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THE STREET POSTED NECROLOG – A SUBTLE ELEMENT OF EVERYDAY URBAN LIFE

Introduction

It is common in Bulgaria nowadays to hear foreigners asking: are all these people, with their faces posted all over the streets, wanted by the police? In fact, all the faces, watching us from every street corner, tree, or lamppost, belong not to criminals but to deceased people.¹

There are many stories in Bulgaria about the funny reactions of foreigners to the street posted death notices, called in Bulgaria – *necrologs*.² For most of the people, coming from abroad, these black and white pictures of the dead are incomprehensible, peculiar and even – when they understand their meaning – morbid. In the same time most Bulgarians, even when they travel abroad, presume all the world to be covered in necrologs and realizing the opposite shocks them almost as much as foreigners are shocked by the necrologs here. For Bulgarians it is somehow natural to live observed by the dead (see fig.1).³ But for people, coming from abroad, this behavior seems exotic to say the least.

In this paper, I will argue that the “exotic” street posted necrolog actually has Western European origins. The opening story is my point of departure in my study of the journey of the necrolog in time and space: what are its origins, when and how it came to the Balkans, and how it so happened that today the publicly posted death notices are perceived as something non-European and obsolete. Though, in the Balkans the necrolog is still part of the everyday life, in most Western countries the street necrolog has been forgotten, and nowadays it is an impermeable sign for most of Europeans outside the Balkans.

The aim of this project is to reveal through the Bulgarian street posted necrolog phenomenon that one of the things that Eastern Europeans can offer to the West is its own past. The dynamic European cultural realm

endures continuous transformations during which some parts of it have been considered no longer belonging to it, somewhat “foreign”, therefore – no longer perceived as European. Usually, it is the simple matters of everyday life that constitute the idea of “ours” and “alien”, and have the greatest influence on the perception of the “Other”. In this respect, European unity is much more rooted in our common history, especially the one of subtle elements of everyday life. Deeply entrenched routines are the very things that surprise us with their variability as well as with some unexpected similarities or common roots. Exactly this “unity of the mundane” is quite often either forgotten or neglected.

Why the street posted necrolog?

I chose such a subtle element of the contemporary everyday life in both Western and Eastern Europe – the “necrolog” (*obituary*)⁴ as the core subject of inquiry for it clearly shows that the common European values and practices are shared in the context of the “fluctuations” of European unity. In the same time, it could be argued that the “necrolog” is clearly indicative for the extent and the forms of oblivion of the common European history of the routine and shared values it implies. The second reason is that the street necrolog phenomenon is poorly investigated up to date namely because it is considered belonging to the “history of the banal” for the Eastern-Europeans.

Based on these similarities, I will try to trace back the process of alienation between the traditions of the common “necrolog” in South-East Europe and the obituary in Western Europe. Contemporary differences will be investigated through the results of the political and ideological transformations that occurred after World War II (when the feeling of European community has been tarnished) as well as through the consequences of the processes of forgetting in the context of contemporary theories of collective memory and forgetfulness.

My second goal is to explore how this transformed, dynamic phenomenon was embedded in the local culture in the Balkans and particularly in Bulgaria, and how being an element of everyday life, it changed the cities, their atmosphere, meaning, and the value of the urban space and environment.

This paper falls into four main parts. The first one describes what the formal structure of the street necrolog is, what the practice of issuing

necrologs in Bulgaria is and how did this phenomenon has become so popular. Some historiographical issues will also be addressed in this part. The second part aims through investigating the way the memory of the dead is honored in Bulgaria, to restore the memory of the necrolog itself, its European roots, how the Balkans adopted the necrolog phenomenon from Western Europe during the 19th century at a moment of Western European cultural expansion. The issues of the appropriation of the necrolog in the Balkans and particularly in Bulgaria, the way the necrolog was changed and how it is perceived by Bulgarians is the core of the third part of the project. In the new Balkan context, the street necrolog outlines the changes (resulting from the rupture in continuity and the cooptation of local traditions and beliefs) that make it look exotic and impervious to Western Europeans. The last part is dedicated to the street presence of the necrolog and its functioning in the city environment.

My work is based on field work conducted in different parts of Bulgaria in 2002 and the beginning of 2008; archive necrologs and newspapers obituaries found in the archive of the National Library “St. St. Cyril and Methodius” (NLCM), Bulgarian Academy of Science archive (NABAS) and The Bulgarian Historical Archive (BHA), as well as my own archive, collected by myself for almost 20 years. They represent excerpts of the phenomenon matrix, as well as its historical development and its variations. They allow me to draw a wide spectrum of meanings, which the necrolog brings and supports by its existence. Particularly for this paper, I also consider Bulgarian internet forums, where public discussions about the street posting of necrologs are happening.

For the analysis of such an exceptionally heterogeneous text such as the necrolog, I will work on the border of different methods and approaches. The project, especially its first part is in the framework of modern transnational history.⁵ The emphasis in this approach is not just on the flows of objects, practices and ideas across national borders, but mainly on the ways in which the practices, values and even objects have been shaped by these processes of transfer; how these objects and practices were appropriated and transformed. To achieve my goals I will also employ the method of historical reconstruction in order to be able to reconstruct the dissemination of the necrolog in the Balkans and to trace back the genealogy of the contemporarily differing necrolog types. I will also use a dynamic comparative perspective, focused on the division between the necrolog/obituary practices in the context of the appropriation of the domestic traditions of commemorating the dead.

The necrolog and the obituary

The *necrolog* is a term used in Bulgaria for a sheet of paper most often in A4 format, with printed text that announces someone's death and funeral (when the title is *Mournful news, Farewell, Last Goodbye, Passed away* etc.) or memorial service (when the title is *Commemoration, Mournful Remembrance, Sorrow, etc.*).

