

Prague ghostlore of the late 19th century. Suburban ghosts between moral panic and vernacular spectacle

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ABSTRACT

In the mid-1870s, a wave of popular urban hauntings in public spaces swept across Europe. These included sightings of the Park Ghost in Sheffield in 1873 and the Westminster Christ Church Ghost in London in 1874. In early December 1874, probably the most famous Czech ghost, the Podskalí Apparition (Podskalské strašidlo), was born. This haunting was followed by that of similar but less popular ghosts that appeared in industrial, working-class Prague neighborhoods in 1876 and 1907, respectively. This paper analyzes newspaper articles from this period about these apparitions and their later depictions in Czech popular culture, and interprets these phenomena as local variants of the so-called “prowling ghosts”, a particular type of suburban phantom documented by current historiographical research on 19th-century ghostlore in England. The paper then describes how these Prague ghosts were utilized socially by two completely different cultural practices. On one hand, these hauntings were used by working-class people as vernacular spectacles and improvised festivities related to pranks, the symbolic occupation of public space, and Czech nationalism. For the middle classes and period newspapers loyal to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, on the other hand, unruly mobs converging on the sites of supposed hauntings were a threat to established social norms and triggered both moral panics and public scorn of these “ghost hunters”. However, this attitude changed quickly when these events entered popular culture in the form of popular songs and, later, memoirs and literature. Between the Belle Époque at the First World War, these famous Prague hauntings were the staple for nostalgic longing in the last few decades of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

KEYWORDS

ghost; haunting; Prague; 19th century; legend

FOLKLORE DE FANTASMES A LA PRAGA DE FINALS DEL SEGLE XIX. FANTASMES SUBURBANS, ENTRE EL PÀNIC MORAL I L'ESPECTACLE VERNACLE

RESUM

A mitjans de la dècada de 1870, l'onada de fantasmes urbans populars als espais públics va arrasar Europa, incloent Park Ghost a Sheffield el 1873 i Westminster Christ Church Ghost a Londres el 1874. A principis de desembre de 1874, va néixer probablement el fantasma txec més famós: l'aparició de Podskalí (Podskalské strašidlo), seguida de fantasmes similars però menys populars que van aparèixer als barris industrials de la classe treballadora de Praga el 1876 i el 1907, respectivament. El document, que analitza articles periodístics d'època que tracten sobre aquests fantasmes i les seves representacions posteriors a la cultura popular txeca, intenta interpretar aquests fenòmens com a variants locals dels anomenats «fantasmes vaguejadors», és a dir, un tipus peculiar de fantasma suburbà documentat per la investigació historiogràfica actual del fantasma del segle XIX a Anglaterra. Seguint aquesta interpretació, l'article intenta mostrar com aquests fantasmes de Praga eren utilitzats socialment per dues pràctiques culturals completament diferents. Per a la gent de la classe obrera, aquests embriuxats eren utilitzats com a espectacles vernacles i festes improvisades relacionades amb bromes, una ocupació simbòlica de l'espai públic i el nacionalisme txec. Per a la gent de classe mitjana i els diaris d'època lleials a l'Imperi Austrohongarès, les turbes rebels que convergeixen als llocs de suposats embriuxaments representaven una amenaça per a les normes socials establertes i desencadenaven tant pànics morals com menyspreu públic dels «caçadors de fantasmes». No obstant això, aquesta actitud va canviar molt ràpidament quan aquests fets van entrar a la cultura popular en forma de cançons i, posteriorment, de memòries i literatura. Des de la Belle Époque a principis del segle XX, aquests famosos embriuxats de Praga es van convertir en un element bàsic de l'enyorança nostàlgica de les últimes dècades de l'Imperi Austrohongarès abans de la Primera Guerra Mundial.

PARAULES CLAU

fantasma; inquietant; Praga; segle XIX; llegenda

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1. Introduction¹

In early December 1874, arguably the most famous Czech ghost, the Podskalí Apparition (*Podskalské strašidlo*) began to haunt this quirky Prague river-rafter neighborhood over a period of several weeks. Similar but less popular ghosts later appeared in industrial working-class Prague neighborhoods in 1876 and 1907, respectively. These urban hauntings were once neglected by folkloristic and/or historiographical research. One of the reasons for this was their peculiar class dynamics: unlike the learned spiritism of the bourgeoisie and the ghost stories of traditional rural folk culture, these working-class hauntings were difficult to interpret, save for shallow notions of the antics of “superstitious workmen”.

This article employs content analysis of printed documents from the period (mainly newspaper and literary sources) to document, analyze and interpret these phenomena from the concept of the so-called prowling ghosts (developed by recent social history) and compare them with similar cultural practices from the same period from beyond Central Europe – mainly from England (where the most thorough studies of this phenomenon have been conducted). After a brief discussion of the research on ghosts in contemporary humanities, the concept of the prowling ghost is introduced and the Podskalí Apparition of 1874 is presented in detail from newspaper sources of the period. The second life of this ghost in the popular culture and literature of that period is then presented. A similar discussion of its spiritual successor, the Libeň Ghost of the Belle Époque, then follows.

