all the time... Slavs lived in harmony with nature and spirituality. Even according to history, and Samuel doesn't like it when I tell him, basically all of Wicca has Slavic foundations. Well, he doesn't like it very much. But the Slavs really lived all the way across Europe, all the way back in England. It's even claimed that King Arthur was a Slav.

The dead play an important role in Lena's worldview: she sees ancestors as part of any society, as teachers and guardians of spiritual knowledge. This is similar to Robert's view, although she places a greater emphasis on Slavic heritage. Sometimes Lena also refers to shamanism as a term synonymous with magic, and her dealings with the dead are similar to shamanic rituals. Her central concept associated with the dead is the “soul”, in the sense of spiritual energy. This view defines the deathscapes – the places and practices associated with the dead. Cemeteries play an important role in Lena's reasoning about these practices. In November 2023 I attended together with Lena a Wicca seminar dedicated to the communication with the dead. Participants were encouraged to create altars of ancestors at their homes and to go to the graves to commemorate deceased family members. Lena, however, perceives the latter practice as disturbing to the dead. As she explained, she has been “a big believer in carrying our loved ones in our hearts”. When she wants to commemorate the deceased, she does it at home: she puts up their pictures, makes an altar, or lights a candle.

In addition, Lena always takes a “visitor” home from the cemetery – some soul that wants to communicate with her; then she must send this soul to its right place. She is able to do this due to the special abilities that she developed during her childhood: she can see what others cannot, she is frequently contacted by the dead, and she can help them. The souls are a form of energy that can live in traces in the physical environment:

I still feel those souls walking behind me. That curtain [between the world of living and the Otherworld] is really just a gentle breeze, or rather there's hardly any boundary at all. That's why people should be careful where they walk because anybody can walk through that gate. [...] They [souls] come. I see them, I feel their energy. And when I pass by the cemetery, I get home, and I can just see the shadows. Or there are some roads where I don't like to go, for example, there was a battlefield, or a place where some tragedy happened. That's how I experience it. Or you're driving in the car and suddenly somebody is sitting next to you (laughs). [...] My perception is that these souls are stuck here and either they don't understand that they must cross over to the other side, or something is keeping them here. I have to help them, just point them in the direction where they have to go, send them back through that portal and just wait for them there. This pilgrimage of theirs is then over. They go where they belong.

Thus, similarly to Robert, Lena helps the souls of the dead, who are kept in the world of the living by some unresolved issues, to get to their right place in the universe – to the Otherworld; and the interaction between the living and the dead is also presented as reciprocal, as ancestors are supposed to help and advise people. Lena's view of the right place for the dead is somewhat different from Robert's view: it is not at the roots of the world tree, but a light understood as a form of the spiritual energy that permeates the universe. The places where the living and the dead interact include home settings or any setting where the contact between them takes place; but cemeteries are not proper places. The graves keeping the material remains of the deceased are not supposed to be visited, but material objects evoking memories play an important role in communication with the dead.

ELA

Ela is also a regular attendant of Wicca events and the school of natural magic, and she also has her own spiritual practice – spiritual consulting and courses on mandalas. Outside of her spiritual activities, she worked at an IT company for many years and then established a business as an accountant.

Ela was born in Bratislava at the end of the 1970s and characterises herself as a child of the socialist era. When she was born, her parents were students influenced by hippie ideas, but her grandfather on her father's side was a high government official and a respected professor at the faculty of civil engineering. Because of his position his children could not be baptized, and neither Ela nor her parents received any religious education. As Ela said, it was extremely good for her, because she was not influenced by that sphere. In addition, she was not influenced by any adult until she was three years old, because her parents were

studying, and she lived in a *koliba* (isolated cottage in the hills) with her grandmother who was very hard of hearing. After that her mother became mentally ill and Ela moved to her grandfather's house in Bratislava. Because she was not socialised in a standard way and did not adjust her reactions to "proper" behaviour, her family viewed her as a problematic child, as "crazy" or "traumatized" by her mother's illness. Ela, however, interprets her "wild" behaviour and visions during childhood as manifestations of her special spiritual abilities, which she started to recognize only after the political changes in the 1990s. She began to read spiritual literature and meet people who were "doing spiritual things". As she said, "that was such an opening for me – to study and hone those skills. And the fact that other people have it the way I have it".

