

PART I

A HISTORY OF ASHKENAZI FOLK HEALERS



FROM TIME IMMEMORIAL, HUMANS HAVE LOOKED TO the natural world, which we always have been a part of, in order to heal ourselves. In this respect the Jews of Eastern Europe were no different from any other people. If anything, what set many Eastern European Jewish communities apart by the twentieth century was a reluctance to embrace the modern era and all the advantages promised by its technologies, including medicine. Had the Second World War not destroyed their communities, the natural healing traditions that had kept Eastern European Jews resilient for centuries would still be known today. Instead, this essential part of their history has been long obscured and, consequently, utterly forgotten by posterity. But who were the Eastern European Jews, and what evidence remains of their traditional healing practices?

To attempt to answer the latter question, we offer a brief sketch of folk medicine, Eastern European Jewry, the communities in which Eastern European (known for the most part as *Ashkenazi*) Jews lived, and what the written historical record reveals about their health practices and beliefs, in both “official” medicine (whether religious or secular) and folk medicine. We describe and discuss the different Jewish healers who treated Eastern European Jews (and their non-Jewish neighbors). And we contrast the worlds of men and women healers (again, whether religious or secular, and in official or folk medicine).

CHICKEN SOUP THEORY

Today the popular notion of healing among Ashkenazim is often reduced to “chicken soup,” but Eastern European Jews have a highly complex medicinal tradition that dates back to the Hebrew Bible. The historical records of Jewish communities across many centuries and lands (the ancient Near East, the Islamic world, medieval Europe, etc.) reveal a rich variety of practices that include plant-based remedies. Oddly enough, if the researcher seeks out evidence of herbalism in modern Eastern European Jewish communities, the written record falls largely silent.

While many aspects of Ashkenazi life and culture have been thoroughly documented, researched, and examined, the majority of mainstream scholarship focusing on the history of Ashkenazi communities has almost entirely ignored the existence of traditional healers among the Ashkenazim; if discussed at all, folk healers have generally been portrayed as backward, ignorant, and foolish. Such dismissiveness is closely tied to the modern medical culture’s interest in elevating its reputation among the general population by discounting premodern traditions and their practitioners and maligning healers lacking formal medical training as “superstitious,” “quacks,” and so forth.² Despite the longstanding and tireless efforts to “eradicate” their practices, however, Ashkenazi folk medicinal practitioners had an enduring presence in Eastern Europe for centuries, and they were an integral part of community well-being until deep into the twentieth century.³

One current authority, the *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, tells readers that traditionally the Ashkenazi approach to health care made no distinction between what would now be considered “scientific” and “folk” medicines. While the entry reveals that Ashkenazim relied heavily on medicinal plants for their well-being right up until the destruction of European Jewry, it completely passes over which plants served as their familiar folk remedies.⁴

FOLK MEDICINE

The World Health Organization’s website, in its section devoted to “Traditional, Complementary and Integrative Medicine,” defines *folk medicine* as “the sum total of the knowledge, skills, and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in

the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illness.”⁵

Contemporary researchers expand this definition further, illuminating some areas where clinical Western medicine fears to tread: the folk healer is the catalyst whose medicine is to bring luck, calm evil spirits, or conjure love. Their expertise is often sought to restore order by pacifying evil spirits, removing states of dis-ease, and restoring harmony. Through the folk healer’s work, a patient can be reintegrated into health and normality. In this way, the healer plays an elemental role in the social order of a culture, restoring the balance of collective community health.⁶

Because Eastern European Jews practiced folk medicine alongside Western medicine, if we want to better understand and appreciate the richness of their healing traditions, including their knowledge of medicinal plants, we’ll have to look at both tradition and progress and embrace a more inclusive view.

PLANTS AND FOLK MEDICINE

Modern scientific literature discussing folk medicine relies on a binary that contrasts “herbal” and “magico-religious.” *Herbal medicine* refers to healing through the application of plants, herbs, and other natural substances found locally.⁷ It’s self-evident that human beings all over the world have discovered, through direct experience and knowledge transmitted over thousands of years, the healing powers of the natural world around us.

By contrast *magico-religious medicine* means it relies on “nonmaterial” curative powers. The attribution of supernatural forces as causes of natural phenomena is a cultural universal that helps humans better understand their place in the cosmos. Supernatural forces provide an explanation for problems of all sorts, including sickness and environmental disasters. In order to restore natural balance or cure illness, humans have appealed to these forces by conjuring magic, reciting incantations, and performing rituals.