2. Research on ghosts in contemporary humanities

Investigations into an imaginary figure such as a ghost – i.e., something that “did not exist” – could be perceived from certain theoretical positions as problematic. However, the author asserts that this kind of skepticism in contemporary humanities – after the linguistic, interpretive, performative, reflexive, cultural, rhetorical and, especially, the mnemonic and ontological turns are taken into account – is entirely unwarranted.² In the last few decades, studies dealing with folkloric ghosts have appeared with increasing frequency in cultural and social history, where they could be considered practically “traditional” today. As the folklorist and social historian Owen Davies tells us, one of the main historical arguments for the unreality of spirits and specters was always the fact that they were almost never sighted by more than one person at a time. However, we could also turn the same argument around to emphasize the significance of historical research into these imaginary visions because, since a great many people in various historical periods and cultures have seen spirits and specters, they are a social phenomenon worthy of research interest (Davies 2007: 13). According to the historian Jacob Middleton, ghost stories reflect the important cultural themes

¹ Parts of this study have appeared in a different form in the Czech language in two chapters of the book by Janeček (2017). The whole text, translated into English by Dr. Melinda Reiding, has been thoroughly amended and updated.

² For the most recent comprehensive overview of (some) of these turns, see Bachman-Medick (2016). Also see Köresaar (2014) on the relationship between the mnemonic turn and folklore studies.

of their periods – primarily, class and religious conflicts and a mythologized fear of criminality, subjects whose reflections we find only with difficulty in other kinds of sources (Middleton 2014: xii).

We can also uphold the relevance of research into 19th-century Czech ghostlore with the assertion by sociologist Avery F. Gordon that, although some phenomena of “fictitious” apparitions and ghosts may at first glance be perceived as unusual, marginal or even bizarre subjects for social science disciplines conducting research on current social realities, there is no reason to neglect them at the expense of other, only seemingly “more real”, creations of the social imagination (Gordon 2008: 7, 27). In the past, only psychoanalysis, folkloristics and, to a certain degree, religious studies considered apparitions and phantoms to be serious matters for research. However, a great many other disciplines have joined these in recent decades, including ethnology and cultural anthropology. Today we can therefore boldly claim that “... in the context of modern anthropology, as long as people believe that something is real, it is real” (Tonkin; McDonald; Chapman 2016: 9). In recent years, especially after the “ghost turn in the social sciences” associated with the concept of the “uncanny”, interest in this subject has clearly also grown in other social sciences (Gibas 2012).

3. Prowling ghosts between urban and rural culture

The urban ghosts connected with the laboring classes as a *sui generis* phenomenon were rediscovered by historical scholars only fairly recently. This is because historiographical interest in the issue of revenants had traditionally focused on hauntings in the spheres of learned and elite culture, which was available for analysis through written and iconographic sources, whereas the ephemeral manifestations of the cultures of the manually-laboring classes were neglected. Meanwhile, folkloristics (or folklore studies) that conducted research into the “supernatural” put the main accent on rural or traditional folk culture, which was accessible for analysis through sources of an oral nature that were usually categorized into the folkloric genres of legends and for a long time disregarded urban phenomena. Phantoms connected with the proletarian culture of industrialized cities therefore represent a doubly strange “revenant discourse” that lies outside both educated/elite culture and folk culture. Distinct from scholarly conceptualizations of the afterworld, the elitist aristocratic and bourgeois spiritism and occultism, and the archaic rural demonic beings of folk culture, these “working-class spooks” are a relatively neglected cultural phenomenon of a syncretic nature that straddles the boundaries of verbal folklore, cultural practices and public spectacles and is extremely interesting owing to its liminal positioning between vernacular and popular culture.

This peculiar kind of apparition can probably be best analyzed by employing the concept of the so-called *prowling ghosts*. According to historian Jacob Middleton, *prowling ghosts* were one of the two ideal types of cultural understanding of ghosts in the 19th century, a phenomenon that was at first popular, then suburban, and finally became part of urban proletarian culture. With a tradition that can be documented as far back as the 17th century, these ghosts drew upon vernacular practices that usually featured apparitions (usually people in costumes) in public spaces. The second ideal type of the “modern” ghost of the 19th century was the

literary ghost. By contrast, this was associated with the intimate environment of the household and salons, a phenomenon of elite and later of bourgeois culture with a poetics and esthetics drawn from Gothic novels and, later, “scientific” spiritism and occultism, which, for many reasons, are easier for us to appreciate today (Middleton 2014: VIII-XVIII).³

Unlike the more intimately situated literary phantoms, prowling ghosts are inherently connected with the public space. Starting in the second half of the 18th century, they appeared in just about every English city as a feature of the specific culture of the manually laboring classes and later in the proletarian milieu. They enjoyed their heyday around the mid-19th century. One of the prowling ghosts’ most distinctive habits was their constant movement, “prowling” for unsuspecting passersby on the outskirts of large cities (this gave rise to their name and distinguishes them from the more static literary phantoms that were bound to specific sites). Period interpretations did not believe them to be spectral apparitions but real masked individuals (often aristocrats who behaved in this way because of a bet, or local ruffians who attacked women) with certain “supernatural” qualities, most often the ability to take inhuman leaps, shining garments, invulnerability to bullets or breathe fire, all of which were at the time “rationally” explicable through inventions or technological innovations.

