

THREE HEALERS IN SOUTH-ESTONIA

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In South Estonia, in the Valga and Võru Districts, also in North Latvia, tales about the healers called Old and Young Suri are still circulating. In the South Estonian dialect the word *suri* means 'healer'. Actually, the tales tell us about three generations of Suris. The first - a half-blind labour-woman Shove, was the mother of Kusta Taitis; the second - Kusta (Kozma) Taitis himself (1842-1921) and the third - Kusta's son Anton Taitis (1902-1956).

The family presumably originated in the Latvian area. Very little is known about the mother and the father of Kusta Taitis. The father is said to have died of plague. His half-blind mother lived in a cave in the Andri farm near the Koiva River, and in 1880 she is said to have earned her living by wizardry. The basic method she was said to have used in treating her patients consisted in turning the leaves of the Holy Scripture with a big key. She had a very high reputation as a witch. It was rumoured that she could put out fire by magic chanting. She used to charge money for her work. As she was blind she trusted some girls on the farm with counting her pay. For some reason she refused to let her son Kusta do the job.

Kusta Taitis - Old Suri - was a member of the Laanemetsa (Lannamõtsa) Orthodox Church. He took to healing in the 1880s after the death of his mother. He was a cottager on the Loosu farm in Koikküla. Old Suri married young and two daughters were born to him. When his first wife died, he married again. Son Anton and daughter Veera, who died young, were born to him from this marriage.

Old Suri was a hefty man with a full beard. He was known as a very kind man. He never did any harm to anybody. He used his abilities to heal people and animals. He was also clairvoyant. Cases have been described when Old Suri described the animals and told how the animals were positioned in the cowshed without ever having set foot into the shed of the person who had come to seek his help. He could also detect stolen things and point to the thief without visiting the scene. It is known that Old Suri could speak Estonian and Latvian. When a Russian-speaking person sought his help, he was assisted by an old man next door, who had learned Russian in the tsarist army. Old Suri would address his patients politely as 'sirs and madams'. He called his fellow-villagers 'sonnies' and women-folk either 'kids' or 'lassies'.

It is generally known that the person who sought Suri's help was to take the material for making remedies with him or her. The things used were spring water, vodka or spirits, sugar and lard to make ointments. Remedies for ani-

mals were made of spirits or flour. The tools of witchcraft were a small enamelled jug and a big iron nail. It was believed that Old Suri had the Seventh Book of Moses as the source of this wisdom and magic power. The book is said to have had black or red pages covered with red or white letters.

A legend goes that Old Suri had been summoned to St. Petersburg to the Tsar to account for his activities. There Old Suri had said that all magic chants were to be found in the Bible. One had to know how to read the Holy Script to find the necessary words.

When a person came to Suri, he would pour the liquid brought to him into his jug and stir it about with the nail. He would chant magic words over it and the medicine was ready. The words he would murmur, while stirring about in his jug with the nail, were indistinct and nobody could make them out. The magic remedies were to be used either before or after the sunrise. He warned against keeping the magic potion in buildings holding fire, that is, in rooms with a hearth or stove. To prepare remedies, Old Suri would also wave in the air as if drawing magic signs over lumps of sugar. He would treat erysipelas by making signs with a lead pencil on brown or blue sugar paper, then cross everything out so heavily that there was only a plumage smudge on the paper. All the signs were drawn counter-clockwise. The magic was then put on the ailing place and covered with some warm and dry garment, usually with a woollen scarf. The Suris used to speak about nine kinds of erysipelas. The most hazardous was erysipelas of the normal skin colour which would often end in death. When Old Suri believed that some evil eye had been at work, he would never call the culprit by the name. Instead, he would describe the course of events or the evil person by some general characteristics (an old woman, a tall man) but specific enough for the victim to guess who it had been. When the evil eye had been identified, Old Suri would give advice how to get free from the evil spell. Old Suri never asked for a pay. He accepted anything given to him as his fee (eggs, money, vodka). When Old Suri thought that the case was beyond his powers, he admitted it by advising the person to go to the doctor or place his faith with God. When Old Suri could not help a person, he refused to accept any fee.

People of different social origin and resources would go to Old Suri for help. The services of trained doctors and veterinary doctors took a lot of time and money in those times. Rich people were ashamed of having to go to the healer. The visits to Old Suri were kept secret. His 80th birthday was well celebrated and the following day Kusta Taits was dead. He was buried in the Laanemetsa churchyard. His grateful customers placed a tombstone on his grave.