But herbal and magico-religious medicine have never been separate practices—they’ve always been intricately interwoven. In herbal medicine, a plant, or a specific part of a plant, might be understood to have healing powers. In magico-religious medicine, the same plant is known to have healing powers when it’s

applied to a wound if accompanied by the recitation of a prayer. Folk medicine practitioners have always understood the important connection between magic and herbal remedies. They believe that remedies work not only because of the plants and other substances they apply, but also through the power of an incantation and other scientifically inexplicable factors. In this way, the folk healer has been at once the restorer of balance and the symbol of the possibility of balance.⁸

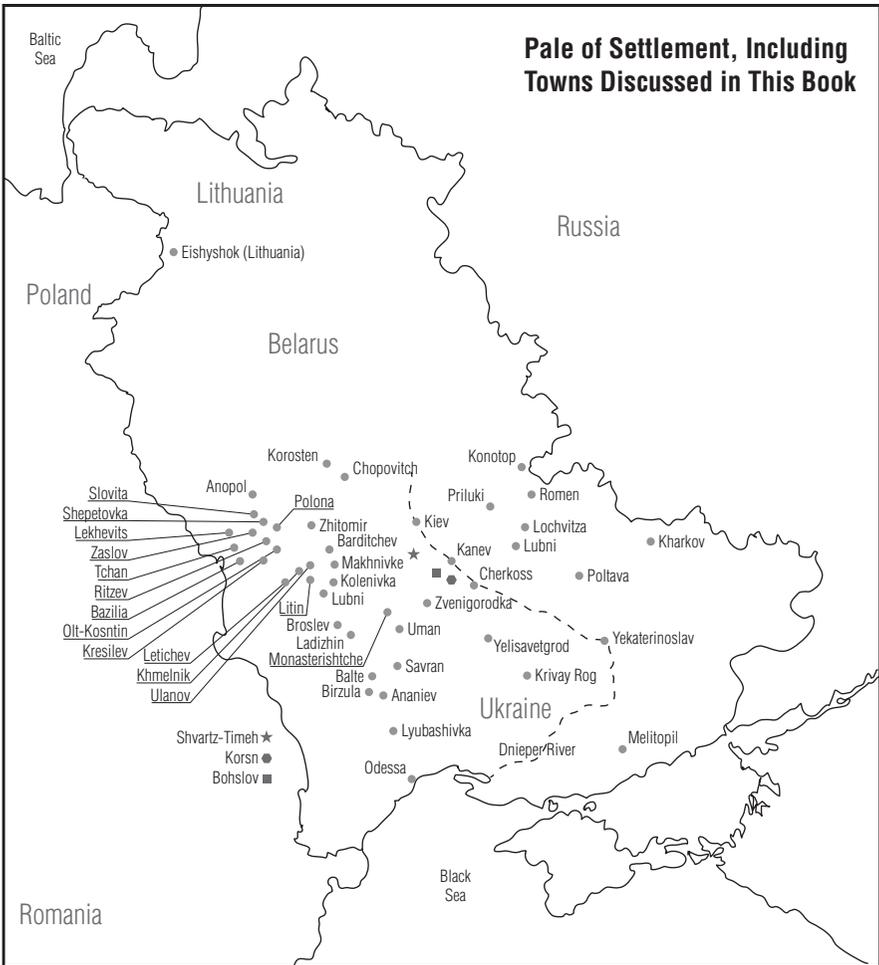
In Eastern Europe, Ashkenazi Jews were one of many cultures whose folk medicine traditions embraced both herbal and magico-religious practices. All of the region's cultures contributed to a complex *mélange* of healing arts going back centuries, if not millennia. And, it might be surprising to learn, the folk healing practices of Ashkenazi Jews were so inextricably bound up with those of their neighbors that they often were virtually indistinguishable from one another.