The appearance of these phantoms, whether merely in narrative rumors and legends or in the form of activities of pranksters and imitators who, inspired by the narratives, went out marauding in disguise, often culminated in a “ghost panic”. However, this term can be somewhat misleading because it is constructed “from above” by the elite culture or sometimes by journalists. In this regard, it displays certain parallels with the modern concept of moral panic (Cohen 2002). In its essence, ghost panic was an informal mass encounter assembled for the purpose of collectively sniffing out and hunting down the prowling ghosts, who were usually young male manual laborers. For them, these encounters predominantly represented a kind of semi-spontaneous festivity, a cheap and popular form of urban entertainment. For the middle classes and their press, ghost panic usually represented an entertaining spectacle as well as an opportunity for moralizing.

This socially clearly-defined cluster of folkloric narratives and cultural practices soon became welcome sources of inspiration for newly-emerging genres of popular news reporting and mass-produced popular culture – especially penny-dreadful books and popular theater performances (Bell 2012: 73–141).

4. The Podskalí Apparition of 1874

The end of November and the beginning of December 1874 saw the appearance of the most famous Czech phantom of the 19th century: the *Podskalské strašidlo*, or *Podskalí Apparition*, which haunted the quirky Prague river-rafter and lumberjack quarter of Podskalí. This quarter was famous at the time for its peculiar dialect, suburban culture, and popularity as a beloved destination for day-tripping middle-class city dwellers.

³ On today’s perception of ghosts in vernacular culture see, for example, Bennett (1999) and Thomas (2015). For more, see, for example, Cowdell (2014).



Fig. 1. Prague river-raft and lumberjack quarter of Podskalí in the late 1800s.
Private archive of Petr Janeček.

Numerous Prague personalities reminisced about this event even decades after it transpired – especially the novelist who wrote about Old Prague, Ignát Hermann (*YPSILON* 1923),⁴ and the writer and collector of legends, Popelka Biliánová. Forty years later, in 1905, Biliánová wrote that the Podskalí Apparition “... in this period thrilled the imagination of Praguers more than today’s Russian-Japanese War” (Biliánová 1905: 247–250). The Podskalí phantom was primarily of an acoustic nature, manifesting itself in a series of strange sounds suggestive of blowing horns that were heard for several weeks beginning on 30 November 1874 in the house and adjacent wood-fenced yard of a Mr. Procházka in Podskalská Street 1/354, near the ferry launch at a place called “Na paletě” or “U Turků”:

At the beginning of December 1874, we youths of the time overheard that something extraordinary was taking place in Podskalí. It was only whispered about so that we would not be distracted at work. Even the police themselves were keeping it secret and they only produced an official report about it a week or so later. Whereas in Prague it was well known that something was haunting Podskalí (Ypsilon 1923).

A week after the strange activities began, the event was covered on the first page of the Sunday Czech-language periodical *Národní listy* (*National Newspaper*) in the column “Daily news”, right after a sensationalistic report under the title “Loupežná vražda” [“robbery and murder”] that exoticized the then faraway realm of Moravia (“In Moravia, robberies and murder are increasing in an uncommon manner ...”).

⁴ For the revised editions, see Hermann (1924) and Hermann (1970).

The Phantom in Podskalí.

Podskalí is haunted – this report has been floating around Prague for several days; everyone laughs, few people believe it, but towards the evening Podskalská Street is full of the inquisitive who go out seeking the phantom. For the nonce, it cannot be seen but only heard. At midnight, nine prolonged sounds like blowing on a horn are always heard: thus, the phantom announces his nightly patrol. The inhabitants of the nearby buildings, especially the women, are terrified, and the most various tales circulate about an apparition which no one has seen, even though a good many of them describe him in great detail. They say it is a white figure that gazes mournfully as though someone had dreadfully wronged it. The house where the manifestations appear used to belong to the Jesuit Order and it is said that the Jesuits have been recently endeavoring to purchase it again, which would perhaps be a little glint of light in the entire swarm of the dark and nonsensical stories that are circulating about the spook. As a result of these tales, the police found it necessary to intervene. An inspector was dispatched with a strong patrol squad, and they occupy that building and the street. The night before last there were perhaps 300 curious onlookers. And truly, at midnight the prolonged sound was heard nine times. Fear took hold of everyone. The police thoroughly searched the building, but did not find anyone. The phantom announced itself, but has not been seen. Today, the police patrol will await the phantom for the second time (Strašidlo v Podskalí, 13 December 1874).

