

HEALERS AND HEALING SKILLS IN THE RYZHKOVO VIRONIAN COMMUNITY

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Abstract: This article explores the implementation of folk medical practices and procedures in the *Viru* (i.e. Estonian and Finnish) group in the village of Ryzhkovo, founded as a mixed Lutheran settlement in Western Siberia around 1803. The material is based on the author's fieldwork in 1999, 2000 and 2004. Despite the currently multi-national and multi-ethnic nature of the village, Ryzhkovo still maintains separate territories for Latvians and Vironians – the Latvian side and the Vironian side. *Viru*, the term originally used by the Finns to refer to the people living in North-Estonia, has obtained a wider meaning and is used as a self-designation for both Estonians and Finns in Ryzhkovo.

Since healing skills are perceived as heritage-related knowledge shared by a group, passed on from generation to generation, available to all and attainable by anyone, folk healers do not stand out much in the Ryzhkovo Vironian community. In a multicultural and lingual environment, there is also quite a lot that is borrowed from neighbours. In part, the survival of folk medical practices and procedures has been supported by actual practical needs. The decline of tradition has been induced by the prolonged socio-political pressure on folk healers, the effective development of the national health care system, and the attitudes within the group itself that have mainly accepted healers of respectable age. Changes are manifest in the modification of healing procedures resulting in a narrower selection of spell types and texts available. Nevertheless, in today's conditions of greater political and economic freedom, there tends to be an increasing interest in folk medical practices and procedures.

Key words: community, folk medicine, healer, multiculturality, Siberia, spell

RYZHKOVO VILLAGE AND THE VIRONIAN COMMUNITY: BACKGROUND AND LINGUISTIC SITUATION

Ryzhkovo is the oldest mixed Lutheran colony in Western Siberia (currently Krutinskii region, Omsk oblast), founded approximately in 1803 by people deported by the Russian Tsar, with additional voluntary settlers arriving later. The people relocated to Ryzhkovo were mainly Lutherans – Estonians, Latvians, Germans, Swedes, Finns – and also Ingrians and Orthodox Russians. By the end of the 20th century, Ryzhkovo had become a multicultural and multilingual village with approximately 750 inhabitants. Russians, whose numbers

had increased considerably after World War II, had become the majority group (ca 400). Second and third by population were Latvians (ca 145) and Estonians (ca 115), both still enjoying their own territory in the village. With regard to other Lutheran groups originally populating the village, the statistics of the village council refers to German inhabitants (approx. 20), leaving Finns and Swedes unmentioned. The villagers, however, did not consider the official data to be accurate, suggesting there were people of nearly twenty nationalities, Finns included, living in the village. According to the Finns from the Om settlement, it was dangerous for the Finnish and Ingrian people to define themselves as such after World War II and the Russo-Finnish Winter War, thus they assumed Russian names, and marked 'Estonian' as their nationality (SKSÄ 155; 1991). The actual russification of names had already commenced along with the creation of village council population registries in 1924 (Viikberg 1998: 87). Identity changes, or double identities brought about by political or economic pressures of the new resident country, are relatively common among immigrants all over the world; e.g., the Kvens in Norway (Sulkala 2002: 217). Siberian Finns have provided an addition to the local Estonian community. Sharing similar languages and cultures, the Ryzhkovo Estonians and Finns have gradually become collectively known as Vironians; elsewhere in Siberia, *virulane* (Vironian) is the self-identification term exclusively used by Estonians. From the very beginning, mixed marriages have been common in the initially Lutheran villages in Siberia. Thus, a current Ryzhkovo inhabitant may descend from Estonians, Latvians, Finns and Germans, making it difficult to instantly define one's ethnic status. With regard to ethnic identity, it is indeed possible for a person living in the contact area of several cultures to identify oneself with two or more ethnic groups. The blurring of the Ryzhkovo Vironians' ethnic identity has been escalated by the unconventional development of the settlers' linguistic environment: unlike elsewhere in Siberia today, the older inhabitants of Ryzhkovo of Latvian, Estonian, and Finnish descent do not use Russian to communicate with each other, nor does any other language dominate in the village. The Ryzhkovo Lutherans understand each other's languages, they can all use their most native tongue – or switch to another, should the situation so demand. Despite this, the Ryzhkovo Vironians can be considered a separate lore group.

