

“The Living Dead” in Modern Era Parish Records in Silesia and Moravia¹

Abstract

Parish records are an interesting source material for researching the issue of beliefs in returning dead. Parish records of deaths rarely relate the funerals of people other than the God-fearing citizens who rested in the parish necropolis or those killed in tragic circumstances, usually as a result of an accident. From the end of the 16th century, the areas of the Silesian-Moravian borderland, or northern Moravia itself, were the scene of fierce struggles against the dead rising from their graves. Later, mainly eighteenth-century publications began to use the term defining these phenomena as *magia posthuma*. The intensity of beliefs in posthumous magic peaked in late 17th and early 18th centuries. It was widely thought at the time that a deceased person whose body does not show normal, post-mortem changes (rigidity) was a witch or a sorcerer. In Silesia and Moravia effective forms of dealing with harmful deceased people were developed in the period of 16th-18th centuries. Based on the analysis of existing source material, we know that the most frequent course of action was to find the grave of the “undead” in the cemetery, exhume the corpse and destroy it. All these measures against corpses who rose from their graves had to leave a trace in the parish books. In the discussed area, the oldest entries from records of death concerning the beliefs in dead who returned to plague the living can be found in the volume for the Silesian city of Strzegom (German: Striegau) covering the years 1589–1715. Some interesting research material is also provided by entries made in the records of death in the small town of Ryžoviště (German: Braunseifen) for the years 1583–1640 and 1640–1717. One of the last entries in the death records was made on 1 March 1755, when the Empress Maria Theresa issued a decree forbidding the persecution of people accused of witchcraft, treasure hunts with the aid of magic and also the exhumation or burning of the bodies of people accused of posthumous magic.

Keywords: Vampires, Witschcraft, *Magia Posthuma*, Poltergeist, Gespenst, Moravia, Silesia, parish register

Słowa kluczowe: wampiryzm, wiedźmy, magia pośmiertna, Poltergeist, Gespenst, Morawy, Śląsk, rejestr parafialny

¹ This article presents the results of author’s research conducted as part of a project financed by the National Centre Science (no. 2016/21/D/HS3/02963) entitled *Magia Posthuma – Beliefs in the Harmful Activity of the Dead in Silesia and Moravia in 16th–18th Centuries*, carried out at the University of Wrocław, Faculty of Historical and Pedagogical Sciences.

Parish records are an interesting source material for researching the issue of beliefs in returning dead. Their condition is satisfactory for the area of interest here, and sometimes they are the only source of information about a specific case in a given locality. This in particular holds true for villages, where no other documents survive that could record the cases of beliefs in “the living dead”, whose alleged activity afflicted the local communities.

Parish records have been maintained in the area in question since the Council of Trent (1545–1563), pursuant to a decision of November 1563 which took effect during the Wrocław diocesan synod of 1580.² Instructions were issued at the time regarding the manner of keeping records of baptisms and marriages, which in 1592 were expanded to include deaths, and their observance was to be controlled by way of visitations in parishes.³

Parish records of deaths rarely relate the funerals of people other than the God-fearing citizens who rested in the parish necropolis or those killed in tragic circumstances, usually as a result of an accident. Seldom can one find entries on the executions of criminals or on other events, although sometimes the priests themselves made notes of interesting occurrences in the life of the parish, which will be further elaborated on. Usually they were recorded only because, pursuant to the custom, a person sentenced to death was accompanied by a priest who administered the last rites, or who tried to convince the condemned person to convert to Catholicism. Clearly they were at times successful, since the relevant entries have been made in death records.⁴ As regards people who inflicted harm after death, it comes as no surprise that they were documented in the parish records. Following their passing away, no one assumed that within a few days or weeks they would have to be exhumed from the local cemetery, which entailed the need to make a margin note of the death, or even to strike out the typical information about a given burial. Researchers have already brought up the surprising entries in parish records along with their clarifications on the margins.⁵ Some of the volumes also feature stricken out or underlined text, etc. Not always does it mean that the matter concerned an evil dead; usually it was a result of human error.

Ghouls, vampires, zombies or spectres (Polish: *upiór*, *wampir*, *strzyga*, *zmora*) were some of the most active demons in the world of archaic imagination of the “village folk”.⁶ Yet they share another common feature, namely the belief in the so-called “living dead”. The ethnographer Jarosław Kolczyński identified the entity referred to as “living dead” (*defuncti vivi*) with *upiór*/strzygoń (ghoul/zombie). It is the corpse of a human being which does not decompose and whose demonic soul continues to occupy the body, or whose soul has been replaced by another, evil entity.⁷ It has been believed since the Middle Ages that the dead live on only because the devil has taken possession

² Parish records are records of baptisms, marriages and deaths occurring within a given parish area. The oldest such entries are from medieval territories of France, Italy and Germany. Pater, *Pfarrbücherverzeichnis*, 13.