BARRIERS TO DISCOVERING ASHKENAZI FOLK TRADITIONS

Yet even after we recognize these cultural, historical, and geographical interrelations, the path to their medicinal plants still remains veiled in mystery. Why is this? For anyone interested in identifying both the healing methods and, more specifically, the herbs that were known to Eastern European Jews at the turn of the twentieth century, a number of barriers stand in the way of any significant discoveries. Information is piecemeal and often only available in one of a wide variety of languages, including Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, German, French, Hungarian, Latin, and Greek. Moreover, much of the mainstream scholarship on the history of Ashkenazi Jews has focused on narrow aspects of their communities, leaving considerable swaths of their legacy neglected and ignored. And finally, the deeply rooted culture of the Jews of Eastern Europe was utterly destroyed between 1939 and 1945. So in order to unearth the less-understood areas of their story, such as their herbal traditions, it's first necessary to re-examine some of what's currently believed about the cultures of health and sickness among the Ashkenazim.

THE ASHKENAZIM AND THE PALE OF SETTLEMENT

Toward the end of the first millennium, one wave of diaspora Jews whose origins lay in the Near East emerged in communities along the Rhine River in what is



now Germany. Over the centuries, much of this population migrated from the Rhine basin eastward, into present-day Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Moldova. Today their descendants are known as *Ashkenazi Jews*, or *Ashkenazim*. Ashkenazi Jews have a long and complex history in Eastern Europe. Over the course of several centuries, through war, upheaval, and border changes, most of the Jews of Eastern Europe were eventually forced to live within a restricted geopolitical partition known as the Pale of Settlement (hereafter “the Pale”) within the Russian Empire.

Inside this circumscribed zone, some Jews settled in larger cities, while others, under the auspices of wealthy non-Jewish landowners, founded small market towns, generally known as *shtetls*. Even though the political, legal, and geographic limitations of the Pale restricted many facets of Jewish daily life, these same constraints opened the door to intricate and intimate relationships with the non-Jewish communities alongside them. These regular connections with adjacent cultures had a significant impact on both the Ashkenazim and their neighbors. In this contested zone of ethnic, religious, and cultural confluence, Jewish, Slavic, and German traditions met, colliding or melding.⁹

Why is this significant and what does it have to do with folk medicine?

As more than one scholar has pointed out, the realm of health and healing, despite all the imposed limitations, had few or no boundaries in the Pale. Jews and non-Jews, whose lives intersected every day, borrowed freely from each other where health and healing matters were concerned:

*There is no field of science in which cooperation between Jews and non-Jews took place to a greater extent than in medicine. In spite of all the social, political, and religious restrictions—as far as Christian Europe is concerned—in cases of illness non-Jews sought remedies from Jews and Jews asked non-Jews for help. This applies to all classes of the population and to all centuries. Medicine alone did not respect any boundary.*¹⁰

It should also be stressed just how important healing was to people over the centuries across the Pale, given the association of healing powers with Jewish religious authority: “Medicine’s high value can be gauged by the remarkable number of famous rabbis [throughout their centuries in the Pale] who were themselves physicians.”¹¹

PIKUACH NEFESH

Some people might question the materials relied upon in Ashkenazi folk remedies that may not appear to conform to laws of purity. But Jewish doctrine has long held the view that the Jewish people must obey the commandment “therefore choose life” as a guiding principle.¹² Rabbis, as representatives of the religious establishment and often themselves healers, have always known how to resolve apparent religious contradictions by invoking the phrase *pikuach nefesh*,

“saving a life.” This principle in Jewish law affirms the necessity of preserving human life and overrides virtually any other religious considerations.¹³

Despite the attention that has been lavished on the world of religion and health, there is a wall that looms over this field, thwarting herbal researchers. Throughout the literature it’s a given that Jews and non-Jews in the Pale shared healing knowledge with one another; in this selfsame body of literature, however, what goes undiscussed is the most important ingredient of the folk healer’s craft: the medicinal plants themselves. Therefore, in order to rediscover exactly which herbs were known and employed by Eastern Europe’s Jewish folk practitioners right up until the Second World War, we’ll have to follow a long and exceptionally faint trail left by the elusive folk healers themselves.