Except the title, the necrolog contents: the Holy Cross or other substitute symbol that signifies religious, political or professional affiliation of the dead person (six pointed Jewish star, five pointed communist star or other symbol); time passed since the death; the name of the deceased; a photograph, except the very first necrolog; the next element is a text written by the authors (its length and style can vary from few words to several paragraphs long, sometimes in poetry). It contains an address and expresses usually "love, pain and dolor" of the grieved. In many cases, the description of emotions is combined with rather stereotypical characteristics of the deceased – goodness, decency, honesty, love to other people, kindness, etc. The last paragraph is usually a ritual formula such as: *A bow on your luminous memory; Rest in peace; Let all people who knew him/her remember him/her with good; May God forgive you.* At the bottom of the text are placed the necrolog authors; the last element is an announcement for a funeral or service.

The necrolog is issued right after someone's death, usually by the closest of kin, but quite often also by friends, colleagues, and classmates or even by institutions. Subsequently, the same dead person is commemorated by follow-up necrologs following the individual rite time of the deceased that begins with his/her death, as it is prescribed by the Christian Orthodox tradition. The final necrolog depends on whether there are any living people that still remember the deceased. The necrologs are posted publicly on all places related to the life of the deceased. They can be mailed to relatives or friends too.

The street necrolog can be seen today only in a few countries in Europe (Italy, Poland), (see fig.2, 3), but mainly in the Balkans. (see fig.4, 5, 6) In most Western European countries and the USA, the death announcements (obituaries and death notices) are published in newspapers only. Although known in other Slavonic cultures and not originally Bulgarian, only in Bulgaria have necrologs gained such ubiquitous presence. (see fig.7) All religious, political, or social communities have appropriated this tradition. (see fig.8, 9, 10) Thus, the publicly expressed feelings of loss and dolor

through the necrologs have become a subtle element of the day-to-day life on the Balkans and particularly in Bulgaria.

Historiographical issues

It is important in my case to begin with the historiography because it could be argued that the historiography itself contributes to of the impossibility to see the real dimensions of the necrolog and is a clear part of the process of perceiving the necrolog as a purely newspaper phenomenon in the West and as an almost “invisible” phenomenon in the East.

Probably because the necrolog is so merged with the street face and is so obvious, it does not provoke reflection. This could be one of the possible explanations for the lack of serious research on the street necrolog phenomenon until now.⁶ This void is somewhat paradoxical. Numerous and various works are dedicated to death and grief both in Bulgaria and abroad. There are also many studies on the funerary rituals, laments and their symbolism while one obviously mass spread and important element of contemporary Bulgarian and other countries’ ritual system has been widely neglected.

I found the first note about street necrologs in the book by the famous Bulgarian musicologists Dimitrina and Nikolay Kaufman, *Funerary and other laments in Bulgaria*.⁷ In it, on a few pages only, they draw attention to the relation between the necrolog and folk traditions encompassing not only the laments but also something larger – folklore thinking as a whole.⁸

Turning to traditional culture, the second note I found was in the book by Hristo Vakareski – *Notions and Imaginations about death*, in which there was one sentence only about the necrolog: *Nowadays, they post necrologs on the walls, which stay there one year or until they fall by themselves*.⁹

Though extremely short, this note is very important because it was the first evidence that in the 1930s when the book was published, the tradition of posting street necrologs in Bulgaria had already been established. That is why I checked the other famous Bulgarian folklorists and ethnographers from this generation – Tzvetan Todorov and Dimitar Marinov. Dimitar Marinov¹⁰ provides a rather detailed description of the Bulgarian folklore tradition including attitudes towards death but I found nothing about necrologs. Contemporary anthropological studies about attitudes towards

death in Bulgarian traditional culture or in the contemporary one and the contamination of both, follow this tradition of neglecting the necrologs.

There are some exceptions. In his very short (eight pages) publication, Austrian anthropologist Klaus Roth¹¹ merely introduces the phenomenon descriptively rather than offering any analysis. However, the author contrasts the taboo and “repression of death in Western society”¹² with the publicly accepted and discussed death and grief in the Balkans, and as a main sign of this difference, he points out the public obituaries (necrologs).¹³ The author presents shortly and compares the formal structure of the street necrologs in the different Balkan countries. He does not go further to explore why this custom is so popular in some countries while in others it is almost unknown. In spite of the comparative perspective of the article, though, Roth does not consider historical issues related to the necrolog, arguing that it would be quite difficult to develop such an analysis, because of the lack of preserved necrologs in archives.

The next article called “Ethno-sociology”, by the sociologist Borislav Ninov,¹⁴ is another short attempt (two pages on the necrolog) to offer an analysis of the phenomenon. The author deals with the Bulgarian traditions of commemorating death – from archaic laments to the contemporary burial services and necrologs in general as expressions of the typical Bulgarian hypocrisy and not surmounted feeling of guilt. Thus, the necrolog with its “hypocritical texts” is taken as evidence in supporting the author’s thesis, which presupposes that the street posted necrolog is a product of a purely Bulgarian attitude, a national “bad habit” that exists only in the territories, inhabited by Bulgarians.¹⁵ It is not clear on what kind of sources is this study based.

The same attitude towards the street necrolog is shared in the book “Kitsch spectrum”¹⁶ by Ivan Slavov. He takes the street necrolog as one of the most striking examples of contemporary kitsch – corrupted taste, hypocrisy, vulgar primitivism, and ugliness. He calls them profane and an anachronism.¹⁷ The main point is that in other (European) countries, people also die but they never use the streets for posting the names of the dead. Implicitly, there is the idea of the inherently Bulgarian and obsolete attitude to advertise death.