³ *Ibid.*, 13–4.

⁴ One fitting example are the death records from the city of Żagań. There are a number of records available there from late 17th and early 18th century, AAWr, Parish records (Sagan), ref. no. 213h, 812, 815, 873.

⁵ Blaschke, „Die älteste”, 111–39 (pages 122–4 are of particular significance for this research).

⁶ Kolczyński, „Jeszcze raz”, 211.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 227.

of their bodies.⁸ The famous work *Malleus Maleficarum* (*Hammer of Witches*) lists a number of ways in which the devil can do so in Chapter 10 (Of the Method by which Devils through the Operations of Witches Sometimes Actually Possess Men).⁹ "Devil's accomplices" are usually those who were suspected of practising magic and all those who have made a pact with demonic forces while still alive. It was them who came back to take possession of their bodies, which were to aid them in the infliction of harm upon the local community. The pre-war researcher, Oskar Kolberg, mentions on the margins of his work that the power of a witch does not weaken after her death; she transforms into a female vampire and continues to exert a negative effect on her surroundings.¹⁰ The same was repeated by the already mentioned Jarosław Kolczyński, according to whom the most dangerous were ghouls/zombies who transformed from dead witches and sorcerers.¹¹ By the power of the pact with the devil, the person who made it gained from one to a few "patrons", that is evil spirits.¹² No wonder, then, that the simple folk began to see their up until then God-fearing, honest and helpful neighbour as a person who, by the power of demonic forces, returned to disturb their peace, disrupt the regular rhythm and order of life and even, in the most extreme cases, bring death upon them. Such accusations were frequently motivated by nothing more than a rumour according to which someone from the family had been burned alive or, worse yet, after death, for posthumous magic (*magia posthuma*).¹³ In such events, the case seemed unquestionable

⁸ Potkowski, *Dziedzictwo wierzeń*, 43; Duma, *Śmierć nieczysta*, 113–33.

⁹ Sprenger and Kraemer, *Hammer of Witches*, 85–91.

¹⁰ Kolberg, *Lud. Jego zwyczaje*, 432.

¹¹ Kolczyński, „Jeszcze raz”, 218.

¹² The reports from an examination conducted in 1654 in the Moravian town of Šternberk (German: Sternberg) mention that one of the women accused of witchcraft following her pact with the devil was under the "care" of as many as three evil spirits (*böse Geister*), whose leader was one by the name of Jockell. His two aides or servants were names Paul and Petr, Státní okresní archiv v Olomouci, fond Archiv města Olomouc, M1-1, box 27, inv. č. 671, file ref. no. 21/IV, p. 10v. Surely one of these dark beings was to take over the corpse of someone who died in order to haunt and pester the local community. For this reason, the erstwhile inhabitants of Moravia believed it a justified necessity to permanently obliterate the "carrier", that is the human body. It should also be noted that most documents concerning trials of people accused of posthumous magic employ terms "evil spirit" or "evil apparition". The examination reports, instead of using the word *Teufel* (devil), spelled with double f, often employ the term *böser Geist*, which was considered synonymous. Jarochna Dąbrowska-Burkhardt has presented an interesting list compiled on the basis of surviving trial records concerning cases of witchcraft in Zielona Góra between 1663 and 1665. The Author has found that the word *Geist* comes up in the context of the devil as many as 30 times, of which the great majority (20) in the phrase *böser Geist – evil spirit* or *böse Geister – evil spirits*. The above findings are also confirmed by the research conducted by Jacek Wijaczka for Duchy of Prussia, It follows from the analyzed trial records that the term "devil" was seldom used, as if people had been afraid to pronounce it. Most frequently, those accused of witchcraft admitted to having been possessed by an "evil spirit" (*bösen Geist*) or by an "evil enemy" (*bösen Feind*). Dąbrowska-Burkhardt, "Kochanek czarownicy", 38; Wijaczka, *Procesy o czary*, 177.

¹³ We know a number of such examples. The oldest one dates back to 1592 and it concerns the former mayor by the name of Kunze, from the town of Horní Benešov (German: Bennisch/Benisch) between Bruntál and Opava. He died as a result of an accident and was buried in the local parish. A few days after his death, word began to spread that he had returned from the other world – *Kunze komme wieder*. Following the exhumation and burning of his body, there were rumours that he had made a pact with the devil while still alive. Evidence was found in the suspiciously quick social advancement of the

