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## DEATH NOTICES IN NEWSPAPERS

### Summary

Daily newspapers in Yugoslavia regularly carry large numbers of death notices in the form of advertisements published by the families of the deceased persons, business firms and social organizations. The present study contains an analysis based on the material taken from two dailies — the Zagreb »Večernji list« (which has the largest circulation of all the newspapers published in Zagreb) and the Belgrade »Politika« (one of the oldest and most widely read newspapers published in Belgrade). The analysis is partly based on a statistical sample which covers selected weeks in the period 1973—1978, with the intention to give a synchronic view of the phenomenon in question. On the other hand the study also includes the analysis of texts and their content.

The starting assumption contains two parallel models of the attitude to death in the contemporary Yugoslav society. The first model treats death as an integral part of living: death is openly discussed and preparations are made for death. This model is close to the values of an agrarian society. The second model avoids the discussion of death, regarding it as something irreversible and inimical to human life. This model reflects bourgeois or middle-class values.

The above analysis of death notices results in the following findings:

1. Death notices form part of contemporary — mainly family centered customs accompanying death. It has not been possible to determine precisely which social classes have adopted the custom, but occupations of the deceased persons sometimes given in the death notices point to better-off rather than to less well-off families, to urban rather than rural ones.
2. Major differences in the style of death notices exist between the eastern and the western parts of Yugoslavia. This allows the conclusion that a detailed examination of death notices published in the capitals of the other Yugoslav republics and in provincial and local centres would reveal differences stemming from national, religious and cultural traditions and well-known in Yugoslav ethnology and cultural history.
3. Death notices point to the existence of firm family ties, supplemented by a rather wide and well-functioning network of relatives. In this respect, too, regional differences must be recognized.
4. At the level of interpersonal relations in modern urban environments, our analysis points to the existence of neighbourly relations and mutual help in cases of death.
5. Certain elite strata of society can also be discerned in death notices. Business firms and social organizations

publish conspicuous notices announcing the death of their prominent employees or members. At the same time, death notices reflect an equalitarian value orientation.

6. The distribution of death notices by sex reveals the traditionally lower social standing of women which is still strongly felt. (Of the total number of death notices, notices commemorating anniversaries of death and notices expressing the bereaved families' thanks for expressions of sympathy received, two-thirds are related to the death of men and only one-third to the death of women). The attitude which in earlier times forbade public expression of grief for a woman is still present, even though the woman's role in society and in the family has changed radically. Despite the generally held view that a widower has more difficulty living alone than a widow, existing kinship communities unexpectedly express their grief for a woman more seldom than for a man.
7. Comparisons with death notices in newspapers outside Yugoslavia point to certain parallels. Also, comparisons with death notices in Zagreb newspapers in the second half of the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth century reveal stylistic and graphic continuity until the present day.
8. Our analysis shows that the view of opposition between traditional folk dirges as an original form of expression of human emotion and newspaper »obituaries« as a »combination of a limited number of fixed elements« (as postulated by some authors) is untenable. It is true that certain stereotypes do exist in death notices in newspapers and that they are to a certain extent perpetuated by the advertising agencies themselves. But we have been able to show also the presence of different patterns of variation, improvisation, introduction of psychological and sociological indications and characteristics of modern society.

Allowing for the fact that death notices in newspapers are an expression of the contemporary consumer society and mass culture, the present author sees them also as something much more than that. Speaking about the dead, they hold a mirror to living human relationships and human values old and new. At the inevitable moment of death, these ephemeral newspaper columns give us glimpses of the secrets of human living which life sometimes carefully conceals even from itself. Aries (1973) and Gorer (1965) spoke of the interdict of death and of the »pornography of death«, which they explained, among other things, by the hypocrisy of modern civilization. Our analysis of death notices in newspapers shows how tradition intervenes against hypocrisy.

From the methodological point of view, the analysis has proved the relevance of contemporary newspaper death notices for ethnology and folkloristic studies, as well as for social anthropology.

(Translated by V. Ivir)