Recently, Bulgarian authors have been paying attention to newspapers necrologs from the time of the so-called Bulgarian Revival. They follow the Western tradition of studying obituaries, paying attention to the biographical items.¹⁸

As far as the tradition of the street necrolog does not exist anymore in Western Europe, (with the exception of Italy), the surveys on necrologs there are in general surveys on obituaries in the newspapers.¹⁹ However, obituaries have a different structure and functions and cannot contribute directly to the study of the street posted necrolog. The modern obituary (mainly in the American, British, and Australian context) is quite different from the street necrolog.

The traditional newspaper obituary is usually a biographical article of selected, mainly famous people – politicians, or more recently celebrities – musicians, actors, writers.²⁰ There is also an attempt to provide a critical and objective biographical appraisal of the life. That appraisal might contain hostile expressions as well.

In his work about the contemporary obituary “Revival of Dying Art”, the Australian obituarist and writer Nigel Stark gives the following example: According to the Telegraph obituary the moment of apotheosis in the life of Simon Raven, the British novelist, came when his wife sent him a telegram saying: “Wife and baby starving. Send money soonest.” Raven replied: “Sorry no money. Suggest eat baby”.²¹ Such a story could have never originated in the Bulgarian (Balkan) necrolog tradition.

The analyses of Western newspapers’ death notices are more promising,²² as their structure and content are closer to the street posted necrolog. A good example is the article by Arnar Árnason, Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson and Tinna Grétarsdóttir in which the authors concentrate on the obsession of writing and reading death notices in Iceland. According to them, these death notices took the form of letters to the dead in which people express their pain and grief. This shift in the Icelandic attitude towards death is explained through “the prominence and acceptance of spiritualism in Iceland”.²³

In the Balkans the structure and content of the newspaper death notices are almost identical to the local street necrologs. In the Balkans, there are two main authors who deal with newspapers necrologs – Dunja Richtman-Auguštin²⁴ and Ivan Čolović.²⁵ They both explore the Yugoslavian newspaper obituaries, but try to put them in a broader context, comparing them with the same phenomenon in some West European countries such as Germany, Italy, and the UK. It is quite striking though that they do not even mention the street necrologs in their work.

This short review shows that the historiography of the necrolog/obituary phenomenon, not only neglects its historical dimensions, but also does not connect the two traditions and considers them as separate and

independent. Moreover, the street necrologs are invisible for most of the scholars in related fields; in the cases they are not, they are considered mainly as a purely authentic and a national phenomenon, without any attempt to look for its historical roots. Thus, the historiography only confirms the everyday intuitions about the necrologs and becomes part of the common process of the European cultural amnesia about the common roots.

History of the necrolog

Even during the first centuries of Christianity, it was a custom to write down the names of the dead people in church books all over Europe, so that they can be read out during the sermon and the community can pray for them. In the Middle Ages these church writings were turned into lists (*necrologium*, *obituarium*, *regula*, *martyrologium*) that were kept and filled by the Church and monasteries. In the 7th century AD these lists were quite common. They were called necrologies (in France they often called them obituaries).

But the necrolog as it is known today is a modern phenomenon in all its variations, in spite of its ancient roots. As such, it is genetically related to technological development and mainly to the invention of the printing press. From the middle of the 15th century onward, one can see ordinances, religious festivals announcements, royal decrees, and concessions for private indulgences posted on the streets, but we cannot see obituaries there. At that time, the street posting and using the new printing capacities were controlled by the state. Thus, the street became an information channel, a tool mainly for official information. It is only when the possibilities of printing and mass circulation of the death announcements on cheap paper were made more widely available, that we can speak about a real development of the necrolog the way we know it now. The free street posting started only in the 19th century when paper became cheaper and mass urban literacy developed. Scholars, dealing with newspapers' obituaries, find their origins around the middle of the 18th century. Hence, the first modern public announcements about someone's death were in newspapers and they were quite similar to contemporary western death notices. Contemporary obituaries appeared at first for a few famous people. It was a slow process, during which we can see how the street gradually became a place for spreading public and then

private information. The newspapers themselves initially were posted on the streets as well, as necrologs will be later. The street newsboys were a part of this street information system as well. They can be considered as being on the border of two systems, when oral information was still quite important, but already not enough. The necrolog (I would add the street necrolog), according to Dunja Richtman– Auguštin appeared at the next period when oral information in human communication did not suffice at all and that “Death notices and obituaries belong to the age of the hegemonic power of the media in the middle of which they emerge representing a subaltern culture”.²⁶

Only after the 1830s citizen’s use of the street to announce goods advertisements, culture events, private events etc. becomes evident. This free posting became a real mass phenomenon. The necrolog as a mass printed phenomenon is related to the same process, but also to urban developments, especially the emergence of the crowded, modern cities. Death notices adapted themselves to the new requirements and living conditions and this was the way the phenomenon “street necrolog” was made possible. The particular individual anonymity in the big European cities²⁷ and their intensive rhythm demanded a different kind of information distribution. The streets and the press became the newest and most efficient channels of information distribution – without any time loss – to reach as many people as possible.

Additional evidence about both the existence of street necrologs in Western societies in the past and the oblivion about the existence of such a tradition there nowadays, could be added. In a journal, published by the Western states Folklore Society, entitled *Western Folklore* from 1957, I found one striking note. There the author Everett Moore posted the following announcement in the rubric Folklore in the news:

The custom of posting death and funeral notices on public service poles and fences was declared unlawful by the Town Trustees. The black-bordered cards were familiar to visitors and residents of the community for the past thirty years. The note was from Santa Maria, California.²⁸

Finally, the numerous street posted necrologs, covering the streets of Italy and Poland, and occasionally in some places of the Czech Republic and Slovakia,²⁹ but also in some countries outside Europe as Columbia or Ghana, add more breadth to the scope and the significance of the phenomenon of the street posted necrolog and its history.