and the corpse of such a deceased had to be isolated and then annihilated. It seems that the intervention of the devil's forces was a sufficient argument to explain why the body, despite being in the grave for several weeks, did not decay. For this reason later, mainly eighteenth-century, publications began to use the term defining these phenomena, as *magia posthuma*.¹⁴ At the present stage of research it is difficult to assess the proportions between the trials of the living and the deceased, but executions of the latter broke out at the beginning of the eighteenth century on a massive scale, when the trials of the living accused of witchcraft or magic were practically abandoned in the area. In both cases, however, we are talking about numbers going into hundreds of victims, both among the living and the exhumed deceased. It follows that at the end of the 17th century, the burden and type of trials in the studied region was shifted to the dead (especially in the localities of northern Moravia), who played the role of "scapegoats" responsible for the various misfortunes and illnesses plaguing the community.¹⁵ Since the end of the 16th century, the Silesia–Moravia border or northern Moravia itself, have been the scene of fierce battles with the dead rising from their graves. The fight did not prevent the simultaneous (parallel) extermination of the living who were accused of witchcraft. The well – known trails have taken place in such places as Velké Losiny (German: Groß Ullersdorf), or Šumperk (German: Mährisch Schönberg).¹⁶

The persecution of dead witches and sorcerers gained momentum in the 17th century. Individual cases of exhumation and burning of corpses of deceased accused of posthumous magic were recorded every few years. Yet a veritable "hysteria" of hunting dead people who allegedly rose from their graves to harass the living did not start until the first half of the 18th century in northern Moravia. From few to even few tens of graves were destroyed in just one of the cemeteries. Moreover, the persecution expanded to include not only adults, but also children¹⁷. This indicates that the notion of *magia posthuma* (posthumous magic) was clearly evolving and with time it was broadened to include new elements, such as the "infection" by the so-called "patient zero" of more

deceased. Johann Kunze started as a poor lumberjack who also made shingles, and he owed his fortune to a pact with the dark forces, until he came to the office of mayor, having previously held the post of councillor. Moreover, it was said that there had been similar cases in his family. Some of his ancestors had been exhumed and burned. Stieff, *Schlesisches Historisches*, 388. In Krosno Odrzańskie a pharmacist apprentice from Zerbst died suddenly in 1659. A few days after his death a ghost (*Gespent*) started to appear in the pharmacy where he explored the secrets of the profession, and it resembled the deceased in appearance, clothing, gestures and posture. An order was issued for the exhumation of his body, which was likely cremated afterwards. Yet of key significance in all this was the information that the apprentice's mother had been burned in Zerbst for witchcraft and that she had given (bequeathed) her child to the devil, Matthias, *Chronica*, 241–2.

¹⁴ Schertz, *Magia posthuma*.

¹⁵ The epidemic of "living dead" was indeed a kind of plague and course for the local municipal authorities. Often, after dealing with one case, news of another suspected dead men from a neighbouring town came in. The chain spread very quickly, and local society acted very hysterically and violently, against the bodies of the dead, who were considered "living dead", controlled by devilish powers.

¹⁶ Krasová, "Hexenprozesse", 1–14; Neder, *Hexenprozesse*, 326–329; Neubauerová and Polách, *Zpráva*.

¹⁷ In the prepared monograph with a working title *Magia posthuma – beliefs in the harmful activity of the deceased in Silesia and Moravia in the 16th–8th centuries*, the currently prepared table shows nearly 400 cases of exhumation and executions of corpses (women, men and children) accused of *magia posthuma* only from Silesia and northern Moravia, which are the subject of research. It should be noted, that nearly one fifth of this number were children, whose corpses were also exhumed and burned. These figures may still change, as research is ongoing.

dead. The belief that a dead witch or sorcerer lying on their death bed or already in the grave can "infect" subsequent graves, especially those of the deceased who died soon after them, was spreading like wildfire. Undoubtedly, it was believed that there were "zero" patients, comparable to those who spread the epidemics, that is those who spread the "poison of witchcraft" (*Hexen-Gift*).

In Silesia and Moravia effective forms of dealing with harmful deceased people were developed in the period of 16th–18th centuries. Based on the analysis of existing source material, we know that the most frequent course of action was to find the grave of the "undead" in the cemetery, exhume the corpse and destroy it. The said destruction did not always entail complete obliteration of the body. Nevertheless, it was believed at the time that quartering and burning of the deceased to ashes and then throwing the remains into the river was the most effective, or in fact the only, form of annihilation of the "evil", allowing the community to return to the times from before inexplicable occurrences.

