# The Doctor Sent Me to a Folk Healer

**Abstract:** For a short period in the 1980s, some folk healers in Soviet Estonia announced they will only receive patients with an official referral from a medical doctor. The requirement was a response to state prosecution, and aimed to promote the image that they work in cooperation with medical doctors. Not all patients brought referrals, but the referrals brought make for interesting research material. The article concerns the patients of one South Estonian folk healer: the healing ritual, patients' self-diagnoses, origin of doctors and patients, printed material in the healer's tradition, written narratives as part of the ritual, the magic power of miraculous healing.

**Keywords:** folk healer, folk medicine, alternative medicine, Laine Roht, letters of referral, healing rite

In recent centuries, the institutionalized medical system and folk healers have become increasingly separated. Today they share only the aim of helping people get better and stay healthy. Doctors with a degree in medicine follow a lengthy road to education. They have to pass a period of practice where they apply their knowledge under supervision and hone their skills. A medical doctor is supported by a network of laboratories, the pharmaceutical business, medical publication series, drug catalogues and medical staff. Patients can be referred to specialists for further study, to rehabilitation or hospitalisation.

A folk healer is, we could say, the opposite. He or she is usually not a single player, has helpers and a network for obtaining herbs, exchanging information and receiving patients. Clearly, a folk healer has no supporting laboratories or pharmaceutical industry, not to mention rehabilitation centres. Working outside the medical system, relying heavily on the folk healer's person-



Folk healer Kaika Laine (Laine Roht; 1927–2013) on her birthday with a TV talk show host Vahur Kersna.

ality, the healer serves to change the patient's mentality and folk psyche. Α healer's method of diagnosing relies heavily on intuition, the cures centre on (miraculous) remedies and (both oral and written) communication with and faith in the healer. A folk healer requires from a patient not only belief but also adherence to instructions. The healing process operates on remarkably brittle and ambiguous verbality. On the other hand, in some cases people do need to change their life

and mobilize themselves in order to conquer the disease, for which purpose the folk healer's system is well suited.

Presumably, the best results in healing patients would come from coordination of both systems, but such instances are truly exceptional, heavily dependent on the people involved and the specific circumstances. I am going to address a phenomenon widespread in the 1980s USSR: well-known folk healers announced they will only receive people with official referrals from a medical doctor. In the 1980s, this was highly irregular, illegal, and the doctors risked their license doing by this, but some patients requested and received the referrals to folk healers. The folk healers were acting out of their fear of the soviet system which viewed their activities as prohibited and punishable. Asking the patient to provide a letter from a licensed doctor seemed like an indication of cooperation with the authorities – it was mimicry, at least I believe that the behaviour can be described as such since the purpose was to remain invisible and unnoticed.

The following analysis of a South Estonian folk healer (and her patients) uses as source material her personal archive. The archive includes referrals from doctors, the book of registration (where a patient's complaint and case history were recorded together with the folk healer's opinion), and the book of thanks (where patients wrote about their successful recovery when they came to thank or were seeking help for a different problem). For the purposes of this article, data from one year (1988–1989) only is analysed, using folkloristic methods.

## Laine Roht, a Folk Healer from South Estonia

Laine Roht (1927–2013) was known also as *Kaika nõid* 'Witch of Kaika' or *Kaika Laine* 'Laine of Kaika'. Her healer's aliases are related to the popular tradition of calling, even today, folk healers witches, and the popular name creation where someone is called after their place of origin – Laine Roht lived in South Estonia, in the village of Kaika. Laine Roht came from a family that has yielded several folk healers (her father and great-grandmother were witch doctors), but also medical health care professionals.

My father knew how to massage and cure animal diseases. He cured horse joint problems and sprains. And he delivered calves. He had a gadget with which he could sound animals. He was called when someone had sprained an ankle or something. His main remedies were turpentine, spirits of wine, and neat's-foot oil. Our great-grandmother (grandfather's mother) also knew how to heal. She delivered babies.