The Bulgarian necrolog is a borrowing from Western Europe that came to Bulgaria in the 19th century, at a moment of European cultural expansion. It was copied as a scheme, as a formal practice, and as content. This borrowing fell on particularly opportune ground. On the one hand, it incorporated the domestic traditions of commemorating the dead, but on the other – it became a part of the young states' ritual system (after the Liberation from Ottoman domination in 1878). This fusion of foreign and domestic traditional customs and rules became so influential a stereotype over time that the usage of the necrolog acquired independence, which constituted it as a rite, a must for everyone.

During this period, Western everyday practices were adopted simultaneously with political ideas and new technologies. The swiftness of the adoption of this new phenomenon cannot be explained just by the influence of Western fashion. The organic implantation of a seemingly foreign cultural phenomenon is actually indicative of the fact that the adaptation of alien practices is possible only on the basis of existing common values and a similar way of thinking.

The western tradition of publicly commemorating the dead came to Bulgaria also first in the newspapers. Though there are some early examples of them in the Bulgarian press, it is only at the end of the period that necrologs, which resemble the form that will dominate both the street and newspapers after the Liberation in 1878, can be found. Among them, there are already notices for people that were not part of the liberation movement, men and women that were unknown to the general public, with date and reason for their death plus a few words about their life.

In a necrolog in "Zornitca" newspaper (3 February 1877) girlfriends of Radka lajkova from the city of Tulcha notify the readers that she died after a long illness. And they suffer, because she was a *virgin who prepared herself to be one of the best housewives and mothers; and she was just to enter her life as a spouse when the ugly Death took her away from this world.*³⁰

The very first necrolog – outside the newspaper tradition – discovered in the course of my research, is from 1850. It is though, questionable to call it a "street necrolog" because obviously its purpose was to serve as an invitation and was sent by mail to certain pre-selected people. Because of political and religious consideration, this necrolog was printed in the city of Galatz, Romania.³¹

The text follows:

*We invite Mr. in the morning at ... o'clock
at the Holy Mass in the Church of "St
Paraskeva" at the sermon in the name of the deceased Bulgarian
non-female (as it is in original – E.K.) Greek Vassillie Evstatievych
Apprilov, who lied to rest two years ago.
Galatz 20 May 1850
Typography Zhurnaluj Danubio*

The very first Bulgarian street necrolog in my collection dates from 1883.³² Though its purpose was to be posted across the town in order to notify the public, its contents and structure still resembles newspaper obituaries. It is important to be noticed that it contains a message about the funeral that happened a week before. Since this moment, every necrolog I found during my research follows an established form – as a text and as a print. This form is different from the contemporary one and is well described by Hariton Ignatiev in his book "Prostranen pismovnik" ("Detailed manual of how to write letters"), published in Plovdiv in 1897, which I found following a reference note in Klaus Roth.

According to the explanation/instruction in the manual, the funeral notifications should be printed on a paper with black frame, with Holy Cross or allegory of Death. The necrolog should include:

1. *All close relatives/kin of the deceased – by kin and by marriage;*
2. *All of the far related relatives by kin*
3. *Their names, nicknames and their kin relation to the deceased person;*
4. *What was the illness – short or long, light or painful – that caused the death;*
5. *The age of the deceased person;*
6. *The day and the hour of the actual death*
7. *The day and the hour when the body is to be moved out from the house;*
8. *The name of the church where the sermon will be;*
9. *In the case that deceased is not well known, the address of the house from where the body will be moved out to the church.*³³

"Prostranen pismovnik" stipulates that the newspapers should follow the same form. The necrologs from that period that I examined in the process of this research follow those instructions literally. The collected archive necrologs show also that at that time Bulgarians printed only

death notices for announcing the death and the funeral but not for commemoration. There is not such inscription in the book of Ignatiev as well. The number of commemorative necrologs, though, increased over time, and became part of the most important changes in the necrolog form that moved the local tradition away from the Western one.

Ignatiev has two additional notes, which are very important for the reconstruction of the street necrolog's history. The first is an instruction to post necrologs on the walls at the most public places around the city.³⁴ On the other hand, on the cover page of "Prostranen pismovnik", the author underlines that he collected and summarized the best of the foreign manuals for writing letters. This is therefore indirect evidence, that through such kind of manuals, Bulgarians adopted the tradition of posting the necrologs. Another confirmation of this are the examples of foreign necrologs from that period – mostly from Austria-Hungary and France – which follow the same pattern both of the texts and design. (see fig.11, 12) This comes to show that at the end of the 19th century necrologs were posted on the streets of Western Europe with this tradition slowly disappearing. Yet even today, street necrologs can be found on the street in some Western European cities – mainly in Italy.

One of the important prescriptions of the manual is for the necrologs to be mailed. These mailed necrologs allowed me to find many examples of them in Bulgarian personal archives, both from Western and Eastern Europe from that time and to find both the difference and similarities of the two traditions and the dynamics within them over time.

The Balkan appropriation

The street posted necrolog phenomenon is part of contemporary Bulgarian funerary and commemorative rituals, but is also an element of the registration and contacting the dead tradition that dates back to the dawn of human culture. The leitmotiv in the necrologs' amalgam is the archaic layer that leads to the human's attitude towards death and the understanding of *this* and *the other* world as a unity of both. This understanding is inherent for both the traditional (folklore) ritual culture and the classical core of the Christian Orthodox ritual system, prevalent in Bulgaria. Thus, the elements of the archaic, the traditionally folklore, and Christian attitudes towards death and funerary rites can be seen as historical layers, refracted through the existence of the modern

phenomenon, moreover a phenomenon that is a result of contemporary technology and a bearer of mass culture values and characteristics.