Ela's worldview is not bounded by any fixed ideas shared in a group; although she identifies as a *čarodejnica* (the Slovak word for witch) and accepts some Wiccan ideas, she perceives witchcraft as a free practice in which she can use any suitable spiritual technique. Unlike Lena and Robert, Ela is not inclined towards Slavic spiritual heritage. She is instead oriented towards Eastern spiritual concepts, especially Tibetan, which she adopted from books given her by her grandfather after the fall of the communist regime.

With her special abilities, Ela has had experiences with the dead since her childhood:

I didn't understand why people were crying when someone died. Because the soul was talking to me in such a... happy way! I just perceived that person as a light. They were smiling. They already had that feeling of happiness. Everybody around was crying, and I didn't understand why. Because I wanted to smile like a child. And of course, after a couple of these situations... they saw it as bad behaviour, and I couldn't go to funerals anymore. They just didn't call me. I never understood why they go there crying and why they're in black. Because to me the dead were lights.

In her descriptions of the souls of the deceased Ela, like Lena, uses the word "light". In relation to the living beings' energy her usual expression is "aura", and she pays special attention to its colours – an important topic in her spiritual practice. However, she also perceives the energy of the living and the dead through smell. Her most emotional experience in this respect was her mother's death: it was her first encounter with the smell of death. She also feels a similar smell in the presence of people who are at the end of their life and have little life energy; and she sees their aura as small.

Energy also plays the central role in Ela's interaction with her dead female relatives. Motherhood and womanhood are central notions in Wicca, as well as in other spiritual currents based on the ideas of witchcraft and magic, and Ela's perception of her mother corresponds to this view. Despite her relatively little

influence during Ela's childhood, she has played an important role in her life, but not as an individual – she appears to Ela during spiritual practice together with Ela's two grandmothers:

When I'm in big trouble or need to make a decision, or my soul feels that I'm about to be hurt or something is about to happen, they advise me: don't do this, do this, or if I just need help, they determine my path. They give me kind of consultation to direct the energy... I see them as an image: there is a fire in the centre, a hearth, and they are sitting ceremoniously in their places, and I am in the circle. Sometimes I just sit quietly and they do some ceremony, which I then apply in my healing, or some other thing, which I learn and practice further. Or when I'm right in front of them, in front of the main ones, I get some message. That message is either an image or a word.

In Ela's accounts the cemetery does not play a central role in the commemoration of the dead: she states that she does not need to go there and put candles on graves because there had been a change: a soul left and what remains in the ground is not the deceased person. Besides, she does not like to go to the cemetery, because at the cemetery she sees "creeping masses" or "entities" waving around graves which are not souls but some fragments of their energy "that remains there, that can't detach itself from the material, and it creeps in there".

In Ela's case the deathscapes include, first of all, home settings, where material things are central. She emphasises the inheritance of habits through which she interacts with her grandmothers, such as making their favourite food, using their favourite dishes, or reading books that they liked. One of Ela's most important practices related to the dead is telling stories about them to her children. This is what people are supposed to do and what her children are supposed to do when she dies – she hopes that they will remember her in this respectful way, but she does not want them to be sad. Material objects convey the presence of Ela's dead female relatives not only in commemoration, but also in her spiritual practice. For example, she inherited from her grandmother a broom and a pot, and that are for her "the most powerful witch's tools", as she believes that her grandmother "really used to fly on that broom".