In the same issue, a second reporter offered information that the Imperial-Royal gendarmes had been secretly searching for the phantom without success since Monday, and added details about the fantastic tales connected with it. According to the reporter, the phantom began sounding off with its horn earlier, at ten o'clock at night, and continued until midnight. Crowds of people from the suburbs and from Prague's New and Old Towns had been hearing the mysterious sounds since three o'clock in the afternoon. These were joined by a growing number of officials that finally comprised ten Imperial-Royal police guards with their bayonets fixed in place, two police commissioners, and six secret police officers:

Starting at 8 o'clock the guards were posted ten paces apart, and there were also several stationed inside the yard. More and more people continued gathering and at 10 o'clock there were already more than 400. It was quiet as the grave for perhaps half an hour, and in this silence it was possible to hear a muffled, minute-long sound of "tooooo". One constable heard it from behind his head, another heard it under his feet in the sewer, yet another heard it behind the fence, etc.: in short, a general panic arose. Many of the onlookers were quaking like aspens, but the police had no fear of the phantom and instead energetically endeavored to discover his whereabouts; though, alas, all was in vain. By midnight, the phantom had made its trumpeting sound nine times, after which it vanished, but not at all like ordinary spooks which only come out to disport themselves between midnight and 1 am. When the police heard no more of its "tooooo" by two o'clock, they left. Altogether, according to

the police logs, the phantom has already blown its horn 72 times and it will probably continue to blow on it if it will have such a large audience as it has enjoyed so far. Yesterday, a new campaign against the phantom was launched and 18 Imperial-Royal gendarmes were dispatched to hunt him out. Whether they captured him we will tell you – tomorrow (Strašidlo v Podskalí, 13 December 1874).

The next day, the slightly disconcerted but mainly amused readers of *Národní listy* were treated to an article about the next move the police intended to take against the phantom. However, the clustering crowds of curious onlookers evidently caused greater problems than the spirit itself:

At 11 o'clock in the yard after the phantom had sounded its horn all at once a clicking sound and an unusual huffing and panting began. Several of the constables burst inside the building and with their bayonets fixed in place they undertook to capture the phantom, which was heard panting near the woodpile and jumping around in the lumber stacks. A round of laughter arose: in Procházka's dangerous yard offered up a pair of amorous cats having a rendezvous. After 12 o'clock the throng was ordered to disperse; however, the people pretended not to understand. Thereupon, Inspector Rost went to fetch twelve police constables, who cleared the streets and dispersed the crowds. However, one hot-blooded goldsmith's apprentice, F. Hevera, wanted to see the phantom at all costs, and on account of not "dispersing" immediately, he was taken into custody. Therefore, the police still did not manage to capture the phantom. Yesterday, all day long, there were several police officers stationed around Procházka's yard as sentinels and they did not allow anyone to pause there for even a moment. In the evening, from 7 o'clock until 1 o'clock in the morning all the streets around the yard there were strong police detachments turning everyone away from the area near the yard. However, regardless of its besiegement the phantom remained undaunted and continued to sound its horn, but now only for the constables since there were no other spectators, and it was still impossible to capture it. The jester's lark, by all accounts, had been a marvelous success (Výpravu proti strašidlu v Podskalí... 14 December 1874).

Národní listy also reported on the phantom of Podskalí the next day:

The phantom is still haunting Podskalí. It can truly be said that there are few ghosts that have caused such an uproar among Earthlings as the one in Mr. Procházka's yard. Every day around a hundred, and last Sunday even some thousand people – and in addition, entire platoons of police. On Sunday, as we have already said, all of the surrounding streets were closed, but the phantom paid no heed and haunted there once more. The drawn-out sound of its trumpet was heard again, though it was only heard by those who were standing closest to the yard; ergo, mainly police officers and those whom Mr. Procházka had summoned to investigate in which way and from where the sound was produced. Till now, all the proceedings have been in vain. Mr. Procházka, as we were given to understand, had intended to invite the bugler from Mr. Holý's Czech theatre in order to discover whether the sound was produced by a trumpet

or another brass instrument. Panic has taken hold in the surrounding buildings; however, on the other hand, the local pubs are thriving, and are thronged with guests telling the most curious tales about the phantom of Podskalí, as well about others, all night long until the day breaks. The most interesting thing, which is truly very droll, is to observe the people who are waiting for the phantom and for twelve o'clock. We went to have a gander, not at the phantom, but at the audience (*Strašidlo v Podskalí ještě straší* 15 December 1874).

The reporter then continues in his indulgent middle-class, proto-ethnographic “observing people” mode describing, in the style of reportage, the antics of the supposedly superstitious working class. The perception of the “phantom” then comes through in three dimensions from participants in the spectacle:

We take our kind reader along with us. We go at eleven thirty, there are several of us, and therefore we are not afraid of the apparition. The streets are packed like a tin of sardines. Thanks to the favors of a policeman we are able to get close to the site. It is just before midnight. Tense with anticipation. The public's laughter and noise fall silent. From inside, the strokes of midnight ring out! There is a general admonition of: “Shhh, Shhh!” and it is completely silent. The last of the twelve peals had struck: no apparition at all. A voice from among the people, a large, muscular man who everyone else stands at shoulder height next to: “That phantom's watch isn't working!” “They're going to fix it for him!” is the reply, and everyone around laughs. “Quiet, there!” another cries, “You'll frighten the phantom!” A bell tolls from another tower. “Well, he's probably going by that clock!” chimes in Kačenka (Katty), who is pressing up against her swain, while at the same time secretly squeezing her neighbor's hand: the poor thing is afraid of ghosts, so she has to cling to the living. “Troo-too!” some wild beast blows through his fist. “Fool, what, are you the phantom?” his friend scolds, and everyone laughs. At that moment, the nearby lanterns were extinguished. The twelfth peal sounded and the town was no longer illuminated for its citizens. There was a general cry: “Hooray! Long live the dark!” (*Strašidlo v Podskalí ještě straší* 15 December 1874).