Appropriating the new tradition of commemorating the dead, the necrologs' texts gradually started to change in Bulgaria. The texts-announcements, the death circumstances and the long list of suffering survivors were reduced in order to clear the way for richer and emotional texts, expressing pain and grief and addressed directly to the deceased. Today these texts (even the short ones) dominate the necrolog' structure, while almost all other elements – except the name and the photo of the deceased – almost disappeared. The change can be traced back to the 1930s but it is more evident since the 1950s. The explanation for this lies in the tectonic shift in the structure of the urban population that followed large migration from the villages to the cities. The Village lost its people; the city transformed its pre-war urban culture. The necrolog as a city phenomenon started to transform itself influenced by the incoming traditional rural culture.³⁵

After the communist coup d'état, in September 1944, the Bulgarian government started a purposeful reshaping of the ritual system in accordance with the new atheistic ideology.³⁶ The new power fully utilized the necrologs' capacity for propaganda and ideological control. Except for the five-armed star instead of the Cross, the necrologs reproduced also the communist funeral orations, listing all merits of the deceased for the bright communist future and the socialist motherland. Soon after, newspaper necrologs were forbidden by the state.

At the same time, the street necrologs blossomed evolving into their contemporary form. For the first time necrologs without religious symbols and even with a black five-pointed star as a sign that the deceased has belonged to the communist party appeared.

Therefore, three main elements structured the necrolog's content. The first is the announcement (gradually more laconic), the second is the text expressing the mourners' emotions, and the third one is the ritual formulas used. The emotional text often is close to the laments' structure and contents,³⁷ while the formulas used are related to the function and meaning of the Orthodox prayer.

This way in the structure of the contemporary necrolog can be traced elements of at least three cultural traditions:

1. The well established on the Balkans attitudes towards Death;
2. Constituting role of the Christian thinking of Death and Christian rites;

3. The modern man attitude towards Death.

As a compensation for the impossibility to freely practice the local traditions related to death, the street posting of necrologs became a mass public event and a ritual in itself. The most important consequence of this process was the invasion of the public sphere by the private one and vice versa: the demonstration through the necrologs of the suffering, sorrow, grieving, and personal feelings in public, for all passers-by to be able to read. In the same time, the necrologs, used by the communist party, became a subtle stage of political propaganda, an ideological tool, and an unapparent way of the politicization of urban environment.

The street posted necrolog

From the early 19th century on, the street necrologs gradually constituted the specific face of domestic space in some areas of South-Eastern Europe, especially Bulgaria, a face that is both strange and common. This process was further reinforced due to the policy of the communist party during the socialist period. As a compensation for rupturing the traditions, related with death, the mutation of the street necrolog became a compensatory public event, which built the urban landscape and transformed the behavior of its inhabitants. Thousands and thousands of necrologs can be seen all over the cities and villages of Bulgaria – they are posted on the doors, building walls, message boards, bus stops, street lamp posts, trees (even in the parks). The streets, covered by thousands of necrologs, mainly in Bulgaria, make such a dramatic personal event as death, an invisible part of everyday life and material culture. Generation after generation has been growing up with this black and white face of the World Beyond. Children are brought up with this placarded Death and the suffering of the living (see fig.13).

Thus, both the living and the dead have become the inhabitants of contemporary Balkan cities and particularly in Bulgaria – the Bulgarian street necrolog system transferred the necropolis in the polis and thus changed not only the face but also the meaning of urban space.

The numerous similar necrologs on the street provoke a respective behavior stereotype in the pedestrians, who just have a glance at the so common street “interior” elements. This attitude is stabilized further by the “uniformity” of the street necrologs’ template. Necrologs therefore merge in a common image, both multi-faced and identical, which does

not provoke much attention. On the other hand, in the context of the Bulgarian ritual funerary system, the necrolog designates both death (someone's death and death in general) and the pain of the mourners. A cursory glance is enough to see that someone mourns over the death of someone – it is not necessary to stop and read the necrolog, to be able to get the main meaning and the message of the text. Hence, a strategy is needed to attract the passer-by's special attention.

In this regard, at least two kinds of strategies can be outlined:

The first one is based on the pedestrians' movements street "trajectory". It assumes that certain places are temporary stops, pauses in the motion – shops, cafes, public transport's stops. In these moments, the pedestrians are able to notice the necrologs, to separate them from the background of the street, and possibly, to read them. The same logic is applied for posting the necrologs always at sight level. Its place necessarily excludes the efforts of reading the necrolog – on the contrary, the most is made of contact possibilities.

The second strategy is somewhat related to the placards' and posters' effect strategy. It is based not on the place at which the necrolog is posted, but on the possibilities, inherent to the necrolog's visual construction to attract the passers-by's attention. A new shape, different color combinations, a new element, a surprise, all these try to deautomate the perception and make the necrolog stand out from the background of common form and model.

The augmentation (respectively decreasing) of the shape has the strongest effect on the passers-by's attention. The big sized necrolog is usually more visible; it possesses an allusion of importance and provokes curiosity. The bigger photography yields a similar result – the picture's format difference attracts the attention and distinguishes it from the rest of the necrologs.

The fonts' system is also designed to fit the way in which the pedestrian perceives the street space; it aims also to facilitate the look, to present the most important information even for the people, who cannot stop and look for the information in a plane text. The necrolog is by necessity an accessible and simple schema, a formula, with a rather short expression. A brief glance should be enough – it is enough just to look at it, to mark its presence. The necrolog schema adapts to the city's tempo, to the atmosphere of ragged Bulgarian streets. It is both too visible, but then again – never an obstacle, never provokes resistance or annoyance.