Ela's image of the Otherworld includes the idea of a boundary between the two worlds expressed in moral terms, although it is somewhat different from Robert's, Teresa's and Lena's representations:

When the dead contact people, it always because of unresolved issues. Sometimes it happens because they want to protect a person... For me, a boundary [between the two worlds] is just a different perception. I just switch that perception, I stop perceiving the body, the material part, our reality. When one is communicating with

spirits, the boundary always must be closed afterwards, otherwise one gets those entities and even evil ones come here and get hold of one's throat and then hold on and do wrong. So one always has to draw that curtain. When I'm consciously asking something or communicating with spirit because I need help, I always close it.

To summarize, the interaction between the living and the dead is reciprocal: deceased relatives are helpful for Ela and her family; they still influence her life and help her to make decisions. On the other side, the dead are regularly commemorated and honoured. Material objects belonging to them play an important role in commemoration as well as in Ela's spiritual practice. The moral dimension of interaction between the living and the dead is also strongly manifested through the idea of practicing magic: Ela's activities are supposed to heal and help people, and the dead direct and advise her in this beneficial work.

CONCLUSION

I conclude that my interlocutors' accounts of their experiences with the dead display a tendency to connect ideas coming from various spiritual teachings. This seemingly corresponds to a view of alternative spirituality as a "pick-and-mix religion" (Hamilton 2000) or a "spiritual supermarket" (Lyon 2000): it has been argued that most participants in the spiritual milieu draw upon multiple traditions, styles and ideas simultaneously, combining them into idiosyncratic packages. This argument follows the influential idea of Thomas Luckmann (1967) who viewed New Age as a market of religious elements, from which individual "seekers" could pick and choose freely. However, as Olav Hammer (2010: 52) states, like any other worldview, alternative spiritual concepts "do not originate in the minds of free-floating, autonomous individuals, but are produced by historically situated people".

In the case of my interlocutors, their choice of spiritual practices has been influenced by the specifics of their upbringing and current situation. After the change of the political regime, the influx of new forms of spirituality broadened their views and knowledge and they started to develop their spiritual abilities. People with Catholic backgrounds had to reconcile their original confessional faith with new forms of spirituality: Robert and Teresa, who perceived their childhood religious experiences in a negative light, turned away from Christianity. Robert's initial choice of the shamanic practice was influenced by his fascination with cultures of American Indians during his childhood and youth, but his current interest in the Slavic spiritual heritage corresponds to the present situation in Slavic-speaking countries of Central Europe – it has been argued that the rise of neo-pagan movements in this region manifests specific contemporary forms of Pan-Slavism, not necessarily expressed in political terms (Čejka & Suslov & Đorđević 2023). Lena with her upbringing in

Russia displays even stronger interest in Slavic traditions: she is engaged in Slavic spiritual organisations; and she tends to interpret any spiritual practice in Slavic terms. Ela's interest in the Tibetan spiritual tradition was initiated by books given to her by her grandfather, but in general she prefers freedom of choice that corresponds to her "untamed" childhood. Teresa's turn to spiritual practice was caused by her experience with her dead father with whom she has identified since her childhood; and her tendency to try various techniques follows from her desire to find the most relevant answers to questions posed by her family life.

Despite the diversity of my interlocutors' experiences with the dead, all of them demonstrate the significant impact of the dead on their lives in two related spheres: the family context (deceased relatives) and their general worldview. Looking at their conceptualisations of the dead through the lenses of distributed cognition, I can conclude that my interlocutors' accounts reflect the constant interactions between the living and the dead: interactions with the dead as social others, interactions with the material environment and interactions of the present with the past. All three kinds of interaction are manifested through spatiality and involve the notion of the spiritual energy.

First, in communication with the living the dead play a role of active social agents. They can be presented as a collective category or as individual people. Both categories exist in two forms: 1) as part of a community inhabiting their right place in the universe, which is separate from the place inhabited by the living; and 2) as energies/entities/persons that get stuck in the world of the living. Interaction with the material environment is also expressed in spatial terms: practices related to the dead as well as physical objects are linked to certain places. And finally, interactions of the present with the past include people's memories of the dead as well as their reflections on the change of the religious and spiritual milieu after the political changes in the 1990s, in particular in terms of practices linked to the dead.