The report goes on to describe another unsuccessful police raid, which then broke up the assembled crowds. The same issue also contained a continuation of the story entitled “Now they have him, now they don't”, which, as well as describing the hunt for the phantom, informed readers about the arrest of a watchman at the nearby enclosures belonging to the Lann family, who had been taken into custody by an officer of the secret police for imitating the trumpeting sound. After a four-hour interrogation, however, he was released (*Strašidlo v Podskalí ještě straší* (15 December 1874). A feuilleton entitled “Pravda o strašidle v Podskalí” [The Truth About the Phantom in Podskalí] published on the front page of *Národní listy* on 16 December 1874 became the phantom's swan song. In an “investigative” and at the same time humorous manner, it “debunked” (perhaps partially under pressure from the authorities) the case for middle-class readers by reporting it as the hijinks of an anonymous prankster blowing on a cheap wooden children's horn, and exhorted the “public” to stop paying attention to the phantom:

Falsehoods and the most foolish fabrications were written, and were spoken even more, about the Podskalí phantom, to the point where a little needle of truth could probably be found in that haystack. And the entire public, not excepting the police, who have been so saturated with these falsehoods that to this day they still have not fathomed what happened (Pravda o strašidle v Podskalí 16 December 1874).

The part criticizing the newspaper reports that amplified the panic was rather hypocritical (they were printed in the same paper, which itself had helped to incite the panic several days earlier). The synergy between the vernacular and popular culture was once again mediated through a patronizing middle-class tone typical of a newspaper covering ghost panics and forbearing towards the bizarre excesses of the superstitious but fascinating urban “folk”: “These examples themselves allow us to conjecture what sort of curious and monstrous tales are being told among the folk. The fantasy of the people, fed by journalistic fables, lead them to believe in a genuine phantom.” (Pravda o strašidle v Podskalí, 16 December 1874).

To conclude, the piece then pronounced an “authoritative” explanation for the phantom of Podskalí (which all of a sudden was referred to as a “phantom” only in quotation marks) and appealed to the restraint and empathy of the readers of *Národní listy*:

There cannot be any doubts that this is some watchman or someone else known in the enclosure who is making a fool of the entire area and all its inhabitants, and he is laughing at how he cried wolf to the entire city of Prague and they fell for it. This much seems to be certain: concourses of people and police guards are most likely irritating the “phantom,” and because capturing it is very difficult it may still delude the public and bedevil the family of Mr. Procházka with its wanton pranks for a few more weeks. This second matter is serious, and should be acknowledged by the public so that it would not become a source of vexation for the entire neighborhood. No one there still pays attention to the “phantom’s” horns; just let the public understand that there is only one correct answer – to ignore the “phantom” and cease to disturb the peace of all of Podskalí (Pravda o strašidle v Podskalí 16 December 1874).

5. Podskalí Apparition in popular culture of the period

It appears that the case of the Podskalí phantom later brought about a paradigm shift in the contents of the newspaper. The following issues, for example, began to indulge readers’ appetite for emotions, which had been whipped up by the phantom’s rampage, with increasing reports of murders and other acts of violence in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and beyond. In conjunction with his banishment from print, this was the beginning of the phantom’s shift towards a comic figure of mass-mediated popular culture, at least for the middle classes. As early as 19 December 1874, this is how the Podskalí phantom was depicted in a comic poem by “Emanuel Pyšišvor” (the pseudonym of Czech humoristic writer Josef Hubáček) in *Humoristické listy*, which suggested ending the fruitless hunt

for the phantom with a raid by a “strong Podskalí fellow” who would catch the phantom and turn it over to the authorities (Pišišvor 1874: 252).⁵

The popularity of the Podskalí phantom was exploited by the popular culture of the period also in other ways. On New Year’s Eve 1874 an anonymously composed text printed as a broadside ballad was submitted to the censors. Composed in an intentionally archaicizing style with the humorous title of “Strassidlo w Podskalí” (*Apparition in Podskalí*), it reflected on the hunt for the phantom in comic fashion:

People, hearken to me
About what happened in Podskalí
On his perch a phantom set
Himself to play a tyke’s cornet.

At eventide it got dark fast
In Podskalí each person gasped
For the devil at such times
Did jab the phantom with his tines.