In practice, the procedure of "hunting down" and executing the evil dead was as follows. A special commission was established, consisting of representatives of the local court, a clergyman, sometimes a doctor, a gravedigger and undoubtedly members of the local community who gathered on the day of the ordered exhumation at the cemetery. The gravediggers dug out selected, suspicious graves, then the corpses were meticulously inspected, assessing the state of decomposition of individual tissues in search of any signs and marks (German: *Zauberzeichen*), which could tie the deceased to magic and witchcraft. They were supposed to indicate the undeniable connection between the deceased and the devil's forces, thus sanctioning the validity of the actions taken. Sometimes during the trial coffins with the bodies were hung from a tree growing in the local cemetery until the authorities came to a decision on what should be done with the suspicious corpse. This had been the preferred course of action regarding the dead who for some reason had been denied burial in consecrated ground since the Middle Ages.¹⁸ In 1595, in the village of Witków Śląski (German: Wittgendorf), located between Kamienna Góra and Wałbrzych, a corpse was exhumed after [however long] and a coin (one heller) was ordered to be placed under the tongue. Next, a stone was placed in the mouth and the head tied with cloths so that nothing could fall out. The corpse was then placed face down in the coffin, which was tied with ropes and hung in such a way as to prevent any contact with the ground.¹⁹ It goes without saying that it must have been a gruesome sight on the inhabitants of Witków Śląski, but it also served as a warning for those dealing with magic and spells, that justice would reach them even after death. It should be noted that the cemetery space was treated as *sacrum*, so the corpse of a person who was considered to be an "evil dead" was exhumed and had to be taken outside the fence surrounding the necropolis. But neither the front nor side gates could be used for this purpose. It was important not to take the regular way out, as it belonged to the sacred area. Instead, the coffins were thrown over the cemetery walls; in most extreme cases, holes were made in the walls. This was to ensure that the dead would not return.

All these measures against corpses who rose from their graves had to leave a trace in the parish books. In the discussed area, the oldest entries from records of death concerning

¹⁸ Aries, *Man and Death*, 57.

¹⁹ NAWr, Cistercian monastery in Krzeszów, ref. no. 403, Księga sądowa [Court Records], p. 224.

the beliefs in dead who returned to plague the living can be found in the volume for the Silesian city of Strzegom (German: Striegau) covering the years 1589–1715.²⁰ Disturbing events occurred in the town in the years 1591–1592 and the local municipal authorities and judicial institutions were enlisted in the defence against them. It all started on September 20, 1591, when a shoemaker named Hans Opitz cut his throat with a knife in the garden of his house for unknown reasons. His wife, when she found her husband's body, in fear of great disgrace that this act could bring upon the family, decided not to reveal the actual nature of this incident.²¹ This was to ensure that her husband's body could be buried in a normal grave in a cemetery, with traditional, religious rites, which was not practiced in the burial of suicide victims. The widow washed the corpse thoroughly, hid the wound on the neck and the thus prepared body was placed in a coffin.²² This way, her husband received a respectable funeral, even though he had killed himself. However, three days later the shoemaker began to show himself in the form of an apparition which resembled the deceased by its posture and appearance, and rumours began to spread that he had taken his own life.²³ Witnesses claimed that the apparition went from house to house, waking up people who had turned in for the night. He strangled them with such force that in the morning they could see bruises and the marks left by his fingers on different parts of their bodies.²⁴ The frequency of these occurrences intensified and after some time the deceased appeared not only at night, but even in the light of day, at noon, and the violence of the apparition's actions was so frightening that people dared not spend any time in the dark.²⁵ The screams were becoming increasingly ominous by the day.²⁶ He would turn tables and chairs upside down whenever there were people in rooms to see it. He would also sit in the evenings and at night in front of the gate of the cemetery where he had been buried, and abuse passersby. He strangled and beat them until they fell to the ground, half-conscious. Some were even said to have died as a result of these beatings. He sometimes appeared looking like himself, with the bleeding wound on his neck. All this continued until the city council had the corpse of the shoemaker exhumed in order to stop the troublesome and inexplicable happenings. At the order of the Prague Court of Appeals, the exhumed body was removed from the cemetery and buried by the hangman by the city gallows. This, however, not only failed to bring the expected results, but in fact intensified the sinister activity of the apparition. The chronicler noted that the apparition "was going wild", so much so that he found himself unable to describe it. What is more, the apparition did not even spare his own family, and so finally it was the dead shoemaker's wife who complained to the city authorities.²⁷ A decision was made to exhume the body again on 7 May 1592. The city hangman removed the body from the pit by the gallows, cut off its head, arms and legs, took out the heart, which was as fresh as that of a recently butchered calf. All the remains were burned and thrown into the river, which was to put an end to the wicked enterprise of the shoemaker who had

²⁰ AAWr Archdiocesan Archives in Wrocław, Parish records (Striegau), ref. no. 416b.

²¹ Stieff, *Von dem Gespenste*, 352; Tieffensee, *Herrn Bakers volständige*, 376.

²² Stieff, *Von dem Gespenste*, 353–4.

²³ Tieffensee, *Herrn Bakers volständige*, 376–7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 379.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 377–9.