HEALING SKILLS AS GROUP FOLK KNOWLEDGE

I analyze the use of folk medical practices and procedures, and the status of a healer in the Ryzhkovo *Viru* group, relying mainly on the judgments of community members. I have observed these since my first Siberian fieldwork in

1991, to the Estonian villages of Verkhni Suetuk (Upper Suetuk) and Verkhnaia Bulanka (Upper Bulanka) in the Minussinsk region of Eastern Siberia. As I continued my fieldwork in the Estonian communities in Siberia, I concluded that healing skills are still part of the general group folk knowledge there and not an exclusive domain of a few select individuals. The tradition has remained strong in the older Siberian Estonian/Lutheran villages founded 150–200 years ago (Upper Suetuk, Upper Bulanka, Ryzhkovo), and also in some newer villages founded approximately a century ago (e.g., Berezovka in Tomsk Oblast, Lileika in Omsk Oblast). The situation was very much different from what I was experiencing during fieldwork in Estonia. At the same time, in Estonia, the use of ethnomedical procedures and especially of word magic was much less topical.

PROFESSIONAL MEDICINE AND FOLK MEDICINE

Professional medicine and folk medicine have developed in constant interaction. From the perspective of a Ryzhkovo patient, the difference between the two is not that great. Thus, the local Vironians can easily place the healer's medicine next to the medication prescribed by a doctor:

[--] *The same as the hospital medicine, they're all sealed, same's this, so the air won't get in. Keep in a dark place, all them medicines, can't let the light get 'em.* [--] EFA, CD 462 (14) < woman, born 1926.

In order to comparatively study the folk medicine skills in Ryzhkovo, we must first explore the relevant definitions. From the early days of professional scientific medicine, attempts have been made to define its relationship with folk medicine. Professional medics are university/medical school graduates and recognized by society, whereas folk medicine is based on community or family heritage, empirical experience, supernatural revelation. Today, terms such as ethnomedicine and traditional medicine are used instead and in addition to the concept of folk medicine (see Rørbye 2003: 12). The Norwegian researcher Stein Mathisen (1989: 64–65) has explained the difference between professional and folk medicine via terminology used therein: in professional medicine, we have concepts such as *disease, cure, diagnosis, rehabilitation*; in folk medicine, the relevant counterparts would be *ill (wrong), heal, miracle*; professional medicine is official, folk medicine unofficial; as methods and practices, professional medicine prefers drugs and surgery, folk medicine prayers and spells.

S. R. Mathisen underlines that professional medicine is based on biochemical treatment of the patient and accepted laws of nature, yet his definition of

folk medicine is fragmentary – by emphasizing word magic, he excludes herbal treatment, massage, etc. (see also Kõiva 1995: 177).

The preference, for one or the other direction during different eras, has depended on several factors. For example, at the end of the 18th century, there was only one doctor for each county in Estonia, and it was difficult for even the estate-owners to get medical help (Põvvat 1992: 48). In 1883, there were only 53 district doctors in the whole of Finland (Honko 1982: 62). Therefore, the transmission of folk healing skills and the emergence of healers during that period were necessitated by practical need.

The French researcher Michel Foucault, having studied the history of psychiatrics, claimed that increased significance of state-provided health service and that of the medical profession resulted in protests from professional doctors against wisemen and conjurers (Foucault 2003: 463). Likewise, in connection with the national awakening period in Estonia during the second half of the 19th century, folk medicine was being superseded as a non-scientific practice. Qualified medical help, however, remained largely unobtainable for country people up until the 1920s (Kõivupuu 2000: 171). Looking back on the early days of Lutheran/Estonian villages in Siberia, it must be stressed that people had no opportunity to turn to trained doctors. Johannes Granö, a pastor in Western Siberia as of 1885, noted that the inhabitants had nowhere to go to get help against diseases (Skyttä 1967: 60). Since the 1890s, until the banning of all religious practices after the Red October Coup, the church welfare service offered temporary relief in Ryzhkovo by tending to the sick and the poor (see Granö 1999: 129). Naturally, this was not a solution for more severe illnesses.

In addition to the lack of doctors, (e.g., the medical station in Yenissei District, Krasnoyarsk Krai served 63 settlements), medical help in Siberia was unobtainable because of the remoteness of these backwoods and taiga villages. In a questionnaire, filled in after the October Revolution, a native of Aruküla village in Tobolsk Gubernia reportedly answered the question about hospitals and the availability of medical services by stating that the hospital is “in the charnel house and nowhere else” and that medical services are available “in Heaven” (Maamägi 1980: 18). In remote Siberian villages as Ryzhkovo (where travelling depends greatly on the weather, as there are still no paved roads), one cannot always count on outside help even today.

The triumph of national health care can be associated with the new generation of medication – antibiotics – after World War II (Kleinman: 1980), and probably also with several other factors, such as enhanced availability of treatment, continuous awareness-raising, etc. Whatever the case in Estonia, the popularity of folk doctors and miracle healers decreased considerably in the 1930s (Kõiva 1995: 176).