The necrologs also testify of the motive culture of the pedestrians, they are consistent with it, they duplicate the routines of the living and that is why there are no necrologs in less visited places. Therefore, people post necrologs in great quantities predominantly on the most crowded streets, where there is the greatest chance of them being read. The interdependence between the number of necrologs and the importance of the street for the city's life is directly proportional. Thus, the dead, which are with us in the common city's space, generate a parallel world. It is peculiarly passive, but also duplicating the active, living world. The street space is twice more crowded and the possibility to meet familiar faces is also doubled – we meet them both among the living and the dead. The fact that the necrologs are posted obligatory on the places related to the deceased's life increases considerably and reinforces this possibility of contact. The same applies for the places that are traditionally connected with death – the church and the cemetery, where necrologs are posted as well. There (especially at the graveyard) one goes with a relevant mood and his emotional condition makes him prone to read necrologs and through reading them to pay tribute to the dead.

The street posted necrologs could be considered also in terms of the Certeau's spatial practices.³⁸ The necrologs are not merely a projection of the necropolis in the city. They create their own space – the parallel and fragmented space of death, mixed with the living space. On the other hand, every necrolog is both a connection and a seal, a barrier, which protects the living people from death. That is why, the necrologs are posted mainly on places, considered to be tender spots – corners, crossroads, trees, doors, etc.

The mentioned already specificities of the street posted necrolog are a result of the communicative function of the necrologs. Through them, the street turns out to be a place in which one can meet the Other, the Beyond; the home, the house, the intimate space is liberated from this function. The personal feelings, connected with the death of the relatives, are exteriorized; the pain, embodied in the necrolog, leaves the house, and becomes alienated from its direct bearers, but is exposed outside, in public.

It could be argued also that the identity structure of the necrolog as well as its aesthetics are rather documentary. Indeed, the necrolog is the last document of the person, both certification (of death and memory) and a passport (for another world). Dunja Richtman– Auguštin claims that for most people in Yugoslavia, the death notice is the first moment when the

person appears publicly and goes out from anonymity.³⁹ In Bulgaria, even that is not the case. The rather scarce information about the dead one, which is increasingly reduced, is quite impersonal and common. Through the necrolog, the dead are even more anonymous, both personalized and depersonalized, making them the same, alike, identical to all other dead on the street. Only the photograph breaks the scheme of anonymity.

Eventually, there is one main identity that is fixed periodically through the necrologs: they (faces that look at us from the pictures on the street) are dead and we, the passers-by, are living. The crowd of the dead people on the street reminds us that we are living, but mortal as well.

Although the necrolog supports many important functions (ritual, communicative, integrative, emotive, etc.) with its presence in the urban space, I will only focus here on one of its most important functions – its function as a border.

The publicly proclaimed grief creates a sense of community both with the dead and between the living. The scholars stress usually the solitude of the urban inhabitants, but the necrolog phenomenon emphasizes more the community relationships and empathy.⁴⁰ On the other hand, erasing both the cultural and spatial divisions between the groups in the city,⁴¹ the necrolog also underlines and fixes them, being a ritual borderline between living and dead, fixing their identity. In the context of the life-death opposition, the necrolog is the material border between two worlds and two states/statuses. As such, the necrolog can be seen as an ambivalent sign – it both disconnects, divides and it is permeable. This ambivalence has a specific sense – the border-necrolog lets through in one way only (information and people). Thus, it is a border, which we can interpret as a contact zone, as a membrane of one-way influences, connecting and separating us with the world beyond, with Death. In the capacity of a material border between life and death, the necrolog turns out to be a “border territory”, which paradoxically surrounds us everywhere – not just close, but near, and even between us. This constant reminding of death and the fragile barrier between it and life is one of the specific characteristics, the peculiarity, which the necrolog attaches to the street and Balkan urban space.

A world never has inner borders. In this case, though, the necrolog turns out to be this inner border, placed, scattered around and between us. If the grave and the cemetery are simultaneously in “this” and in the “other” world,⁴² and consequently, are at the edge of life, the totality of the necrologs could be seen as an aggregate sign of the cemetery and

thus, of the necropolis incorporated into the polis. It could be argued even that in this sense there is no necropolis, as far as all (living and dead) are together, in the city. The dead are projected in the city through the necrologs. The necrologs (as the cemetery) not just “semantically repeat the spatial structure of the settlement”⁴³, but double the city, do not create it, but fix it. They are the Other, among which we are living. Thus, the sacred and the profane are mixed in order to allow people to see through and beyond the mundane. To stop on the border.

Conclusion

Starting with the end of the 19th century, the signs in the cities begin gradually to be one of the most important urban characteristics, but also, to be part of these specific elements, which lend the particular atmosphere of each city. The street posted necrologs add additional peculiarity and dimension of the Balkan and especially the Bulgarian city face.

It is important to underline that if in the beginning (19th century in Bulgaria), such a way of honoring the dead and testifying death publicly on the street was considered modern and civilized, in accordance with the new European tendencies, nowadays, in quite the opposite way, the dead people and the pain surrounding Bulgarians everywhere is considered “Balkan”, obsolete, and even “savage”.⁴⁴ The appeal (mainly from young people) is to accept the European way (sic!) and to post death notices in newspapers only.

This “obsolete” and “primitive” attitude to expose pain and suffering is considered to be exclusively Bulgarian. One can hear or read quite often that the necrologs are a Bulgarian invention⁴⁵, an authentically national (folklore, pagan) tradition. The necrolog issuing and the attitudes towards death especially in relation to expressing emotions, are seen as a part of the “national psychology”; as a sign of the specific Bulgarian attitude towards life – “accepting life as pain”, “underlying the desperation, the bad side of life”.⁴⁶ Moreover, Bulgarians consider the necrolog practice as an element and sign of the Bulgarian identity.

Thus, the Bulgarian street posted necrologs, are not only part of the material shape of the national specificity, considered as unique by both Bulgarians and foreigners. They are also an identity symbol, used equally from all denominations in Bulgaria – Orthodox Christian, Jewish, Muslim. On the other hand, this “purely” national attitude is a derivation of the

ancient pan-European tradition of commemorating death, which has nowadays taken different variations, not only in Europe, but also beyond it.

