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## **Lecznictwo ludowe Ukraińców na przełomie XIX i XX wieku**

### **Folk medicine in Ukraine at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries**

#### SUMMARY

The article is devoted to a discussion of herbal remedies and their use in treatment, as practised by folk medicine in Ukraine at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. The data for the article derives from Polish ethnographic journals, such as “Lud” [People], “Ziemia” [The Land], Ukrainian publications and studies by J. Talko-Hryncewicz (*Zarys lecznictwa ludowego na Rusi Południowej* [An outline of folk medicine in Southern Ruthenia]), as well as O. Kolberg, K. Moszyński and Z. Boltarowycz.

The Ukrainians have an ample knowledge of herbs, and of the ways in which herbal remedies can be prepared and used, and such knowledge shows a lot of regional variation. This diversity is due, on the one hand, to the fact Ukraine is inhabited by a large number of different ethnic groups, and, on the other, to its specific geographical, economic and cultural conditions. Ukrainian folk medicine has always had a special character and history, inextricably linked with the nature of Ukraine’s flora. As centuries went by, there developed a number of beliefs, customs and rituals connected with the gathering and drying of herbs, as well as the preparation and use of herbal remedies, both for curative and magical purposes. Many plants were credited by folk tradition with unusual powers of driving away demons and protecting people against the “evil”. For centuries, the plants – in the form of fresh boughs, made into wreaths, or tied in rods, fresh and blessed – would be stuck into fields to protect the crops from hail and thunderstorm, and to ensure a good harvest by their mysterious powers. The herbs were believed to make plants, animals and people fecund, and at the same time they were widely used for practical purposes. Herbal remedies were in fact the basis of Ukrainian folk medicine. An extensive body of knowledge of the curative properties of herbs, bushes and trees was held especially by the “initiated”.

The herbal remedies included: infusions, decoctions, and tinctures based on water, alcohol, vinegar, wine, whey and milk, as well as powders, ointments, compresses, fumigations, and inhalations. Among the most widely used were infusions and water-based tinctures made from fresh and dried herbs. It was believed that some plants had magical cure-all powers. Remedies made from St. John’s word were thought to be effective in “a hundred ailments” and were commonly used in treating diseases of the lungs, the alimentary tract, and the urinary tracts, as well as in curing women’s ailments, and in the treatment of malaria, headache, dysentery and colic. A similar role of a panacea for almost all kinds of diseases was attributed to sage, elecampane and valerian.

The Ukrainians also used forest berries in their folk medicine. Bilberries were used for stomach ailments, raspberries in treating colds, and cowberries were used for kidney and liver ailments. In the Trans-Carpathian regions inhabited by the Boiko ethnic group, kidney diseases were treated using the whole of cowberry plants.

The most numerous group of herbal remedies used in Ukraine was devoted to treating malaria – there were regions where over one hundred varieties of malaria were known.

Ethnographic materials from both the 19th century, as well as those of contemporary origin, indicate that medical knowledge on the use of herbs or on simple medical procedures was very widespread among the inhabitants of Ukraine. The rural population relied on drugs obtained from fresh parts of plants and “freshly” killed animals, or on drugs of a mineral origin. Pragmatic therapeutic action was often combined with magical-religious activities. The type of procedures depended on the cause of the disease, and this in turn was explained by beliefs concerning the origin of diseases and of plants. In folk medicine, practical-utilitarian treatment formed an integral whole with magical-religious activities.

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