The main aspect of the agency of the dead is the "energy" that influences people's feelings and senses. Importantly, it allows reciprocal interaction of the two worlds and produces a feeling of the continual presence of the dead in the lives of the living which has a significant moral aspect. The connection between the concept of energy and moral behaviour can be connected to the idea of individual spirituality characteristic of alternative spiritual currents. As Galina Lindquist (2004) argues, the holistic worldview represents human beings as participating in the functioning of the universal cobweb as one of the forms of existence which contribute to its prosperity; this view corresponds to the political ideals of educated urban participants: egalitarian social order, citizens' engagement, ecological lifestyle, individualism and free choice. From this point of view, individuals are supposed to contribute to the general transformation of the world, because the development of the self is perceived as work

on both an individual and a global level. Indeed, my interlocutors expressed the idea of one's responsibility for their moral intentions and actions.

A moral dimension of the deathscapes present in my interlocutors' accounts is manifested through the spatial division of the world of the living and the Otherworld, which parallels Douglas' idea of cosmology as the moral order. The dead situated in the right place are benefactors: they protect the living and advise them. If the dead stay or get stuck in the world of the living (the wrong place for them), this is caused by unresolved moral issues: problems, guilt and atonement, a wish to help the living with certain problems, etc. This moral categorisation corresponds to numerous studies demonstrating how the violation of moral norms by deceased persons is linked to the negative impact of the agency of the dead on the lives of the living. In folklore studies, these findings refer to the traditional figures of revenants; in anthropology, exploration of such impact led to the emergence of the special field of hauntology (Good & Chioventa & Rahimi 2022).

Physical surroundings are important in the interaction between the living and the dead for all my interlocutors, albeit in different ways. For people who turned away from Christianity or did not have religious education, the meaning of the cemetery – the traditional Christian place of commemoration – is different from the traditional view: the tradition is upheld, but only as a matter of custom, and the cemetery can even be avoided when perceived as a location of souls or energy stuck in this world. This tendency as well as the idea of the Otherworld “forces” or souls that can stick to the living can be related to Douglas' concept of contamination and the contagious nature of the sacred sphere.

The forms of communication with the dead in private settings, on the other hand, have been transformed and expanded. Instead of the praying for the dead characteristic of Christian households, people who adhere to alternative forms of spirituality perform various rituals, meditate and interact with the dead by means of material objects, including altars, or through habitual activities. Material objects provide the link between the living and the dead, supporting and enhancing their interaction. The tendency to use the residual belongings of the dead to evoke memories has been widely explored in anthropological and historical studies that revealed the importance of material objects in experiences of grief, mourning and memorializing (Hallam & Hockey 2020). Ethnographies of alternative spirituality have also pointed to the importance of the use of various material objects in spiritual and religious practice (e.g., Castellanos 2021); that could be interpreted as the material agency (Teidearu 2023; Kumar 2024) or as the manifestation of the agency of the dead (Heng 2020).

Material objects can also serve as a manifestation of the agency of the dead in a different way: actions of the dead who are stuck in the world of the living can have material impacts, such as causing inanimate objects to move. This representation points to the moral dimension of deathscapes and, again, can be interpreted in relation to Douglas' concept of contamination in terms of

violation of moral norms. In the context of cognitive studies, as Richard Heersmink (2017) argues, the way in which artifacts are used in moral practice can be explored in connection with the perspective of distributed cognition with distributed morality theory. From the perspective of distributed cognition, humans make material patterns into representations by enacting their meanings (Hutchins 2010). In cognitive and evolutionary studies, this tendency has been explained by human evolution that has always been inextricably linked with the material forms people make: as Lambros Malafouris (2018) states, human beings are not merely embedded in a rich and changing universe of things; rather, human cognitive and social life is a process genuinely mediated and often constituted by them. Thus, the role of material objects in interactions between the living and the dead is always linked to how “the universe is moralized” (Douglas 2003 [1992]: 5). In the context of alternative spirituality, this “moralization” is expressed by the notion of energy.