²⁶ Stieff, *Von dem Gespenste*, 359.

²⁷ Tieffensee, *Herrn Bakers volständige*, 380.

killed himself.²⁸ Once Opitz's corpse was removed from the local necropolis, the entry on his death was also stricken out from the records, which was to wipe him out from the memory of the posterity. Thanks to this entry we know that Opitz lived in the suburbs in front of the New Gate (Neugasse, now Dąbrowskiego street) in Strzegom.²⁹ A contemporary researcher must be vexed by the fact that the newest publications regularly, and often intentionally, cite Wrocław (German: Breslau) as the place of the events from 1591–1592. Other times, both Strzegom and Wrocław are indicated as their location. The author of the most detailed account of the case of shoemaker Opitz laconically placed the occurrences *in einer berühmten Stadt Schlesiens*.³⁰ This is so imprecise that it certainly does not entitle researchers to indicate Wrocław as the city in question. Strzegom as the location is supported primarily by the collected source materials. Besides the aforementioned entry in the record of deaths, we also have at our disposal the judgement of the Prague Court of Appeals, which the authorities of Strzegom requested to issue legal instructions.³¹ There also exist history records from the local chronicle³² and from that maintained in the nearby town of Świdnica.³³ All the collected source materials unequivocally point to Strzegom, and not Wrocław as the arena of happenings in 1591/92 [sic!].³⁴

This was not the only such recorded case in this city. Two years later, in 1594, a woman called "die alte Anna" died in Strzegom. The entries in the record of deaths provide further details; namely, she was claimed to have been a witch (*venefica*) and it was also noted that she had lived near Hans Opitz: "*bei Hanns Opitzen dem Pülweissen*". It may be surmised that she was either related to him or worked as the shoemaker's servant. The entry may also suggest that she had something to do with the suicidal death of Opitz. The body of "old Anna" was buried in the local cemetery on 17 October 1594, then exhumed and moved to another place and finally, on 25 November of the same year, burned to ashes.³⁵ It must be added here that one of the chroniclers from Świdnica (German: Schweidnitz) used the above term *Pülweissen* in a slightly changed form of *Bielweiserey*³⁶ when referring to Opitz and the Strzegom events of 1592.³⁷

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 361; Bohn, *Der Vampir*, 64–6.

²⁹ AAWr, Parish records (Striegau), ref. no. 416b.

³⁰ Klapper, in his article on malicious dead from Silesia, also names Strzegom, see: Klapper, "Die schlesischen Geschichten", 77.

³¹ NAPr, Apelační soud, ref. no. 226, p. 8r–8v.

³² E.g. Filla, *Chronik der Stadt*, 182–3.

³³ NLW, Manuscripts, ref. no. Akc. 7234, p. 848; Schimmelpfenning, Schönborn (eds.), *Schweidnitzer Chronisten*, 92.

³⁴ The researcher is equally irritated as in the case of Strzegom by the fact that events that occurred in Levin are sometimes erroneously situated in Lewin Kłodzki (German: Lewin) and in Lewin Brzeski (German: Löwen), despite the absence of any connection. The erroneous date of 1345 is also frequently cited. The cremation of the body of a dead woman who pestered the local community took place in the village of Levin in the north of what is now the Czech Republic in 1344, which is testified to by the records kept by chronicler abbot Neplach. He also added that the fire did not catch until shingles from the local church roof were used to kindle it. FRB III, 481.

³⁵ AAWr, Parish records (Striegau), ref. no. 416, no page numbers.

³⁶ The term *Bielweiserey*, a variation of *Bilwis*, was also used in different forms, such as *pelwysen*, *pilbis*. Grimm's dictionary of mythology offers various theories on this entity, which may have been a house ghost or demon, and in the 15th-century German-speaking areas it was used to designate a witch. Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, 391; Wojtucka, „Procesy o czary”, 37.

³⁷ Schimmelpfenning, Schönborn (eds.), *Schweidnitzer Chronisten*, 92.