Reportedly, the midwife noticed the doctor's sign – a snake and a cup – on Laine's forehead at birth. However, she never received official training. Laine had 6 classes of school education and subsequently worked her whole life in the post office, mainly delivering mail to the village houses. She married, but had no children. In the 1990s, her brother's son and wife moved in with her and she became her daily assistant. Before that, various acquaintances, mostly similar healers or would-be healers assisted her in receiving patients (Ellermaa & Pitsner 2013).<sup>1</sup>

She started to heal people at the age of 33 and became famous in early 1980s as a healer using archaic methods. Laine's local fame gradually spread and in ten years she became nationally renowned. She lived in her father's house, a wooden house in the 1930s style in the South Estonian hilly countryside. The household included a byre, storehouses, and later a hillside fireplace. Her methods were classic: saving prayers and spells over remedies. Herbal remedies were what she used most, both herbs she or her trustees had collected and potions made thereof. She also mouthed incantations and prayers over substances brought along: patients were asked to take along water or vodka, sugar, honey, salt, fat. Remarkably, she had learned her incantations from the anthology of Estonian folk songs ("Eesti rahvalaulude antoloogia"), and for prayers used the catechism or church calendar Biblical excerpts for the respective day (Kõiva 1995).<sup>2</sup> In one interview, she emphasised the range different written sources she uses, for example tooth ache words from the children's magazine "Pioneer" (Ottas & Tammer 2000). It was also common at that time for folk healers to visit each other in order to become acquainted, compare methods, have fun or learn from each other (Kõiva 1995, 1996).

Laine belonged to the local church committee and in the mid-1980s stressed she only receives the Christened. In actual fact, she received everyone except cancer patients who had had operations or radiation therapy. At that time, most people were attached to no congregation and the requirement of being christened was novel as children were not regularly christened. People did, however, have themselves and their children Christened in order to attain Laine's audience. The issue here was not whether people were religious or atheists, not of science or rationality but purely one of a desperate yearning for healing. Unfortunately, there is no way to characterise the process in more detail as we have archived interviews and published memories but no basis for a generalised overview of behaviour. She



Television recording crew at Kaika Laine's home. Next to Kaika Laine, television producer Georg Jegorov. Private collection.

did not send away anyone nor argue with people who claimed to be christened but were not.

Laine Roht spoke to patients in local dialect, making herself homely for the south Estonian patients while sounding foreign and mysterious to north Estonians and those familiar only with orthographic Estonian. Laine loved to use a humorous tone in talking to patients, to make jokes, talk of famous people from the region the patient came from or to talk of patients she had received from the same region. Her communication style and structure served to becalm and reassure the patient.

Personally, I had recommended Kaika Laine and Gunnar Aarma, and they were accepted, for a folk medicine conference in Finland. I suggested them as representatives of different schools and methods. That visit abroad was the first time Laine experienced comforts unknown to the average Estonian village dweller. However, even more important was her contact with similar Finnish traditional healers who received wages and worked daily with classic massage, bloodletting and other methods at the Kaustinen folk medicine centre. It was a good



At leisure at the Kaustinen folk medicine centre. In the foreground Laine Roht in the swing of dance. Photo by A. Hernesniemi.

opportunity to see other masters in practice and show you off both formally and informally. Although Laine was approaching 70 at the time, she managed nicely in all situations. She was convinced that Finns used generally similar methods and they had nothing much to offer. Laine mixed well with the company, not least because of her humorous attitude. She danced a lot and felt like a star. She later visited other medical conventions abroad (Ellermaa & Pitsner 2013). She was also thrilled with tourist bus trips to European religious centres.

In the mid-1990s, the Witch of Kaika became a media star: she not only performed at the great forums of folk and alternative medicine practitioners and new age healers (for example, the prominent annual "Maaema mess" "The Mother Earth Fair'), but also on the radio and TV. Interviews were conducted by various media celebrities interested in alternative solutions and phenomena. Some of the films and shows broadcast on the national TV were prepared by folklorists and concerned various aspects of Laine's activities since the 1990s. A short interview to BBC introduced Laine to the Anglophone world and she felt honoured by this. The visit by the news crew was a novel experience for both sides. Members of the crew had their health checked and took the advice seriously. Laine managed to spot lovers among the crew, causing excitement for both sides.