Tra-ra, too-too-too, like the horns of hunters
Then the clinks of horsemen’s spurs
All the phantom’s noisy riot
Rather robbed them of their quiet.
(Strassidlo w Podskalí 1875)⁶

⁵ Many thanks to researcher Jaromír Tlustý for informing me about the identity of the author.

⁶ The full title of the song was *Strassidlo w Podskalí. Ukrutná panychyda, sepsaná potmě u příwozu na postrach wssem newěrným pannám a růženečkářkám, a na výstrahu wssem trumpetrům od cibil i militér na swětlo boží wydaná od dwou se milujících Franclů*. Prague: Steinhauer a Novák, 1875. The translation of the text into English doggerel, using weak rhymes, slightly irregular rhythms, and deliberate archaisms, is proposed by Melinda Reidinger. The original Czech text is:

Poslechněte lidé málo,
co jest se v Podskalí stalo.
Usedlo tam na bidlo
s dětskou trubkou strašidlo.

Když byl večer, hned se smrklo,
v Podskalí to v každém hrklo,
neboť tu hned strašidlo
počal čert brát na šidlo.

Trará, tú-tú-tú jak z waldhorny,
pak zas jak když cinkaj šporny,
tak strašidlo dělalo
a pokoje nedalo.



Fig. 2. Anonymously composed broadside ballad lyric sheet for *Strašidlo v Podskalí* from 1875. Prague City Museum archives.



Fig. 3. Karel Bendl's polka *Strašidlo v Podskalí* from 1874. Prague City Museum archives.

This popular song, whose verses mocking the police's work led to a police investigation and its confiscation in 1875, went through several reprints and spread the fame of the Podskalí beyond the readership of *Národní listy*. The phantom's definitive entrée into popular culture was then confirmed by the humorous polka *Strašidlo v Podskalí / Gespenst im Podskal (Apparition in Podskalí)* (Bendl 1874), composed anonymously during the period of the phantom's escapades by a young Karel Bendl (Podskalský) (1837–1897), who was most likely, alongside Bedřich Smetana and Antonín Dvořák, the most popular Czech composer in the second half of the 19th century. The polka gained tremendous popularity on the

Czech scene and was regularly performed in numerous settings, ranging from street recitals to masquerade balls, *ridottos*, Carnival celebrations, and theater performances until the first few decades of the 20th century (Ypsilon 1923).

However, in the vernacular culture of the manually-laboring classes, this phenomenon did not fade away by any means. A mere two years later, in October 1876, the Podskalí panic repeated itself on a smaller scale in Holešovice on the outskirts of the opposite side of Prague. There, too, strange sounds emanating from an apartment building in that neighborhood began attracting crowds over a period of several days:

For a long time, it was unknown where the widely-traduced phantom of Podskalí had relocated to, until it appeared the previous week in immoderate measure here nearby. [...] It is not necessary to illustrate how a great many avid spectators gathered each evening in order to be convinced in person about the phantom's trumpeting, and everyone was in the dark about what it should mean (Z Holešovic 27 October 1876).

However, an official inspection of the building determined that a faulty gas meter was making the sounds every evening at the same time when the coal gas used for illumination was released into the service lines.

6. International parallels of the Podskalí apparition

In 1873, just a year before the appearance of the Podskalí phantom, the “Park Ghost”, one of the most celebrated local “incarnations” of the famous Victorian phantom Spring-heeled Jack, played havoc in the English city of Sheffield. This phantom's activities, which persisted for two whole months from Easter to Pentecost, were followed by crowds of up to two thousand people, most of whom were young male manual laborers. As in Podskalí, these crowds often entered into conflicts of various sizes with the guardians of law and order. According to folklorist David Clark, Spring-heeled Jack was a typical manifestation of the workers' culture of the period that drew inspiration for this vernacular festivity both from texts of oral culture and from the “new” literature popular among young men of the time, i.e. penny dreadful novels (Clarke 2006: 38). Like in Prague, the attitude of print publications of this period towards the Sheffield phantom, which ranged from patronizing humor to moralizing judgments of the vulgarity of working class entertainments, was significantly mediated through a middle-class lens. The Prague lens was slightly milder in its evaluation, clearly on account of *Národní listy's* “more plebian” readership and the less violence that occurred during the events in Podskalí. Another parallel with those events is the London panic of 1874, which took place in the Christ Church area of Westminster only six months before the events in Podskalí. This was clearly the largest ghost panic of the 19th century as over six thousand people were caught up in it after they had visited the site to admire a likeness of the alleged ghost that had been fashioned from white paper and left hanging from a tree (Davies 2007: 91).