Anton Taits (Young Suri) in his young days was fond of acting. He was the parish clerk in the Laanemetsa Orthodox Church. Only later in his life did he

follow his father's footsteps, becoming a healer. Once Old Suri had been asked to say whether he would leave his knowledge of witchcraft to his son. Old Suri had answered that those things could be taught only to a grown-up man of at least 21 years of age. He had added that there were things that could not be taught. Some knowledge of witchcraft had to be inborn. Local people remember that at school young Anton had been a quick-witted, but mischievous boy. Young Suri was a good musician. When Kusta Taits died, Anton inherited his tools of witchcraft. His ways of healing were the same his father had used, but he was not so widely known as his father had been. He was thought to be less efficient and less skilled.

Young Suri used to refer to the Holy Scripture in explaining his healing powers, but he knew a little of medicine too. His best friend was the local medical man. Anton Taits started his course of treatment by mentioning the patient's name and the father's name followed by the word 'in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit I call the soul to step forward'. Anton Taits was clairvoyant, so he had inherited his father's powers. He would account for his success of treating erysipelas with plumage and sugar paper by the effect of a magnetic field on the inflamed place. Heat would magnify the effect, he would say.

People would go to Young Suri and ask him to use his clairvoyant powers in detecting theft. People also sought help in ailments caused by fright and consulted the Suris for skin diseases. While speaking of fright, one should mention the well-defined relationships that both Suris (father and son) had with snakes. They never killed a snake. Snakes were respectfully called *viilup-viilup* or 'little fish'. The Suris knew how to help the people frightened or bitten by snakes. It was said that they whistled and summoned the snake to come, and then made the snake suck the poison out of the wound. To treat skin diseases and boils the Suris used the so-called 'snake vodka'. In early spring an alive snake was trapped in a bottle, spirit was poured over it, the bottle was corked and kept. The Suris would warn that the bottle should not be kept in a building holding live fire. A story repeatedly told about the Suris tells about a woman who goes to seek Suri's help. She has taken a basketful of eggs to pay for the magic. On the way to Suri's place, she finds that there are too many eggs in the basket. She decides to keep some of them. She takes them out of the basket and hides them under a bush. She intends to collect them on her way home. When the magic has been effected, Suri remarks that she should not forget to take along the little things she had left under the bush. When the woman bends to pick up the eggs, she jumps back in fright as there are no eggs any more. Instead, there is only a bundle of hissing snakes there. Here one must draw the listener's attention to the fact that in oral tradition stories about Suri

Father and Son have become merged, and it is impossible to tell which of them the stories really speak about.

Anton Taitis was married to Olga Sibul (1921) and they had a son called Voldemar. At school the boy was a bright pupil and it was thought that he would succeed his father as a healer. However, he was called up and reported lost in action in World War II. Anton Taitis' healer's work was stopped by the decision of the People's Court of the Valga District in 1952. He was accused of treating people by going in for black magic, resorting to fraud and swindle to get spirits, money and food. Although people came forward and testified in court that they had resorted to Taitis' methods of treatment after regular medicine had failed to help them, Anton Taitis was convicted. The counsel for the defence wanted the case to be qualified as fraud. The consultant-neurologist stated that the methods used by Taitis were generally acknowledged and in use in psychiatric treatment, but Anton Taitis was still sentenced to two years in prison for practising medicine without any medical qualifications. Six months later he got released from prison. In his amnesty a certain role was played by the wife of the local policeman, whose leg was saved by Taitis' magic. Anton Taitis returned home and worked till the end of his days in 1956 as a stableboy in a collective farm. The Taitis' family burial place is in the Laanemetsa graveyard, Anton's wife Olga died in 1981. People still visit the graves, leave money there and take soil from there to treat their diseases.

While speaking about his clairvoyant powers, it was said that he could see the scene if he concentrated his thoughts on it. In the years of World War II, many people visited A. Taitis to get some information concerning some far-away or lost relative or friend. The information Anton Taitis provided often proved true, especially when he spoke about injuries, their origin and location. The information was more exact when Taitis could see a photo of the person he was sought information about. When treating ailments caused by fright or some other psychic factors, Anton Taitis would emphasise that the magic would work only if the patient had trust in his healing power. He also knew and used medical herbs. In addition, it must have been of great healing effect when a person could freely tell a famous healer about the tormenting troubles. There are stories telling about people provoking the Suris to demonstrate their power. Once Suri had put his hand on the head of a teasing neighbour. The neighbour had felt his body go hot and the fingers tingled as if needles were shooting out of them.

As Anton Taitis had no direct descendants, his knowledge of black magic was buried with him. A distant relative of his, an 86-year-old woman still does some healing at Laanemetsa.