Apparently, national medical services reached the village of Ryzhkovo in the 1930s. Intrinsicly of the Soviet system, attempts were made to introduce new treatment practices by banning the old ones, yet in a village with strong folk traditions, such bans were not particularly successful. A Russian doctor sent to a Siberian village was still a stranger, and although the command of the Russian language was not a problem for Vironians, the stranger was never trusted blindly. Even today, the belief that national health care cannot be trusted in the case of certain illnesses (e.g., St. Anthony's fire, sickness from wind, water, earth, or evil eye) is prevalent in Ryzhkovo.

Relying on the materials collected in Norway, Bente G. Alver and Torunn Selberg have concluded that the interest in alternative medicine, even in countries with well-developed health care systems, has not decreased, despite better health care systems and increased availability of medical treatment (Alver & Selberg 1989: 207). The impotence of professional medicine is most apparent when it comes to diseases of folk etiology.

The national health care system in the Soviet Union underwent rapid development after World War II, as a result of which a local hospital was opened in Ryzhkovo:

[---] *First there was a Russian doctor, well in my younger days I knew a Litovkin, then a woman came, well she wasn't 'ere long. Vobshe [in general] women weren't 'ere long, but now already, well, Van'a I've had since '43, well since '46, then already had an akusherka [midwife] and doctors and even a nurse in that hospital, and. And then it took off, for a while they vobshe had a head doctor and had patients lying in the hospital there. [---] EFA, CD 458 (16) < woman, born 1923.*

The authorities denounced folk medicine as obsolete, and the best-known healers found themselves on persecution lists:

Well, then they started to mock the old women, wouldn't let 'em heal anymore. They weren't allowed then. They're afraid. Now, now no longer, no longer afraid, but then afraid they were. Back then, you said a word and they could lock you up. [---] EFA, CD 465 (29) < woman, born 1927.

Still, the numerous Estonian healers in Siberia were never subjected to quite as strong a pressure as the North Siberian shamans. Ethnologist Laur Vallikivi has described how Soviet authorities persecuted shamans – they were declared enemies of the people, profiting at the expense of others, and causing harm to people instead of healing them. Their ritual items were confiscated, shamans were imprisoned or deported (Vallikivi 2005: 41). The social status of a healer did not equal to that of a shaman. Consideration has to be given to the fact that

while there were many healers in the villages, their activities were less visible and less attractive than these of the shamans, however, the awareness of a potential punishment for practicing their skills must have affected the transmission of lore. The healing practices were illegal until the beginning of the 1980s, when L. Brezhnev allowed folk doctors to practice freely.

According to Mare Kõiva, who has studied Estonian folk healers, favourable times for folk medicine and healers arrived when the continuity in the tradition of folk healing had already been interrupted in most places in Estonia (Kõiva 1995: 183). Today's stressful life in Estonia has revitalized the activities of folk healers, including non-traditional ones. Similar processes can also be observed in Ryzhkovo.

HEALING SKILLS AS GENERAL KNOWLEDGE

Similarly to many other Siberian villages, the healing skills among the Ryzhkovo *Viru* group are applied as general collective knowledge rather than being the domain of a few wisemen, even today.

[---] *We got plenty of 'em in the village. [---] Vedoma Mari knows, Miku Anni knows, Petju Helena knows, her Poljaka, Ignatovicha Mari knows, Pauliina knows, well, who else knows around here, that Pahmernyi Vilma knows at this end [of the village]: against St. Anthony's fire, startling, evil eye, stabbing pain ... Well they know, people know a lot. Even Naaritsa Sanja knows. [---] EFA, CD 459 (5) < woman, born 1913.*

The last person on the list, Naaritsa Sanja, is a generation younger than the others mentioned, and is included by the informant in an attempt to emphasize the continuity of transmission of healing skills.

In earlier times, a multitude of healers has been a common phenomenon elsewhere as well, for example in Finland, where there were up to 40,000 healers at the beginning of the 19th century; by the end of the century, the relevant figure was approximately 7,000 (Lönnrot 1981 [1839]; Paju 1989: 81). In Estonia, the use of healing words was widely spread at the beginning of the 20th century; over the last hundred years, there have been about 700 persons reported as engaged in folk medicine in the Võnnu parish alone (Kõiva 1995: 176). The first statistics on Estonian folk healers date back to the 1920s; for example, in 1925, there were 395 healers in the country according to an archival record (Põvvat 1992: 48). According to the first national census of Russia, there were over 500 unlicensed medical practitioners in the Tobolsk Gubernia in 1897 (Perepis' 1905: 228–229, 248–249).