Unlike those in Holešovice and Westminster, the mystery of the Podskalí phantom was never officially explained. In the decades that followed, this led to it being classified in the increasingly popular Fortean “paranormal” discourse. However, as with the vast majority of similar ghost or poltergeist phenomena, these events were most likely a prank played by an unknown actor who, in all

likelihood, was an inhabitant of the “haunted” house on Podskalská Street. As the folklorist and historian Owen Davies mentions in his social history of ghosts, mysterious sounds or knocking and banging sounds have been typical manifestations of gender-defined “domestic” hauntings, which take place in the intimate space of the homes of young girls and women, who, historically, have most often been maids or other household help (Davies 2007: 172–175).⁷ Even to this day, poltergeist activities are characterized by their close relationship with the domestic environment and a clear social profile, as has been illustrated by recent comparative research conducted on over 200 contemporary cases of poltergeists in Great Britain and Germany, nearly two thirds of which were related to women, 78% of whom were under twenty years of age. According to Davies, the main motivation for these activities throughout history – besides the rebellious tendencies of adolescents – is an attempt to affect power relations within the family or household in a symbolic manner. In the past, these relations were further amplified by the social inequality between servants and their masters (Davies 2007: 177). However, “male” haunting, as opposed to “female” haunting, was historically differentiated by a stronger link with public spaces such as streets, parks, and cemeteries, though both of these gender-defined practices held the same potential for evoking the phenomenon of the “prowling ghost”. Ultimately, the Podskalí phantom is the most emphatic example of this. At the same time, however, as Jacob Middleton points out, we should not take the phenomenon of prowling ghosts as merely a joke or hoax but as a distinctive cultural practice in the form of a social “game” in which those who passed themselves off as ghosts, and those who went out to look for or to listen to them, were voluntarily acting in appropriate social roles that were firmly connected with the culture of the manually-laboring classes (Middleton 2014: XIII).

7. The Phantom of Libeň of the Belle Époque

More than thirty years later a similar phenomenon appeared on the outskirts of Prague close to the boundary between the working class quarters of Holešovice and Libeň. In 1907 the press was captivated by a new phantom that, unlike the phantom of Podskalí, is half-forgotten today. The Libeň apparition ran amok for several days in these outlying quarters of Prague, both of which had haunting grounds in the industrial periphery of the metropolis that associated them closely with the “modern” working-class culture. What set this latter-day legend apart from the Podskalí Apparition was that the phantom took a primarily human form and had a distinct appearance. Other details, such as the alleged use of phosphorus to explain its mysterious glow, are also worthy of note. Reports of the Libeň phantom appeared in both the early popular publication *Pražský illustrovaný kurýr*, intended for a broad spectrum of readers,⁸ and the middle-class *Národní politika*. In its morning edition of 20 January 1907, the latter published its first report under the sensational title “A Phantom on the Libeň Bridge” [*Strašidlo na libeňském mostě*]:

⁷ On the history of “poltergeist” cultural practices, see Davies (2007: 90).

⁸ For more on this periodical, see Machek (2009).

Libeň has been gripped by terror. The Libeň bridge is haunted, not by the legendary “horse head on chicken feet” but by a spook, a truly scary spook. This is how it happened: on Tuesday night a law-abiding and god-fearing citizen, who until the last moment had been paying reverence to the foaming Gambrinus brew in the Carnival festivities somewhere on the other side of the Libeň pile bridge, was grunting out a waggish song, stopping every once in a while to tame his frolicsome legs, which continually ran ahead of his body. Before his eyes appeared the lovely faces of beautiful masks, and in this state of mind the law-abiding little citizen stumbled towards the bridge, which he began – in a very un-engineerlike way to measure the width and length of. When he was almost at the end of it, he overheard a muffled sigh. He halted and the blood froze in his veins – his legs were perilously tangled up, and he fell with a shriek of horror on the ground. Woe unto him! Before him stood a spook, a real spook, long, emaciated, and billowing, which held a red railroad lantern in its outstretched arms. And from him was emitted a horrible wheezing, thudding, and shrieking ... Pedestrians in the morning found the dear citizen lying unconscious on the bridge (Strašidlo na libeňském mostě, 20 January 1907).

The report continued with a description of further encounters with this alleged apparition that contained ironizing references to the intoxication of those involved, a tale explaining how the light on an approaching train is mistaken for a ghost, and the motif, with ironic effect, of a woman scolding her drunken husband after he returns home from the festivities:

The second case. A man who had enjoyed more than a few drinks went at night from Libeň to Holešovice. At the end of the bridge, just in front of him rose up a terrible phantom, which began to pound him mercilessly. The man flew in mortal terror, with the phantom after him. He runs, breathless, into his home, and the phantom, please, goes in there after him, and it shouted until the neighbors converged on the spot: “I’ll teach you, you rogue, to come back so late from the pub!” (And wicked tongues, of course allege that it was his wife) (Strašidlo na libeňském mostě 20 January 1907).

The article ends with an awkward “rationalizing” explanation for the phenomenon, fabricated by the journalists and featuring the popular motif of the phosphorescent phantom of the period. This (rather untrustworthy) explanation applies the ironic detachment from the entire incident (probably a manifestation of the typical aggressive behavior of a prowling ghost) displayed by middle-class journalists towards a phenomenon that would today be termed a hidden or contextual advertisement (a type of public relations communication that utilizes a contemporary sensation to promote a cultural event).