Western Europeans no longer recognize the necrolog tradition of commemorating the dead as similar to their tradition of the obituary. Likewise, Balkan people have forgotten that they have “borrowed” the practice of issuing necrologs from the West. Thus, the street posted necrolog is a brilliant example of a memory tool, which could be seen paradoxically, as a sign of cultural oblivion that took place over time alongside the processes of transnational exchange and local appropriation.

Still, regardless of the differences that can now be seen in the form and practice of the “necrolog”, when its history is traced back – the differences fade away and what is left is true similarity – both in form and in substance. What is more, the “necrolog” (genetically connected with Christianity and the honor paid to the memory of the dead) reflects one of the most conservative and non-susceptible to rapid change elements of every culture.

Finally, the necrolog is not a specific Bulgarian phenomenon, it is neither a Balkan one, nor a merely European one. It could not be considered as Slavic, or Christian, or belonging to the monotheistic religions. It is a transnational phenomenon, which was appropriated in different cultures and has become so deeply embedded in the local traditions that wherever it has been adopted, it has become an essential part of the national identity.

NOTES

- ¹ See a similar story in: http://209.85.135.104/search?q=cache:Qm02_klG7Fgl:abritinbulgaria.com/2007/09/24/death-bulgarian-style/, accessed January 12, 2008.
- ² The notion *necrolog* (gr. *nekros* – dead, deceased and *logos* – oration, speech) means posthumous speech for someone, memory for someone, a short article on someone's death, and as a *necrologia* (*necrologium*) – list of the dead. Thus, the term speaks for itself. It is mainly "an oration for death", funeral speech, article, biography. The notion can be discovered in many European languages and everywhere it is connected with an article about someone's death and a list of the dead. The word is widespread and shows deep roots in the European history but the notion it designates has many faces and does not cover the European geography, at least not as a public issued necrolog. See L. Andreychin (ed.), *Bulgarski talkoven rechnik*, BAN, Sofia, 1973; P. Guerin, (ed.), *Encyclopedie Universelle, Dictionaire de Dictionaires*, vol.V Paris: 1895
- ³ All pictures, used as illustrations in this paper, are taken by myself in the course of my research.
- ⁴ The term "obituary" should, strictly speaking, be applied only to the longer, objective biography as it is used in the West. The Bulgarian (Balkan) practice is, accordingly, better described as a "death notice" or just necrolog.
- ⁵ E. van der Vleuten, "Technological History and the Transnational Challenge. Meanings, Promises, Pitfalls", paper for the *Inventing Europe workshop* in Plovdiv, 28 February – 1 March, 2008; I. Iriye, "Transnational History", in *Contemporary European History*, 14 (4), 2005, 3.
- ⁶ For the Italian street necrologs see the short announcement by M. Lange, "Italian Death Notices: Seen on Your Morning Walk: The Morning after Italian Mourning Posters: Sharing with the Community: Ephemera for Ephemeral," *Design Issues* 5 (1), 1988
- ⁷ N. and D. Kaufman, *Pogrebalni I drugi oplakvaniya v Bulgaria*, BAN, Sofia, 1988
- ⁸ Kaufman, *Pogrebalni I drugi oplakvaniya*, 284
- ⁹ Hr. Vakarelski, *Poniatia I predstavi za dushata. Sravnitelno folklorno izuchavane*, Sofia, 1939, 155
- ¹⁰ D. Marinov, *Izbrani proizvedeniya*, vol. II, Nauka i izkustvo, Sofia, 1984
- ¹¹ Kl. Roth and J. Roth, "Public Obituaries in South-east Europe," *International Folklore Review*, 7, 1990
- ¹² Roth, "Public Obituaries," 80. In this regard see also: G. Gorer, *Death, grief and mourning in contemporary Britain*, Cresset Press, London, 1965; Ph. Aries, "The Reversal of Death: Changes in Attitudes toward Death in Western Societies," *American Quarterly* 26 (5), 1974; L. Thomas, *Smartta*, Fakel, Sofia, 1994

- 13 Roth, "Public Obituaries" 80
- 14 B. Ninov, "Bulgarinat i smartta: nadgrobnite pametnici I necrolozite",
Sociological problems 4, 1991
- 15 Ninov, "Bulgarinat i smartta" 79
- 16 I. Slavov, *Kitsch spectar*, Nauka i izkustvo, Sofia, 1990
- 17 Slavov, *Kitsch spectar*, 126
- 18 E. Nalbantova and A. Velkova-Gaydardjieva, *Posmartnoto slovo kato fenomen na bulgarskata kultura*, Slovo, Veliko Tarnovo, 2000
- 19 For newspaper obituary analysis see: G. Long, "Organization and Identity: Obituaries 1856-1972," *Social Forces* 65 (4), 1987; J. Hume, *Obituaries in American Culture*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2000; M. Eid, *The World of Obituaries: Gender across Cultures and over Time*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 2002; Br. Fowler, "Mapping the obituary: Notes towards a Bourdieusian interpretation," *The Sociological Review* 52 (2), 2004; Br. Fowler, "Collective Memory and Forgetting: Components for a Study of Obituaries," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 22, 2005; N. Starck, "Revival of a dying art," *Opinion (Journal of the SA English Teachers Association)*, 46 (4), 2002
- 20 Flower, "Collective Memory and Forgetting", 63
- 21 Stark, "Revival of a dying art", 6
- 22 There are some articles dedicated to the language in newspaper death notices related both with issues of identity and biography. See for example: L. Serianni, "Appunti sulla lingua delle necrologie giornalistiche," *Lingua Nostra*, XXXV (1), 1974; C. Bascetta, "Ancora sulla tipologia dell'annuncio funebre," *Lingua Nostra* XXXV (4), 1974; Ch. James, "The Language of Death in German Newspapers," *Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German* 14 (1), 1981
- 23 A. Árnason, S. Baldur Hafsteinsson and T. Grétarsdóttir, "Letters to the dead: obituaries and identity, memory and forgetting in Iceland," *Mortality*, 8 (3), 2003
- 24 See D. Rihtman-Auguštin, "Novinske osmrtnice," *Narodna umjetnost* 15 (1984); Dunja Rihtman– Auguštin, "We Were Proud to Live with You, and Now Immensely Sad to Have Lost You," *Narodna umjetnost* 30, 1993; D. Rihtman-Auguštin, "Biographic items in Yugoslav and Italian death notices," in *Life History as Cultural Construction/Performance*, ed. T. Hofer and P. Niedermüller, The Ethnographic Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Budapest, 1988
- 25 I. Čolović, *Divlja knjizevnost. Etnolingvističko proučavanje paraliterature*, XX vek, Beograd, 2000
- 26 Rihtman-Auguštin, "Biographic items", 310
- 27 See more about the discussion about the anonymity of the big cities in: Fr. Tonkiss, *Space, the City and Social Theory: Social Relations and Urban Forms*, Polity, 2005, 10 and further.