To conclude, the common feature of all individual accounts is the interconnection of spatiality with the concepts of right and wrong behaviour – both of the living and of the dead. Ideas of practitioners of alternative spirituality differ and correspond to different ways of upbringing and current views, but nevertheless all of them point to the same idea: the dead are part of society, united with the living by the universal spiritual energy.

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NOTES

- 1 According to Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman (2000: 2), contemporary spiritual currents “invariably understand themselves to be ‘alternative’, either strongly (they are explicitly dissenting) or weakly (they are merely variant or optional)” to dominant ideas and structures of “official” religion as well as secular science, and for this reason, the loose category of “alternative spirituality” is appropriate. In my account, I will primarily use this term.
- 2 The most recent census in Slovakia (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic 2021) showed that the number of people belonging to the large churches has fallen and the number of non-religious people has risen significantly. The number of residents who affiliate with Roman Catholic religion is the highest (3.04 million): it is up to 55.8% of the whole population. However, in comparison with the previous census in 2011 their number and proportion decreased by more than six percentage points, representing more than 308 700 people. The second most numerous group (almost 1.3 million) is the population with no religious affiliation. Its proportion increased from 13.4% in 2011 to 23.8% in 2021. This change does not necessarily point to an increase in non-believers but can indicate the increasing popularity of “unchurched spiritualities” (Watts 2022) and can be linked to a growing percentage of people in the world who identify as spiritual but not religious (SBNR, see Fuller 2001; Wixwat & Saucier 2021). In addition, 4007 residents affiliate with a new census category “Paganism and natural spirituality”.

- 3 The main role in the formation of neo-shamanic groups in Slovakia in the early 1990s was played by the European branch of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (hereinafter referred to as the FSS), located in Vienna (Bužeková 2012, 2017). I became familiar with this milieu in Bratislava in 2004 and carried out ethnographic research there in 2009–2011. Since then, I have been in contact with several people practicing shamanism in various forms.
- 4 So far, I have conducted repeated in-depth interviews with 13 interlocutors of corresponding age (those who experienced the change of the political regime as adults) and 5 participant observations of meetings of the spiritual circles. In this paper I present the results of the inductive analysis of 8 interviews with 4 interlocutors. I coded the data using emic categories. The excerpts from the interviews which are presented in this paper were translated by me.
- 5 The names of my interlocutors are pseudonymized. I present here mostly women's accounts; this aspect is a result of the complex gender dynamic of spiritual circles. The empirical research has demonstrated the prevalence of women on the spiritual scene all over the world (Keshet & Simchai 2014). During my previous as well as present research on spiritual gatherings I met women in all age categories, and my previous research pointed to a process of stratification of spiritual groups in which men can gradually replace women in leading positions (Bužeková 2014). In this paper I will not pay attention to the gender aspect, as this topic deserves special consideration.
- 6 In a narrow sense, this term refers to a day which is a state holiday, officially called "Pamiatka zosnulých", that is, Remembrance of the Dead, celebrated on 2 November. For more about this holiday in the context of alternative spirituality see Bužeková 2024.
- 7 The Spartakiads were mass gymnastics events designed to celebrate the Red Army's liberation of Czechoslovakia in 1945. The name refers to the 1921 Prague Spartakiad organised by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (Roubal 2019).
- 8 Mirzakarim Sanakulovich Norbekov is a teacher of alternative medicine originally from Uzbekistan, known mainly in the countries of the former Soviet Union. He has written several bestselling books explaining how to feel happy and live a healthy life, and encouraging patients to take an active role in treating their illnesses (see Centrum Norbekova v ČR a SR, <https://www.norbekov.cz/>).
- 9 See Rodosvet Académia, <https://akademiarodosvet.webnode.sk/>.
- 10 Kurovsky is "the highest *volchv* [Slavic sorcerer or priest] of the outer circle of the ancestral hearth of the traditional Slavic spiritual school", teaching *ведическое славянство* – Vedic Slavic tradition and spirituality, including meditation techniques, positive psychology, and martial arts (see Kurovsky).

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