These nocturnal incidents quickly spread throughout Libeň, striking terror into the hearts of many of its inhabitants. Every living soul gives this bridge a wide berth at night. The mystery of the nighttime spectacle there was finally explained by a thoroughly reliable witness. He is said to have seen a tremendous dog that was running around on the Libeň bridge and giving off a phosphoric glow. This dog, as is well known, had

run away from the Libeň theater after a performance of the detective play “The Hound of the Baskervilles”, where it plays an important role, and it was running around the bridge at night. Because it had been painted with phosphorus, it terrified so many otherwise courageous people. This dog is a magnificent example of the Leonberg breed borrowed from “The World of Animals” and it is possible to see him every Sunday afternoon and evening in the Libeň performance of the “Hound of the Baskervilles” play mentioned above, where he will thrill you with horror with his stage performance. It is only natural that his appearance on the Libeň bridge evoked this hoax of a “phantom of Libeň” (Strašidlo na libeňském mostě, 20 January 1907).

This explanation for the case was then taken up by the even more skeptical *Pražský ilustrovaný kurýř*, which perceived the entire affair purely as a competition between the Holešovice and Libeň workers’ theaters:

Since Monday, Libeň has been steeped in an uncommonly powerful excitement. It has been said that at the Libeň end of the pile bridge a phantom robs nighttime pedestrians of their courage to walk across the bridge. The phantom also engages in other shenanigans which allegedly aim at dissuading the local citizenry from visits to the “Uranie” theater so that they would instead patronize their local one. The most recent reports of the phantom, an illustration of which we provide for you on the basis of eyewitness accounts, indicate that it has already been captured (Strašidlo v Libni 17 January 1907).

Libeňské strašidlo.

(Dělal na úrbě slonák.)

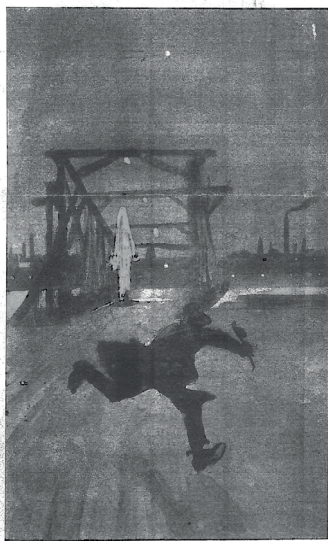


Fig. 4. The phantom of Libeň of 1907, as imagined by an illustrator for *Pražský ilustrovaný kurýř*. Private archive of Petr Janeček.

The phantom of Libeň had a sequel of an exclusively auditory nature reminiscent of its predecessor from Podskalí. Unlike the latter, however, the mystery was explained by the guardians of law and order. Indeed, a memorial to the phantom has even become an exhibit in the Czech Police Museum in Prague:

Besides these silent witnesses against the most serious offenders, the Police Museum also boasts of various other curiosities, such as the “Libeň Phantom”, which rampaged for a fairly long time and aroused fear in the neighborhood of the haunted house. Always after midnight a wooden leg of the “murdered” awakened the sleeping inhabitants of the house and they say the echoing of its steps was horrific. However, the police did not recoil from the mysterious phantom, and in their investigations they discovered that the problem was a strange door knocker that had been deviously placed in the attic. The knocker was confiscated and stored in the museum of crime and the haunted house was relieved of fear and fright (UH 1939).

8. Conclusion

The prowling ghosts of Prague of 1874, 1876 and 1907 were utilized socially as two very different cultural practices. For the working classes, these hauntings were used as vernacular spectacles and improvised festivities linked to pranks, the symbolic occupation of public space, and Czech nationalism. For the middle classes and period newspapers loyal to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, unruly mobs converging on the sites of supposed hauntings were a threat to established social norms and triggered both moral panic and public scorn of the “ghost hunters”. However, this attitude changed very quickly when these events entered popular culture in the form of popular songs and, later, memoirs and literature. Between the Belle Époque of the early 20th century and the First World War, these famous Prague hauntings became the staple for nostalgic longing in the last few decades of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Like their more famous British parallel, the prowling ghost named Spring-heeled Jack, the Prague phantoms were the product of a distinctive hybridization between the primarily oral vernacular culture of the “traditional” countryside and the gradually-emerging, more sophisticated working-class culture of the metropolis. Distanced from fantastic rural demons and the realistic subject matter of workers’ everyday lives, and standing midway between the folk beliefs of the traditional countryside and the rumors of the modern metropolis, these half-human, half-demonic phantoms of suburbia were a symbolic manifestation of a wide range of social processes associated with urbanization and industrialization. This manifestation in the form of a distinctive urban demonology was soon adopted by new forms of popular culture and became a nationwide literary tradition.

The Podskalí phantom, the Libeň phantom, and other hauntings that appeared with growing frequency on the industrialized outskirts of urban centers in the 19th century and *fin-de-siècle* manifested themselves among a cultural echelon that after the First World War organically embraced the figure of the Spring Man of Prague, a peculiar national manifestation of the originally British urban ghost, Spring-heeled Jack, that became the most famous Czech phantom of the 20th century (Janeček 2020). With the advent of this migratory urban legend, the old pre-First World War ghosts ceased to be active in oral communicative memory and moved towards the more static cultural memory of literature and memoirs.

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