However, such crews were rare visitors. The media people among her acquaintances were mostly Estonians who first visited with a recording crew and later returned on their own. A better insight of this network is certainly gained by considering the albums Kaika Laine kept at home, the books she received as gifts, but first and foremost the various records of her daily life and meetings. In her old age after she had given up active healing practice she was in the focus of extraordinary attention. A local media celebrity Vahur Kersna opened a bench dedicated to Laine while she was still alive.<sup>3</sup> Her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday found mention on TV and in media as the birthday of "our healer". Laine posed in national clothes, with TV show host Vahur Kersna, who was one of the main organizers of the broadcasted birthday party. Unexpectedly, several officials including the minister of culture (also wearing a national costume) arrived to personally congratulate the witch doctor. Wearing national costume is in contemporary Estonian clothing style limited to a restricted range of events - their usage emphasises the symbolic feeling of our-ness, affinity towards traditional heritage.

It's also worth mentioning that the ongoing boom of bibliographical publications has also produced one on Laine Roht (Kudu 2009), labelling her the woman of the century; and at least one more book about her was written by the journalist Ellermaa and is titled "The people of Kaika Laine" (Ellermaa & Pitsner 2013). The latter became quickly a bestseller and includes interviews with a number of people who had known the healer. Roughly a third are well-known people, including doctors she had close contact with, naturally telling multiple successful healing stories. The publication is certain to widen the perspective on clairvoyants and healers in contemporary society and is worthy of closer attention. Somewhat unexpectedly, the book also considers issues related to growing old and the life of an old person, the years when she was no longer receiving patients.

There is also a line of books on herbs and vernacular recipes sold under Laine's name, pretentiously titled "Kaika Lainest Vangani" (*From Kaika Laine to Vanga*; Jõgioja 2008, 2009– 2010). The title compares Laine to the Bulgarian prophet Baba Vanga who has gathered much acclaim in Europe. Interviews of and nuggets of wisdom by the Witch of Kaika have been published in books combining advice from various healers (e.g., Ottas & Tammer 2000).

## The Healing Rite and Its Written Aspects

As we saw above, Laine's knowledge was mostly in the domains of family and local lore as well as various printed material she mixed into her knowledge. Written and manuscript material formed an inseparable part of the healing rite. The folk healer's healing ritual in general is largely similar to what happens during a regular doctor's visit, though somewhat differently organised. Based on personal participant observations and descriptions by other researchers, I am going to give a short outline of the healing ritual Kaika Laine used – the general structure remained the same throughout the years, though the elements changed in the course of time (e.g., for a time in the 1980s she used also acupressure).

Laine Roht received patient(s) in a dedicated room decorated with icons, pictures and flowers – the reception room. The room included a table and chairs for patients. There, the folk healer greeted the patient and instructed to record a short summary of their case in the reception book (or it could be recorded by the healer's helper). Having received the remedy components the patient had brought along,<sup>4</sup> she proceeded to the room next door to charm these over her birthmark, sitting behind a writing-table. She returned within half an hour to an hour, handing the patient the ready-made drug, accompanied by oral instructions of use, and saying farewell.

As regards the story written into the registrations book before the remedy was prepared, the summary is similar to a case history prepared by a medic according to what the patient tells. However, the descriptions in the folk healer's registration book include more details, more ailments, background information and causal relations. These short records are, in fact, in the majority a list of self-diagnoses, listing disease after disease, but also thorough analyses and data on the patient's social situation (e.g., problems with aging, family, colleagues, etc). Together



A selection of books about Kaika Laine.

with the referral forms and book of thanks the summaries form a written disease narrative. These are quite interesting data.

While the remedy was being prepared, the patient was given the visitor's book or book of thanks, which could be read silently or aloud in turns if the patient had come with family members or in a group. Reading the messages and letters from prior patients had a therapeutic effect as most were success stories and injected the waiters with optimism that even the worst can be cured. The book of thanks indicates that many came to Kaika Laine for help on several separate occasions, interspersed over several years. The book of thanks served to increase the reliability and authority of the folk healer (cf. Altnurme & Lyra 2004 for comparison with New Age healers).

## The Range of Referral Diagnoses

In the late 1980s, in response to the state's efforts to root out alternative medicine practitioners, Kaika Laine was among those who announced both in radio broadcasts as well as through word of mouth that she works in cooperation with medical doctors and will thus only receive patients with a doctor's referral. Laine's personal archive shows that, indeed, for a few years patients did present referrals. However, this was still a minority of all patients she received within that time period.