EARLY ASHKENAZI HEALERS IN THE PALE

In the Pale, many towns populated by Ashkenazim stretched along the trade routes that connected Eastern Europe to the larger world. Over the centuries, traveling merchants and traders who traversed these lands carried with them not only merchandise but news, information, and ideas from far-off lands. By the Middle Ages, the medicinal works of the ancient Greek writers such as Hippocrates, Galen, and Dioscorides had been translated into Latin and Arabic, making them accessible to broader audiences throughout Europe. These classical texts described plants and other natural substances and their efficacy in treating illness. Literate Jewish and non-Jewish healers alike drew from these sources for their work with plant medicine. The impression these works made on Jews practicing medicine in the Middle Ages can be seen in the reception of the writings of Moses Maimonides, a Sephardic physician, polymath, and philosopher who flourished in twelfth-century North Africa; his works influenced Jewish healers for many centuries.

In the Pale, from the earliest times, and even into the early twentieth century, causes of illness were understood differently than they are today. Contemporary medicine has shown that the symptoms of a cold, such as fever, are evidence of the body’s immune system fighting off an invading pathogen, such as a virus. By contrast, healers in premodern Eastern Europe would have posited that a supernatural force, such as a demon, had caused the illness.

Of all the known supernatural forces, “the evil eye” made Jews of the Pale particularly wary.* Belief in the evil eye is an ancient concept, and while it’s not specific to the Jews, mention of it is found in biblical writings. Those who feared the evil eye were convinced it was a curse cast upon the victim, motivated by envy or other malicious feelings. Often innocents such as children or animals were targets of the evil eye. The problems brought on by the evil eye could be almost anything: nausea, chest pains, headaches, weakness, or fear paralysis, to name a few. Curing the evil eye kept many folk healers busy in the Pale. As authorities in exorcising malevolent forces, experts were sought out both to cure illness and, for prophylaxis, to ward off potential harm.

THE BA’ALEI SHEM

So far we’ve only spoken about healers in general, but a variety of Jewish and non-Jewish folk medicine practitioners and healers flourished in the Pale for centuries: alchemists, pharmacists, shamans, and physicians all practiced variations of local folk medicine.¹⁴ Foremost among the healers of many Eastern European Jewish communities were itinerant Kabbalists, or *ba’alei shem*, men who traveled widely, dispensing charms or incantations, amulets, and herbal remedies to combat the evil eye and other diseases for anyone in need of their expertise.

The *ba’alei shem*, “masters of the name (of God),” were a prominent feature of the Pale as both religious leaders and healers. The singular title *ba’al shem* signifies its bearer’s ability to manipulate holy names, including those of God and angels, along with the names of Satan and malevolent spirits, in order to conjure desired results. The *ba’al shem*, as a cultural universal, served largely the same role or function as the shaman or “medicine man” in traditional societies the world over, mediating between the profane and the sacred, as an interceder between the living and the dead. *Ba’alei shem* were syncretic healers: relying upon the Kabbalah (writings of the Jewish mystical traditions) for guidance, and dispensing remedies both magico-religious and herbal, including amulets,

* If the term *kinnaheerra* is familiar to you, it’s a charm against the evil eye, from the Yiddish *ken ein hoyre* (“no evil eye”).

traditional plant knowledge, and phamacopeia of the era to heal the individual and honor the Jewish mandate of *tikkun olam*, “repair the world.”¹⁵

Their eclectic approach to healing made the ba’alei shem widely sought out by both poor shtetl dwellers and elites, whether gentile or Jew. These healers were extremely versatile, promising to restore vitality and fertility, cure disorders, particularly sexual disorders, and protect against sickness, misfortune, or the evil eye.¹⁶ Ba’alei shem were also equipped with psychic powers of prognostication, fortune-telling, dream interpretation, and exorcism.¹⁷

Because Ashkenazim had for centuries shared with their non-Jewish neighbors a range of supernatural beliefs and practices, particularly with respect to the afterlife, the ba’alei shem were often consulted for protection from potential supernatural threats. Many Jews believed that the empty spaces surrounding towns or villages were the domain of evil spirits, such as Lilith of biblical renown, who lay in wait to kidnap newborn boys. Dybbuks, improperly buried persons (literally, “cleaving spirits”), might also assault the unsuspecting as they made their way to or from town. Most people believed these phantoms were dangerous, so safeguarding against potential attacks on anyone who might find themselves in potential disaster zones was essential.¹⁸ To counteract a possible attack, the ba’al shem would create personalized amulets, incantations, and herbal remedies. As itinerant healers, they were sought out for a panoply of ailments and served as magicians, hypnotists, therapists, pediatricians, urologists, obstetricians, psychiatrists, homeopaths, parapsychologists, and family practitioners.¹⁹