However, it is probable that the census data and other archive materials fail to reflect the actual situation in Estonia or elsewhere. It seems likely that healing spells have not been a tradition solely confined to persons with particular skills or features, as claimed by some researchers (e.g. Kõivupuu 2000: 35, Kõiva 1992: 117). Apparently, such knowledge can be considered restricted lore only in certain regions or persons.

Based on the information obtained from Siberian Estonians during the last decade of the 20th century (the data from earlier times is inconclusive or non-existent), one could argue that at the time, the knowledge of word magic among Siberian Estonians, who had grown up under the influence of their Russian Orthodox neighbours, was much more common than in their Estonian homeland. Relying on her research materials, collected in 1980 on folk medical practices in the Võnnu parish, Mare Kõiva claims that repatriate Estonians from the villages behind Lake Peipsi returned as carriers of considerably more archaic tradition (Kõiva 1995: 183).

Nevertheless, the transmission of healing words was dealt with greater caution in the Siberian villages of South-Estonian origin (e.g., Semenovka, Zolotaia Niva) (see Korb 1996: 12) than in those settled by the descendants of North-Estonians. In homeland Estonia, the situation seems analogical: in Southern Estonia, the healing spells have been a more restricted part of the lore than in the northern part of the country.

TRANSFER AND RECEIPT OF HEALING SKILLS AND WORDS IN THE RYZHKOVO VIRONIAN COMMUNITY, AND THE MOTIVATION BEHIND THIS

The members of specific lore groups/families acquire certain parts of the folk medical knowledge through the oral tradition process. Among the Vironians in Ryzhkovo, healing words and skills are passed on in the same way as any knowledge of tradition – songs, stories, folk calendar related customs, etc. A similar situation has been highlighted by Vladimir Templing (2005: 215), a Russian researcher who has studied the folk traditions of Russian village communities in Siberia. Naturally, there are more, and less so, capable people with healing skills to be found in every community, including the *Viru* group – just as there are more and less capable people among storytellers, songsters, and specialists in folk customs.

When I asked the Ryzhkovo Vironians if anyone could become a healer, the rather general opinion in the village was this:

[---] *yes, they could. Anyone. See, if ya want, ya ask. She'll write ya down and ya read and can heal people.* [---] EFA, CD 459 (8) < woman, born 1913.

According to another relatively popular belief, the words can be passed on only to younger people:

Well can be, to a younger one. Not to an older one, but younger one. Can teach whomever. EFA, CD 447 (34) < woman, born 1928.

[---] *Words of god they are. You can teach them to anyone. [---] Who wants to learn, let 'em learn. Words of god can be taught to everyone.* [---] EFA, CD 472 (22) < woman, born 1921

The claim that these are words of god and can be passed on freely is rather common in the older Siberian villages. The identification of spells with the word of god is probably influenced by the fact that, in the European cultural space, rewritings of the Gospels, parts of prayers, etc. have been used as spells for centuries (Kõiva 1998: 200). The Our Father prayer has also been used as a spell, expected to stabilize any critical situation (Kõiva 1999: 118), and the material gathered from the Vironians of Ryzhkovo confirms this. The understanding that god's help is available to all through healing words is the basis for another belief common in Ryzhkovo: *no price can be put on god's help.* EFA, CD 451 (10) < woman, born 1922.

In the local context, this would mean that the healer asks for nothing in return for help, naturally, it does not mean that in-kind donations or money would be denied as an expression of gratitude. Such a standpoint – god's help has no price – is similar to that of healers who feel to be the channels through which the help of god is conveyed to people, as explained by B. G. Alver and T. Selberg (1989: 211).

Quite logically, the aforementioned belief is related to the widely spread notion that a healer can only help a baptized person – someone who has been granted the protection of the heavenly forces (e.g. Valk 1998: 141). In the Ryzhkovo *Viru* community, it is often noted that *healing words will not work on those of little faith*, and, to prove that, many informants can readily offer a specific example:

[---] *Our Andre was little, he was ill and as soon as Liida went t' see the old woman, she asks whether he's baptized or not. Liida says no. First she baptized him, then started to heal him.* [---] EFA, CD 464 (25) < woman, born 1927.

THE RYZHKOVO HEALERS

With regard to their main treatment methods, folk healers have been categorized as follows:

- 1) healers who perform treatment in an ecstatic state,
- 2) verbalists, i.e. healers who employ words and spells,
- 3) herbalists, i.e. healers who use plants,
- 4) manual therapists, i.e. healers who use their hands (e.g. Tuovinen 1984).