Some interesting research material is also provided by entries made in the records of death in the small town of Ryžoviště (German: Braunseifen) for the years 1583–1640 and 1640–1717. Some of them were made by a priest named Johann Gabriel (1595–1620). Besides regular entries on baptisms and deaths, he also made notes on selected interesting events from the life of the parish and of the deceased whom he buried. He added his own remarks and drawings on the margins, for example a sketch of a sword by the entry on the baptism of a daughter of master hangman Daniel, which took place on 18 May 1614.³⁸ The first mentions of suspicious corpses are recorded in 1597. On 26 January of that year, a woman called “die alte Gritte” passed away. No signs of postmortem rigidity were found on her body, and when punctured it bled. It was only at the clear order of the authorities that the corpse could be buried on 28 January 1597, in the evening.³⁹ Another entry regards a woman who died on 10 June 1600, on whom the priest remarked that she was not a good-natured person. Her apparition (*ein Gespenst*) was to harass people and animals, causing bodily injuries to them.⁴⁰ In 1610, rector Gabriel made note of a case of a “living dead” in the locality of Břidličná (German: Friedland an der Mohra), remarking that a similar event had taken place in his parish around that time. It involved a dead old woman from Vikantice (German: Weigelsdorf), who was supposed to be buried on 21 April 1610. At the family’s request, however, the funeral was put off, as the woman’s corpse showed no signs of post-mortem rigidity. The body was moved back to the family house, and after a few days it was concluded with sadness that it was indeed possessed by the devil. Around the same time strange and dangerous things began to happen to people, including children, and to animals. At the order of authorities, the woman’s remains were buried on 6 May 1610.⁴¹ A similar case occurred soon thereafter, on 21 November of the same year, and this time postmortem rigidity was not observed yet again.⁴² The next incident is dated 19 February 1611. The corpse of a certain Hans Streck lay unburied for 4 weeks, when finally, same as in the case of 21 November 1610, it was ordered to be buried by a road used for driving cattle.⁴³ The subsequent volume of records of death from the Ryžoviště parish, covering the years 1640–1717, also contains entries regarding posthumous magic. For example, on 4 March 1703, a 70-year-old woman named Rosina Breyerin was buried, and then exhumed and burned.⁴⁴ Similar entries can be found in the record of deaths in the aforementioned village of Břidličná (German: Friedland an der Mohra). The first one concerning dead witches is from March 1610, when a certain Magdalena, widow of Jakob Zimmer, was exhumed and then burned.⁴⁵ The next case took place on 6 March 1617, when a certain Susanna passed away and her body showed no regular posthumous changes. Additionally, suspicious marks were found on it. In the

³⁸ ZAO, pobočka Olomouc, Sbíрка matrik Severomoravského kraje, Římskokatolická fara Rýžoviště, R X 1, ref. no. 7494, p. 126v.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 207r.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 209v.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 216r–v.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 217r.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 217v.

⁴⁴ ZAO, pobočka Olomouc, Sbíрка matrik Severomoravského kraje, Římskokatolická fara Rýžoviště, R X 2, ref. no. 7495, p. 515.

⁴⁵ ZAO, pobočka Olomouc, Sbíрка matrik Severomoravského kraje, Římskokatolická fara Břidličná, R V 1, ref. no. 7441, p. 106.

opinion of the local residents, this was because her corpse was under the influence of the devil. It was passed on to the hangman, who burned the remains on 24 April.⁴⁶

Isolated entries concerning dead witches and sorcerers can be found in the records of death also of other localities from the bordering region of Silesia and Moravia, that is where the most trials of dead who returned to harass the living took place.⁴⁷ Usually the original entry was stricken out, and the reason therefor was noted on the margin or underneath. This additional information is sometimes elaborate, but other times it is limited to just one or a few words, as in the case of Christoph Kimmel of Václavov u Bruntálu (German: Wildgrub), who was buried on 14 February 1719. His body was exhumed and burned on 25 April of the same year, and only one word was added in the records of death: *combustus*, accompanied by the date of cremation.⁴⁸ In turn the corpse of Freidrich Helfert, buried on 15 January 1738 in the cemetery of Děřřichov nad Bystřřicí (German: Dittersdorf) was burned along with others from the same village. The remark in the records of death reads "ist mit dem Christian Philip umbgelauff. und mit ihm verbrent worden".⁴⁹ The next page contains a glued-on note with detailed information concerning the fate of Christian Philip, buried on 9 December 1737, and his sinister posthumous activity.⁵⁰

The detailed notes are of most use to researchers. They make it possible to attempt a reconstruction of the entire event if the records of death are the sole source of information about the returning dead. On 11 December 1708 Sybilla Mařřl was buried in Stará Rudná (German: Vogelseifen). Deceased at the age of 34, on the night following her death she harassed the residents and their animals, making knocking noises and pinning down (strangling) the living. At the order of the Olomouc consistory, her body was passed on to the hangman and burned, most likely on 25 April 1709. It merits a mention that the priest's description gives a detailed account of the entire occurrence, and even though half of it has been stricken out, it is still legible.⁵¹ There is an interesting remark in the death records kept in the village of Dvorce (German: Hof), located between Opava and Olomouc. 36-year-old Rosina Kleinsorgin was buried in the local cemetery on 20 January 1714. She did not find peace after death, however, and due to nighttime disturbances, her corpse was exhumed along with all the objects found in the grave, and given to the hangman who first decapitated the body and then cremated it.⁵² The parish death records of Horní Beneřřov contain an interesting mention of a case that took place in 1734. A certain Andreas Kőnig, who passed away at 12:00 a.m., was accused

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 111r.