Looking at the diagnoses in the referrals, in 1988–1989, Kaika Laine had patients with more than 200 different ailments. The severity of disease varied widely among those referred, ranging from incurable or complicated diseases requiring close medical supervision to chronic problems and simple colds. All disease groups are seen in referrals, all organs are mentioned as needing checkup or restoration to health: diseases of the heart and blood circulation (including myocarditis), problems of the respiratory system from pneumonia to asthma and bronchitis; gastrointestinal problems and other internal organ problems (haemorrhoids, stomach functions, pancreas, kidneys, pancreatitis, liver, gallstones), otolaryngology issues including maxillary sinusitis, gynaecological problems ranging to infertility; mental problems; oral cavity and dental problems; cosmetic problems; psychological problems (weight and eating problems, depression); alcoholism and other addictions. Patients with a referral also had problems needing specialist or rehabilitator address, such as logopaedic problems or post-bonehealing weakness or stiffness in joints.

Sometimes the prompt for a visit to a folk healer came at a critical point: right after being diagnosed with cancer or before an operation, when people are prepared to change their lifestyle in the name of health and life, or are looking for another way to save them. There are, however, some very severe problems that were not taken to a folk healer: e.g., serious kidney failure, profound movement disorders, congenital genetic defects.

The referral diagnoses lead us to the conclusion that the patients sent to a folk covered healer the large majority of the general practitioner's area of praxis as well as that of specialists': there are a number of diseases that merit specialist attention as well as those with no possible cure. There are also referrals where the doctor has not been able to



Like a medical worker. Laine Roht in her office in the 1980s.

give a diagnosis, but has left it up to the folk healer to identify the nature of the problem.

Surprisingly, there are also traditional diagnoses not found in official lists of diseases, for example, the evil eye or verbal harming of health. This is surprising because this is a natural part of diagnoses given by folk healers, similar to being cursed – certainly not a diagnosis you would expect from a medical doctor.

The way referrals were formulated is most interesting. Most doctors have filled the referral blanks in the ordinary manner: name and age of patient, diagnosis in Latin and other pertinent information, including proscribed drugs. Doctors added x-ray pictures, EKG films, and blood and urine test results – just like when sending the patient to a specialist. Referrals were signed by the doctor and stamped with his personal rubber stamp. We see referrals complete with additional health data, addressed to valued specialists who had months-long queues, and we can only guess as to why the patient decided to visit the folk healer instead. It could have been their greater trust in the folk healer, disappointment in the medical system and personal choices in assembling a healing plan, preferring an unproven yet hope-infusing method of healing. However, some doctors rotated the referral blank and wrote the diagnosis in free form in Estonian, giving no diagnosis in Latin. They did not refuse to give the patient the referral, but obviously they had their reservations about this. The archives show that some patients had voluntarily brought along supplementary data that had been used to send them to a specialist.

# The Doctors Who Gave Referrals to Folk Healers

Taking a look at who were the doctors that sent their patients to folk healers gives us a most interesting topographical picture. In the 1980s, as Kaika Laine was becoming a well-known healer, most of her patients came from South Estonia, but as her fame spread, she started to attract patients from other regions of Estonia.

In the period when she asked for doctors' referrals, patients came mostly from specialists and regional doctors from larger south Estonian cities of Tartu, Võru, Viljandi, Võhma, Valga, less frequently from further in Estonia (western Haapsalu, central Paide, Jäneda, northern Kohtla-Järve, regional capital Tallinn in the north). However, the cooperative doctors had, in a broad sense, South Estonian roots, and only single doctors came originally from other regions. Doctors who had given one referral were likely to also refer other patients. Probably these doctors were sympathetic to alternative medicine – one of them is currently working with Waldorf methods.

We can not be certain about the gender balance among referring doctor. As for the referral letters, many doctors have not signed their name but in illegible signature only. We can only assume that as there were more female than male doctors, and

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since psychic phenomena in general attract women, the referring doctors were women rather than men.