In practice, healers often use a combination of different healing methods, yet with some individuals or for certain treatments, a single method may dominate. I have not encountered healers who would enter an ecstatic state among Siberian Estonians.

In Ryzhkovo, it is believed that healing skills can be acquired by anyone who so desires. Thus, the notion of folk healers as marginal persons and conspicuous looks, who have been given their healing skills either at birth or through divine revelation or religious experience, does not apply to the *Viru* group, although based on materials collected in Estonia, many researchers have referred to this (see Kõivupuu 2000: 53; Paju 1989: 81). The Ryzhkovo Vironians attribute supernatural powers to wisemen who knew cattle magic, could capture thieves, etc., and to witches (popularly known as *kaldun*, *galdunja*) who could cause the sickness or death of human beings or animals. In Ryzhkovo, there is a marked difference between wisemen and witches (regarding the terms, see Eisen 1919: 14; Laugaste 1936: 516–524), and both are mostly referred to in the past tense. The stories about Ryzhkovo folk healers may indeed emphasize the healer's ability to handle supernatural and common everyday ills, however, the narrator would always underline that the relevant skills have been acquired by learning.

Based on his knowledge of folk healers in Russian village communities in Siberia, Vladimir Templing states that this vital survival knowledge, including ethnomedical practices, is often acquired as a teenager. Reportedly, some youngsters have started to use their healing skills at an early stage, thus we have reports of some young healers (e.g. Templing 2005: 214, 226). However, according to the general belief, people expected healers to be of a rather respectable age. The 1929 data on Estonia indicates that most healers were older than 40 (Rooks 1929: 378). Bearing in mind the relevant data collected in Estonia and Ryzhkovo, we can conclude that due to their limited life experience, it was difficult for young healers to gain respect in a traditional village society, and on the other hand, the young people who welcomed the new and the modern would often be unwilling to become a healer. In Ryzhkovo, an older informant

was still bitterly regretting the dismissal of her mother's advice to learn healing words:

[---] *My Momma would always say, Liisa, go write down those remedies. I'd say, I'm no grandma to write that down. But now I could've used it all.* [---] EFA, CD 451 (10) < woman, born 1922.

Similar records can also be found among the Estonian materials in the Estonian Folklore Archives:

Grandmother M. Vuks used to say that she would have loved to pass on all that healing wisdom, but one can't pass it on to the next generation. And wanted to give those words to me, but me – I was young and full of pride – such old superstitions. [---] RKM II 395, 341 (1) < Võnnu (1986).

The latter archival message also points to the widespread belief that before dying, a healer must select a follower to pass on the magic words and healing knowledge. Judging by the material recorded among the Ryzhkovo Vironians, it appears that this obligation was eliminated due to the abundance of healers and the free transmission of healing skills to anyone interested.

With regard to the instances of unsuccessful healing attempts, and the relevant reasons, the Ryzhkovo *Viru* tradition has had a deep-rooted understanding that from among the abundant healers, the patient has to find the one who heals *by blood*.

[---] *Everyone can't help everyone. It's the same with the Anthony's fire... Some read the words and it starts hurting more. Someone whose blood is not in line with this or doesn't...*

– So you must be keen to make sure whose reading helps you?

– *Well you read and if it helps, it helps right away. But if it doesn't help, you can't go there any more, it'd start hurting more right away, you feel it.* EFA, CD 468 (5) < woman, born 1915.

The Ryzhkovo material also confirms the widely spread notion that the healing power will vanish once healers lose their teeth and when their health deteriorates (for corresponding material from Võrumaa, see Kõivupuu 2000: 55):

But they themselves say the cures of those won't work who have no teeth left in their mouth. [---] EFA, CD 475 (22) < woman, born 1927.

Despite that knowledge, some Ryzhkovo healers, like Mari Vedom who had lost her teeth and could barely walk, have kept using healing words during the

last years of their lives, hoping that the spells might still help the ill. Another prevalent belief is that healers cannot cure themselves, yet some Ryzhkovo healers have nevertheless been successful in this.

ILLNESS EXPLANATIONS AND HEALING PRACTICES IN THE COMMUNITY

Throughout time and among different peoples, the search for the cause of an illness has played an important part in curing it (Honko 1960: 83–84). According to folk belief, most illnesses are induced by wind, water, earth, the dead, the evil eye, or witchcraft. Since illnesses fear the unveiling of their names and origin, the identification of the particular disease could be interpreted as healing (Manninen 1925: 453; Loorits 1990: 61–66). Some of the most popular healing principles, known also in the Ryzhkovo *Viru* community, are as follows:

- 1) the medical remedy must originate from the same place as the illness;
- 2) the medical remedy must be similar to the symptoms or the affected area;
- 3) the medical remedy must be stronger than the illness in order to drive it away or kill it (Manninen 1925: 455–458).