Like their non-Jewish neighbors (i.e., later than their counterparts in western Europe), the ba’alei shem also eventually learned the mystical teachings of the physician and alchemist Paracelsus and incorporated them into their own healing methods.²⁰ Like other shamanic healers, the ba’alei shem interceded into the spirit world, but with a particular Jewish emphasis rooted in the Kabbalah with its reliance on Jewish ritual and symbolic magic.²¹ A prescription for protection often included a handwritten personalized amulet, guaranteed to perform a wide range of functions. Each of these talismans was unique and had to incorporate four mandatory elements: the names of God and angels, relevant biblical passages or phrases attesting to God’s healing power, a meticulous detailing of the object’s various functions, and the name of the person it was meant for, along with their mother’s name.²²

In addition to their use of biblical sources for creating protective amulets, ba'alei shem also consulted special remedy books (generally referred to as *segulot*, “cures,” and *refu'ot*, “remedies”). These resources were an integral part of Ashkenazi medicine from the Middle Ages onward and were consulted by Jewish folk healers right up until the Second World War.

THE REMEDY BOOKS

Besides their knowledge of religious history, religious law, and local oral traditions, the ba'alei shem relied heavily on the available medical literature. Their primary resources were the *segulot ve-refu'ot* remedy books, which circulated in both manuscript and print.²³ Remedy books came in a number of forms. There were “practical Kabbalah” guidebooks that borrowed liberally from popular Eastern European folk medicine beliefs and acquainted the Jewish reader with elements of Slavic superstitions, popular medicine, and healing practices.²⁴ Hebrew and Yiddish translations of works by western European physicians also served as remedy books.²⁵ While many remedy books were attributed to notable Jewish physicians or ba'alei shem, anonymous volumes were just as common, which suggests the intriguing possibility that some may have been written by women. The *Sefer ha-toladot*, which focuses exclusively on midwifery, is one lacking attribution.²⁶

In the eighteenth century the Żólkiew press—at the time the only Jewish printing press in the Kingdom of Poland—mainly published books on practical Kabbalah.²⁷ These collections of recipes for an assortment of herbal remedies, charms, and amulets circulated throughout Ashkenazi communities for generations, but the introduction of publishing expanded their distribution and use greatly.²⁸ Because the Żólkiew remedy books incorporated so many Slavic popular medicine and folk beliefs, their content was quite distinct from many other publications in this genre, especially those emerging from Jewish communities in Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands.²⁹

Most practical Kabbalabs were pocket-sized or slightly larger (duodecimo or octavo) and generally less than 150 pages. They usually contained an index of the most common diseases along with their corresponding healing remedies. For any given ailment, such a handbook might recommend a charm (such as

the recitation of a specific psalm) coupled with an herbal concoction. To help Ashkenazi readers with the remedies, the authors would filter concepts and terms from Latin, German, Polish, and so on into colloquial Yiddish.³⁰

Ba'alei shem, to best market their personalized services, wrote their remedy books to attract as wide an audience as possible. One remedy book, *Toldot Adam* by Yoel Ba'al Shem (also known as Yo'el Heilperin), enjoyed such enormous commercial success that its author boasted there was no town in Poland that did not have a copy.³¹

SOME HERBS MENTIONED IN THE EARLY REMEDY BOOKS

Hillel Ba'al Shem, a well-known eighteenth-century practical kabbalist who traveled many of the regions of the Pale, in his Hebrew-language *Sefer ha-Heshek* relied on Polish and East Slavic dialect terminology—*plaster* (plaster), *kwarta* (quart), *wanna* (bath), *syrop* (syrup), *funt* (pound), *belladonna* (belladonna), *walerjana* (valerian), *majewij barszcz* (May borscht), *krapiva* (nettles), *gorczyca* (mustard), *woronii koren* (raven root), *pijawki* (leeches).³²

Yoel Ba'al Shem, who was active in Zamość (present-day Poland) in the late seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries, in his recipes used Slavic terms such as *tsybulia* (onion), *ognennaia kost* (fire-bone [elderberry?] seeds), *ruta* (rue), *malwa* (mallow), *smetana* (sour cream), *petrushka* (parsley), and “Slavic” herbs as well as medical terms (elixirs, balsams, plasters) common in the standard scientific language of the time.³³