However, despite the outward impression of cooperation, in actual fact there was no collaborative work on diagnosing, curing or analysis of method efficacy. The referral to a folk healer was a concession to patient wishes and delegation of curing certain diseases to folk healers. We can see that patients with serious medical problems were sent to folk healers, as well as hopeless cases, ambiguous diagnoses, people with social or mental problems. Analysis of the self-diagnoses recorded in folk healer's reception book indicates that people often had problems other than what the official medical diagnosis was. Besides medical problems, patients had social, cultural, psychological problems that induced a visit to a witch doctor as they could not get help from the system. There was no point asking a doctor or even psychotherapist whether the mean boss will quiescent or would it be wise to start looking for a new job? What to do when a member of the family receives a bleak diagnosis? Is the child dim-witted, rebellious or ill? There were a number of difficult life and health problems where a person found himself alone or in opposition with the near and dear – where a dependable ear or expert advice was welcome. Clearly, some of these and dozens of other questions could be answered by an experienced and dedicated psychologist or psychotherapist, but a folk healer provided a faster and more comprehensive answer with no additional clauses or need to reform your lifestyle. We should also bear in mind that at the time visiting a psychologist or advisor was regarded with prejudice.

# Conclusions

Medical professionals were undoubtedly daring in their actions as they could have lost the doctor's license which they had studied and worked for many years. This could be the reason why some formulated the referral in a non-standard manner. The phenomenon discussed here derived from a specific situation - limited access to medical help and enmity to folk medicine. Control exerted by authorities forced folk healers to, in turn, search for legitimacy and ask their patients for referral letters from doctors to prove they are working together with medical doctors. That is the starting point from which a cascade of interpretations and rationalisations disperse, all explaining why in late 20<sup>th</sup> century a famous healer from the periphery was chosen over a representative of the medical profession. People saw cooperation between doctors and folk healers as natural and this raised their opinion of folk healers. The need for doctors' referrals disappeared in the early 1990s together with the end of the Soviet Union and its restrictions, and consequently the number of patients arriving with referrals dried up.

Folk healer records reveal that a remarkable proportion of difficult diseases were conquered using symbolic healing – using verbal influence on simple remedies – and many patients received help or substantial support. While undoubtedly medical science

has made headway with hereditary and incurable diseases like epilepsy, cataracts, asthma, diabetes, new alleviating medicines and props have become available, most of these were not available during the Soviet era and for some problems there still is no remedy. There is a grain of truth also in the fact that most of the medicine-making (out of ingredients provided by the patient), the related verbal and magical practices as well as related locations remained a mystic area of sacredness and miracles, a secret. Some were revealed by media but the majority still remained *terra incognita*. This opened the door for other possibilities. Looking back at the recorded material, it seems that people did not explain it in terms of magic or religion but instead as personal fluid and powers.

Analysis of records also highlights a very important aspect of 20<sup>th</sup> century healing rituals: the written word and reading as means of influencing the patient and supporting the ritual. To get better, one needs not only belief, trust and the right expectations, but also stories of success and communication indicating the authority of the healer. This niche is filled by the written getting-well and thank-you stories the healer keeps and presents to her patients.

# Comments

- <sup>1</sup> In time, Laine was visited by intellectuals, healers and people with something on their mind or wishing to meet someone with special powers. A certain cross section of people of different motivation who either alone, with a friend or accompanying a patient visited the Kaika witch is provided by Ellermaa & Pitsner 2013. The book highlights long-term relations with folk healers, doctors, adherents of alternative medicine.
- <sup>2</sup> She provides different references in interviews over time, and the list is further widened by printed and written sources people remember. Laine was not the only one making handwritten copies and typically of the folk healers active in the 1980s she generously shared her manuscripts with others (cf. Ellermaa & Pitsner 2013).
- <sup>3</sup> Establishing benched dedicated to and named after people important for the community was initiated by Vahur Kersna in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The idea led to controversy. Estonia had at the time no such tradition, it was perceived as personal initiative relayed by media. This led to discussions on who determines the names

and funding. Since the tradition took root as memorial plaques and stones, the only change was in the shape. According to established traditions money was donated for the monument by local government and cultural organisations as well as local people. Today, benches of this nature have been established in various locations ranging from appreciating hidden aspects of culture to representatives of popular mass culture.

<sup>4</sup> Information pertaining to what needed to be taken along, how to behave, register, where to go and much more spread orally from visitor to visitor. In interviews and media mediated addresses of the 1990s she always gives a list of recommended substances that need to be taken along and provides various instructions.

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