The following Ryzhkovo healing practices can be seen as based on the aforementioned concepts, e.g. when treating a child suffering from dog sickness (gulping and eating like a dog):

[---] Where a dog has died and I know it for certain, and has rotted away, or well is still there, you move it and then go there to rub the child, kinda just rub him on that spot. But the child will have, well it's a big spot, that's what is called dog sickness. Three times must go, or nine, and the child becomes healthy. [---] EFA, CD 459 (20) < woman, born 1913.

For water-induced itchy skin rash, the treatment was to rub it with salt, and for better results, healing words were also required. The salt had to be thrown back into water at the same spot where the illness was thought to have originated from.

For the treatment of stabbing pains, stabbing instruments were used:

But if ye have stabbin', they put nine needles. See, nine needles in a cup they put, water and nine needles inside. But I didn't watch and I don't

know if they put, must ask Helena, if they put them point up or point down. Then they read on that, and then must drink the water. Or then how they do it, some just read, give water, others stab a knife where it hurts. Heal it in all kinds of ways. Oh yes! EFA, CD 459 (23) < woman, born 1913.

The magical procedure had to be carried out three times, with the spell repeated the same number of times. The substance or item, necessary for treatment, was taken in quantities of three or nine – all this is typical in the tradition of many different nations (see Mansikka 1929; SKVR 1908–1948).

In the case of spells based on numbers, often used to treat skin diseases (e.g. erysipelas), traumas (strained abdominal muscle), stomach-ache (stabbing shots), sicknesses with mythological backgrounds (stroke, lumbago), various problems of the mind (e.g. shock), the prevailing remedy is to count from one to nine and/or backwards from nine to one (Kõiva 1999: 116–118).

Verbalization of healing words almost inaudibly is common in Ryzhkovo, too, although this is not associated with the loss of magical powers that may result from reading them out loud. According to common belief, spells were not supposed to be audibly verbalized as the healer would have lost his/her healing power and the spell would not work. However, in this Siberian village, people were not afraid of losing the magical power, nevertheless, the words were read quietly, almost inaudibly (regarding the same tradition in Estonia, see Kõivupuu 2000: 174)

A tendency of fading tradition can be noted in the medical practices and spells of the Ryzhkovo Vironians. For example, there are said to be nine types of erysipelas, but commonly, people can only list three: blue, white, and red, occasionally also black. The illness descriptions are very similar to each other. The most common practice for treating erysipelas, popularly known as “the rose”, is to read healing words on water or on a piece of red cloth. Generally, it is known that the healing water must contain salt and nine pieces of coal, but in the present-day tradition, the coal is often omitted or the procedure is modified by throwing a lit match in the water.

The words of the “rose spell” for treating erysipelas are known to many people, but the most frequent texts used in Ryzhkovo are the modifications of the most prevalent type of incantation, “Three roses”. Likewise, Andra Veidemann has classified the same type as being the most prevalent in Estonia (Veidemann 1985: 141):

*Jesus came down from Mount Sinai,
Holding three roses.
One was blue, one was red, and the third was white.*

*He dropped the blue, he dropped the red,
He dropped the white.*

*The flowers were without tops above, without hearts inside, without roots
below.*

*Go down, go down, go down under the rock,
Beneath the roots of nine juniper trees.*

Amen.

*These must be read three on tea, or read on it [the sore spot], or read on
a rag three times, too. And then spit on the ground: "All shits get away
from me!" Spit to the left: "May all shits get away from me, may my
health return!" EFA I 38, 123 (7) < woman, born 1913.*

Older, dialogue-based spell types (see Kõiva 1992: 124) are rare in Ryzhkovo today. For example, stabbing pain is treated by way of using the following method:

*[---] I asked her: Why you stab? But she says, I stab for stabbing. Then you
must ask three times: Why you stab? – For stabbing. – Why you stab? –
For stabbing. So, so, and so and so. And then she says: I stab forever and
for all life. And then reads into water and offers a drink and it gets better.
[---] EFA, CD 459 (6) < woman, born 1913.*

The *frost sickness* (see Korb 1998: 63–65), well-known in Om settlements, is unknown among the Vironians in Ryzhkovo, however, from older tradition, the names, explanations, and treatments for the mythological illness *lendva* (*lendva*) have remained amazingly vital here. Though, having lost some of its archaic features, *lendva* remains to be a diverse tradition still believed in today, with old remedies and methods being used in the treatment. *Lendva* stands for sudden severe pain in the lower back that can hit a person or an animal previously considered perfectly healthy, and the condition may be lethal.