⁴⁷ 18th-century works relate numerous examples from Hungary, but only few from northern Moravia.

⁴⁸ ZAO, Sbirka matrik Severomoravskėho kraje, Řřmskokatolická fara Dolnř Václavov, Br III 2, ref. no. 494, p. 182v.

⁴⁹ ZAO, Sbirka matrik Severomoravskėho kraje, Řřmskokatolická fara Moravskř Beroun, Dv VIII 3, ref. no. 6222, p. 375.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 375. The entry made on 9 December 1737 is accompanied by a note that the deceased Christian Philip did not find peace in death and was burned – *hat nach seinem Todt nicht geruhet undt verbrent worden*, *Ibid.*, 373.

⁵¹ ZAO, Sbirka matrik Severomoravskėho kraje, fara Stará Rudná, Br X 2, ref. no. 592, p. 479r.

⁵² ZAO, pobořka Olomouc, Sbirka matrik Severomoravskėho kraje, Řřmskokatolická fara Dvorce, Dv I 1, ref. no. 6166, p. 804r.

of sinister posthumous activity.⁵³ The local chronicles provide further details on what this “living dead” did. Allegedly, he harassed adults and children to such a point that they were afraid to sleep alone with lights off in the room.⁵⁴ The aforementioned death records for the years 1660–1779 mention that due to König’s activity, people from nearby villages heard all kinds of sounds at night (mainly knocking).⁵⁵

The most elaborate entry in regards to the number of bodies exhumed at the same time comes from the death records of the town of Libavá (German: Liebau) for the years 1706–1759, located northeast of Olomouc and of the village Smilov (German: Schmeil), which no longer exists. This area became famous for the trials and executions of deceased exhumed from the local and nearby cemeteries, in various years of the first three decades of the 18th century. It was a time of a “hysteria” of sorts, involving mass-scale hunts directed against the dead who allegedly returned from the other world to cause damage to their neighbours and families. This phenomenon peaked in the years 1726–1728.⁵⁶ In this period, Georg Polzer was identified as patient “zero”. The man died at the age of 72 and was buried in the cemetery in Libavá on 18 August 1726.⁵⁷ An examination of his body revealed that it was bleeding and had red blotches on the back and feet⁵⁸. His first “victims” were a two-and-a-half year old daughter of a certain Johann Michael Schneck, who passed away just five days after Polzer, and an anonymous woman who was buried there on 26 August at the age of 36.⁵⁹ The last entry in the consistory records for the year 1726 is one that documents the exhumation of the body of a three-year-old child. Entries for the next year (1727) list the particulars of 14 other exhumed people in January and February alone.⁶⁰ It should be emphasized that although the list clearly shows that 60 bodies were removed from the cemetery, the words *abgeschafft* or *verschafft* are written next to the names of only 11 out of 15 people buried in March of 1727. Moreover, some of these people were not buried in the cemetery of Libavá until March 1727, which shows a disparity between the records of deaths and the list contained in the Olomouc consistory records. The list does not provide any information on the exhumation and removal of the body of Georg Sendler, an 83-year-old man from the village of Smilov, who died and was buried in November 1727.⁶¹

One of the last entries in the death records was made on 1 March 1755, when the Empress Maria Theresa issued a decree forbidding the persecution of people accused of

⁵³ ZAO, Sbíрка matrik Severomoravského kraje, Římskokatolická fara Horní Benešov, Br IV 22, ref. no. 527, p. 152v.

⁵⁴ SABK, Místní národní výbor Horní Benešov, ref. no. 86, *Kronika města Horní Benešov*, p. 47; SABKMístní národní výbor Horní Benešov, ref. no. 1034; *Urkundensammlung der Stadt Bennisch 1302–1843*, 252–3.

⁵⁵ ZAO, Sbíрка matrik Severomoravského kraje, Římskokatolická fara Horní Benešov, Br IV 22, ref. no. 527, p. 152v.

⁵⁶ Bombera, „Posmrtná magie”, 38–55.

⁵⁷ It should be noted, that in the Parish Records of death lacks information about body of Georg Polzer ZAO, Sbíрка matrik Severomoravského kraje, Římskokatolická fara Město Libavá, Bu VI 4, ref. no. 5878, p. 738.

⁵⁸ ZAO, pobočka Olomouc, Arcibiskupská konzistoř Olomouc, ref. no. C13, box 2278, p. 167r.

⁵⁹ ZAO pobočka Olomouc, Sbíрка matrik Severomoravského kraje, Římskokatolická fara Město Libavá, Bu VI 4, ref. no. 5878, p. 738.