- 28 E. Moore, "Funeral Notes", *Western Folklore*, 16 (2), 1957, 137
- 29 Roth claim that street necrologs are known in Hungary Italy and Austria but
the lack of preserved documents in archives renders research impossible:
Roth, "Public Obituaries", 87
- 30 "Zornitca" newspaper, 3 February, 1877
- 31 Bulgarian Historical Archive (BIA), f. II A 1999
- 32 Bulgarian Historical Archive (BIA), f. II B 8528
- 33 H. Ignatiev, *Prostranen pismovnik*, Plovdiv, 1897, 76
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 Kaufman, *Pogrebalni I drugi oplakvaniya*, 284
- 36 See: A. Pashova, "Dnes ostana prazno edno rabotno miasto" /Nova
ideologiya za smartta I pogrebalnata obrednost na darjavniya socializam v
Bulgaria ot 50te – 70te godini na XX vek/" *Balkanistic Forum* 1-3, 2006
- 37 Similarly to traditional laments, the necrolog also often uses a direct
invocation of the deceased, describes the sorrow of the living and the reasons
for the death, emphasizes the emptiness and the feeling of loss after the death
of the beloved person: Kaufman, *Pogrebalni I drugi oplakvaniya*, 285.
- 38 M. de Certeau, *Izobretivane na vsekidnevieto*, LK, Sofia, 2002, 178
- 39 Rihtman-Augustin, "Biographic Items", 323
- 40 Tonkiss, *Social Relations and Urban Forms*, 8
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 V. Garnizov, "Veshti I prostranstvo v pogrebalnite I pominalnite obredi ot
Mihailovgradsko", in *Bulgarian Folklore*, 3, 1986, 26
- 43 *Ibid.*, 25
- 44 "In Bulgaria, for example (as in one-two countries around and some African
countries), people posts necrologs [...]. The necrologs in our country are
everywhere [...]. In other words, that is some specific cult of ostentation of
the pain after death of a close person. By the way, the savage expression
of pain is distinctive for the primitive societies.": [http://74.125.39.104/
search?q=cache:Zu_LvPv7_Ycj:www.obshtestvo.net/content/view/](http://74.125.39.104/search?q=cache:Zu_LvPv7_Ycj:www.obshtestvo.net/content/view/) accessed
April 03, 2008
- 45 "They [the necrologs] are really something domestic, national – I say that
without banter. They add something special to the atmosphere of this land,
some thousands years old grief": [http://209.85.135.104/search?q=cache:ic
dpGlnbh2MJ:forums.wsphere.com/index.php](http://209.85.135.104/search?q=cache:icdpGlnbh2MJ:forums.wsphere.com/index.php) accessed April 03, 2008
- See also: "In fact issuing necrologs is a typical Bulgarian custom, inherited
from the communist time": [http://209.85.135.104/search?q=cache:mJcq3v
nlb0UJ:forums.wsphere.com/index.php](http://209.85.135.104/search?q=cache:mJcq3vnlb0UJ:forums.wsphere.com/index.php) accessed April 03, 2008
- 46 [http://209.85.135.104/search?q=cache:mJcq3vnlb0UJ:forums.wsphere.com/
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Fig. 1. Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria



Fig. 2. Assisi, Italy



Fig. 3. Street necrologs from Poland



Fig. 4. Street necrologs from Montenegro



Fig. 5. Street necrologs from Greece



Fig. 6. Street necrologs from Croatia



Fig. 7. Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria



Fig. 8. Armenian bilingual street necrolog from Bulgaria



Fig. 9. Jewish street necrolog from Bulgaria

СКРЪБНА ВЕСТ

На 03.10.2003 г.



ПОЧИНА

нашия скъп и непрежалим



АЛДОМИР БЕРАФЬИМОВ НИКОЛОВ (АЛДО – 19 г.)

*Не си отиват мъртваите от нас,
когато ги оставим под земята,
едва тогава истинската власт на
чувствата ни оръзва се в сърцата!*

*Защото тихата несъпротива
на дланите му леснали в цветя
една огромна, страшна сила придобива,
опровергвайки смъртта.*

От опечалените

Магистър Лиц. Ул. „Пиротска“ 16, ет. 2, тел.: 983 19 24

Fig. 10. Bulgarian street Muslim necrolog



Fig. 11. 19th century Bulgarian necrolog



Fig. 12. 19th century French necrolog



Fig. 13. Bulgarian street necrologs on the kindergarten fence, Veliko Tarnovo