*[---] Lendva, see, ain't been long, second year now, when in our street,
there where my farm is, there was such a strong man Gulbi Valodja, but
now it is only Mari staying in that farm. Took the cows out in the morn-
ing and went to get grass for the horse, healthy strong red man, I can't
tell, ain't many men like that, he went out healthy and came back, could
hardly get inside and [said he feels] sick, sick, fell on the sofa and died,
because of that lendva. Many know about lendva in our village. [---] If it
strikes your temple or your heart, you fall and die right away. EFA, CD
459 (10) < woman, born 1913.*

Lendva is thought to be caused by a malevolent person. In Ryzhkovo, the illness is not explained by way of an arrow released by a witch (e.g. Loorits 1990: 63; EE 1990), instead, it is associated with forced actions of certain people

(called *goldunja*) who, having acquired the relevant skill, can never get rid of this.

[---] *She let out the ill, lendva or how you say it. [---] Upon animals and upon people. Well they saw her do it. The hair was pulled down on the shoulders and she was blowing to one side and the other and. True or not, I don't know. That's what people said.*

– What happens when you have *lendva*?

– *Well you get sick, when it hit an animal, the animal or cow got sick right away. Won't eat and cold air start coming from the mouth and.* [---]

– Those who create *lendva*, do they mean it to hit someone in particular or does it just go?

– *Well she lets it out in the wind, where ever that blows. [---] Well there are words of course, sure. [---] She's learnt it, they say can't rest in peace. She must do it. [---] Well she I think [---] had let Auld Horny inside herself. [---] EFA, CD 451 (11) < woman, born 1922.*

However, according to informants, it takes more than a malevolent person to spread *lendva* – it requires certain atmospheric conditions, too:

[---] *She can't do it every day, only with Northern winds. Then she can let it. [---] Can reach a person, can reach an animal. [---] EFA, CD 464 (28) < woman, born 1927.*

The villagers could also name the healers who could help in finding a remedy against *lendva*. Similarly to other healing words, the *lendva* spell was often read on the water that the sick had to drink or wash themselves with. Stronger medical remedies – gunpowder and also cobwebs – were used in Ryzhkovo to treat animals:

The cow had it, then I put milk and gave that and egg and that, how to say, gunpowder. [---] And then, I can't say it, in Russian – pautina. [---] Well that too had to be used, pautina they say in Russian, in Estonian, I can't say now – webs. You got 'em in prigona and inside the house, too. [---] EFA, CD 456 (28) < woman, born 1921.

HEALER'S NATIONALITY, THE LANGUAGE OF WORDS, THE SPREAD OF ORAL AND WRITTEN SPELLS

First and foremost, people turn to healers for help. In the Ryzhkovo village community, patients first turn to a trusted, local healer of the same nationality. Going to see a healer from another community/nationality can be consid-

ered in case of a more serious illness or a more complicated problem. Several researchers of folk religion have pointed out the fact that healers from other nationalities are often attributed with stronger healing powers and greater skills (e.g. Loorits 1928: 17ff). The Ryzhkovo Vironians also sought help from their neighbouring Latvians and from nearby Russian villages:

– *Well there was a wee village here, Kudrinsk they called it. From there, there was some wise old man, good understanding. Went there, sometimes brought him here.*

– What problems did people go to him with?

– *Well from sprains and when said evil eye and. [---] Those that can heal, can tell from the outside what a person suffers from. [---] Looks and sees right away what you're ill with. Like a doctor. EFA, CD 451 (18) < woman, born 1922.*

Likewise, practices common in the Estonian tradition can be attributed to Russian healers:

[---] *My master 'ere had it on his hand the other year, skin peeled off, all to the bone. Nothing helps, nothing helps. Came an old lady, she wasn't ours, not from our village, a strange Russian. We show her the hand, she says, oh, you take window sweat, anoint with that. We started to anoint the hand with that and it healed. EFA, CD 469 (24) < woman, born 1922.*

Naturally, the Ryzhkovo Vironians themselves have also spread their healing knowledge beyond their community's borders:

[---] *Four years ago, I was in Kruutu in hospital, down with my knees, my knees hurt a lot. And a woman, she's Russian. Ah, ah, who got sick there. I read to her. And we were in our ward. And then that other was younger, asked about everything. I had in Russian and in Vironian and all kinds. She wrote it all down. [---] EFA, CD 447 (34) < woman, born 1928.*