⁶⁰ ZAO, pobočka Olomouc, Arcibiskupská konzistoř Olomouc, ref. no. C13, box 2278, p. 168v.

⁶¹ ZAO, pobočka Olomouc, Sbíрка matrik Severomoravského kraje, Římskokatolická fara Město Libavá, Bu VI 4, ref. no. 5878, p. 745.

witchcraft, treasure hunts with the aid of magic and also the exhumation or burning of the bodies of people accused of posthumous magic⁶². On 27 August 1753 Marianna Saliger died at the age of 63 in the village of Svobodné Heřmanice (German: Frei Hermersdorf), west of Opava. She was buried in the local cemetery.⁶³ She was known by the nickname "Richter Wenzelin", most likely because of her husband Wenzel Saliger, who was a former soldier.⁶⁴ Nothing seemed surprising about her death; by the erstwhile standards she passed away at a very advanced age. Yet she had been perceived as a witch even while still alive. The accounts given by witnesses in regards of the magic she allegedly practiced point to this perception as exaggerated. The woman primarily made all kinds of medications, herbal infusions and ointments. With their aid, she rendered very basic medical services to the local community. Nevertheless, the witnesses heard in her case testified that the locals had seen her as a "Hexe". A similar description can also be found in the church chronicles of the parish Leskovec nad Moravicí, which provides some basic information on a case that was finally solved in late January 1755.⁶⁵ The first disturbances did not occur until the end of 1754. Then, on 13 December, a special committee was appointed to investigate the alarming accounts. Members of the committee heard a few tens of witnesses who testified under oath, repeating what had been said in previous trials. Marianna Saliger, or rather "something" that had inhabited her body, was supposed to pester the inhabitants to such an extent that some of them, including women, children, and the old decided to relocate to the neighboring villages. Only young and strong men, who were said to have been less afraid of the apparition, were to remain in their homes. A few tens of other graves in the local cemeteries were dug out along with that of Marianna Saliger. They belonged to the deceased who had died after the alleged "witch". The bodies were carefully examined. Suspicious, inexplicable marks were found on 18 of the corpses. Thus, it was pronounced that the witch Saliger had "infected" them, and so they had to be destroyed along with the body of the perpetrator. The remaining ten corpses must have shown natural signs of decomposition, since they were reburied.

The execution took place on 30 January 1755 at a site referred to as "Hexenplan". First, however, a hole was made in the cemetery walls, through which the bodies were dragged out, heaped on a cart and taken to the place where they were to be burned. According to the chronicles, it was two sons of Saliger who dragged out her corpse through the wall, which they were forced to do. This must have brought shame and sneering comments of the local residents upon them, which is why they decided to move elsewhere.⁶⁶ The remains of the alleged witch were placed at a stake. When flames began to devour them, the smell was apparently so unbearable that many of the gathered people left the site and returned home. Moreover, it was said that when Marianna Saliger's body was burning at the stake, a spinning wheel began to turn by itself at her home. Following

⁶² MZAB, Moravské místoržitelství – patenty, box 70, shelfmark. M 23.

⁶³ ZAO, Sbírnka matrik Severomoravského kraje, Římskokatolická fara Velké Heraltice, J IX 8, ref. no. 785, p. 40v.

⁶⁴ The posthumous trial and execution of Marianna Saliger were discussed in detail in an article by Slezáková, "Charakteristika a historická", 132–5 and in the text by Martinek, "K otázce tzv. Posmrtné", 37–41.

⁶⁵ SABK, fond Farní úřad Leskovec, ref. no. 45, pp. 13–4.

⁶⁶ Martinek, "K otázce tzv. Posmrtné", 38–9.

the burning of the corpse, against the hopes of the local community, the disturbances not only did not end, but also intensified. The Empress Maria Theresa herself intervened in the case and resorted to threats to calm down the local residents in order to prevent further exhumations and executions of the dead.⁶⁷

In conclusion, it should be noted that the phenomenon, or in fact the beliefs in the revival of the corpses of dead witches or sorcerers, were particularly strong in Moravia. A number of cases were also reported in Silesia, yet both their number and concentration around specific centres were not as large as in the case of the neighbouring region. In addition, over nearly three centuries in Silesia only isolated cases of action taken against “living corpses” were recorded in various periods and throughout the area, with a few exceptions. In Moravia, these occurred mainly in the northern part of this historical region, and they were concentrated around specific towns and cities and the surrounding villages. It should be noted that in the 17th century, trials of both the living and the dead were held, but from the end of the 17th century and until the middle of the 18th century, “living corpses” began to replace the living in persecution of the crime of witchcraft. The sole exception to this rule were cases of people accused of treasure hunts with the aid of magic. The temptation to become rich with the help of spells remained strong in Moravia.

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⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

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