The writing down of spells has been known among many peoples, and there is nothing uncommon about finding extra knowledge from the neighbours' spell collection. Many researchers have also pointed out that healers are often more educated than the average population (e.g. Templing 2005: 214–215). However, the situation is the opposite in Ryzhkovo where the older generation has not obtained proper education. Writing down texts is a difficult task for many of them. Therefore, the healing words used in Ryzhkovo have spread orally more than usual. As a result, the meaning of (foreign language) spells learned by ear can be largely distorted. Likewise, words and texts void of meaning have been used for spells throughout time. In a multicultural environment, switching

between languages is normal, and that rule also applies to spells. In the spoken or written texts of the Ryzhkovo Vironians, one can encounter mixtures of Russian, Estonian and Finnish, as well as mixtures of Russian and Estonian; the alphabet can alternate between Latin and Cyrillic, Estonian texts can be transcribed in Cyrillic.

When speaking of how they learned healing words, the villagers emphasized that the words are generally passed on in the language they were first learned. Since the Ryzhkovo Vironians can speak Estonian, Finnish, Latvian and Russian, the healers there have spells in all four languages. In the course of fieldwork and amidst Estonian healing words, I noticed Finnish words for illness caused by the wind, a Russian spell for an evil eye, Latvian words for sprains and erysipelas (known as “the rose”). The latter seemed especially popular in the community, for example:

Mūs' kungs Jēzus Kristus brauc' pār jūr'. Deviņ roz' rokās. Trīs zil's, trīs, trīs balt's un trīs sarkan's. Zilā iznīk', baltā izplūst' sarkanā izžūst. Izpūt roz' ārā kā vec' mēness, kā vec' kok [unknown word] izpūst, no Māra vārd' āmen, no Māra vārd' āmen, no Māra vārd' āmen. EFA, CD 311 (24) < woman, born 1922.

“Our Lord Jesus Christ rides across the sea. Nine roses in his hand. Three blue, three white, and three red. Blue waned, white drained, red dried up. Blow out the rose like waning moon, like a wooden [unknown word] it rots, Amen in the name of the Mare, Amen in the name of the Mare, Amen in the name of the Mare.” (approx. translation into Estonian by Gunars Tisons).

Translating a spell to a more convenient language is also acceptable in the Ryzhkovo Vironian community. When I asked a woman who knew Finnish and Latvian healing words whether she was familiar with any Estonian ones, she replied:

[---] *Well when you put it, y' know. You need to think, [how] to turn them into Viru, those words.*

– Can they be turned like that?

– *But why can't they? [---] Turn all them words, like they say the Russian way 'perevesti', then learn. [---] Languages are so that you speak one language, it comes like they say in Russian, skladnosti, but if you know 'em in another language, must change 'em again. [---] EFA, CD 469 (22) < woman, born 1922.*

However, many medicinal herbs are known in Ryzhkovo only by their Russian names: the ones unknown in Estonia (see Viikberg & Vaba 1984: 222) or the

plants that grow beyond recognition in the fertile Siberian soil. In addition, consideration has to be given to the influence of the Russian media and literature.

IN CONCLUSION

In Ryzhkovo, as among Siberian Estonians in general, the older ethnomedical procedures and the knowledge of healing words have survived longer than in the Estonian homeland. This is to do with the practical need and the influence of neighbours, and also with the relatively well-preserved heritage of word magic. Folk doctors do not stand out much in the Vironian community in Ryzhkovo, as the older generation considers healing skills to be available to all and attainable by anyone. Mostly, healing words have been transmitted orally, but have also been written down in later times. The multi-cultural and multi-lingual environment has facilitated the learning of the neighbours' healing words, even in other languages. The translation of healing words has also been considered normal.

While certain old-fashioned illness definitions (*lendva/lumbago*) and treatment procedures survive, the healing tradition among the Estonians, in Ryzhkovo and in Siberia in general, appears to be fading: the number of healers is diminishing, the healing procedures are modified, and the selection of spell types and texts is becoming smaller. It is largely due to the more efficient national health care system since World War II, and decades-long ideological pressurizing of folk healers. As the village community respected healers of honourable age, young people did not consider it necessary to learn healing words before reaching a respectable age themselves. By then, part of the tradition had been irrevocably lost. However, it seems that folk medical practices are not disappearing after all, but instead, are undergoing a transformation, largely due to the influence of the mass media.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article has been written with the support of state programme project *Ethnic Culture in the Estonian Settlements of Russia* (No. EKRM04-33).

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(Finnish Literary Society, sound recordings archive of the Folklore Archives)
ERA, CD – The Estonian Folklore Archives, sound recordings on CD
EFA – The Estonian Folklore Archives, manuscripts since 1996
RKM – The Estonian Folklore Archives, manuscripts (1940–1995)

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