Along with practical Kabbalahs, the other significant genre of remedy books widely used by the ba'alei shem were the translated works of prominent European physicians of the era. The great international bestseller from the late eighteenth century into the nineteenth century was French Swiss physician Samuel-Auguste Tissot's *Avis au peuple sur sa santé*, “Advice to the People in General, with Regard to Their Health.” Tissot's work went through many editions in a number of translations, eventually making its way into both Hebrew and Yiddish versions for the use of Ashkenazi healers in the Pale. Herbal products recommended by Tissot (all common in the general European *materia medica* of the time) in the Yiddish and Hebrew (abridged) translations include elderflower, silverweed, rose, purslane, lettuce, houseleek, vervain, herb Robert, crane's-bill, chervil,

parsley, sage, rosemary, rue, mint, marjoram, tobacco, wormwood, ground oak, Carmelite water, and Hungary water.³⁴ Whether the remedy books were written by physicians whose work had been translated into Hebrew or Yiddish or were authored by the ba'alei shem themselves, this body of knowledge, which borrowed liberally from many sources both ancient and modern, left an indelible mark on medical praxis among Eastern European Jews, and many books were reprinted numerous times over several centuries.³⁵

The European Enlightenment, the intellectual movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that emphasized the value of scientific reason over tradition, eventually affected the culture of Ashkenazi healers, whose practices were rooted in the age-old ways. And as the Enlightenment took hold in Eastern Europe, general communal trust in the traditional mystical ways of healers such as the ba'alei shem began to erode.

By the end of the eighteenth century, however, *tsadikim* (Hebrew, “the righteous”), the new leaders of the emergent Hasidic movement, which promoted a spiritual revival among Ashkenazim beginning in the eighteenth century, supplanted the ba'alei shem as community healers with paranormal powers; and the trained physician, along with a new profession, the feldsher, displaced them as community healers with medical or paramedical training.³⁶

EARLY JEWISH PHYSICIANS

Alongside traditional healers and religious leaders, trained physicians also treated Ashkenazi Jews in the Pale. Prior to the seventeenth century, many Jewish physicians in Eastern Europe were formally trained in academies abroad, foremost among them at the famous medical school in Padua, Italy. Apart from practicing medicine for their livelihood, many Jewish physicians were also scholars, rabbis, philosophers, or poets. And while most Ashkenazi Jews were beset by persecutions, pogroms, forced conversions, and everyday restrictions and prejudice, trained physicians often attained high social standing in the communities where they lived. Significantly, these physicians often limited their practice to the upper classes rather than their co-religionists in the towns and villages. Many trained physicians considered themselves as too exalted to perform lowly tasks such as surgery, which they regarded as worthy only of their uneducated assistants.

Trained physicians in the early modern period (roughly 1600–1800) offered consultations or oversaw surgeries, but mostly they served as private doctors or university instructors.³⁷ Whatever advantages their formal education provided them socially or financially, the main contribution of early modern Jewish physicians toward the advancement of medicine was in their role as translators, bringing the writings of Islamic medicine (often via Hebrew) to a wider European audience.³⁸

EARLY PHARMACIES

The pharmacy or apothecary has for centuries been the primary commercial source of medicaments, frequented by traditional healers and trained professionals alike: from the Middle Ages onward, pharmacies were where traditional and other healers acquired their secret ingredients, recipes, prescriptions, and jargon. Pharmacies sold not only preformulated medicines but also plants such as *Piper nigrum* (black pepper), *Cinnamomum* spp. (cinnamon), *Prunus dulcis* (almond), *Castanea sativa* (European chestnut), and *Laurus nobilis* (bay laurel) leaves, various roots, wax candles, and incense.³⁹

Pharmacies served as meeting places for the ba'alei shem and other healers, where they could pursue their interests and trade stories and information regarding their arts.⁴⁰ In Poland the pharmacist was known as an *aptekarz*, *alchemik*, or *chemik*, and aside from supplying ingredients, pharmacists also relied on their own collections of books and manuscripts for recipes and instructions for concocting medicines. Apothecary libraries in all communities often collected not only classical medical tracts such as those of Hippocrates, Galen, Avicenna, and Dioscorides but also pharmaceutical and perfumers' manuals, along with the writings from the alchemical tradition. Among the most important alchemical works were those of Paracelsus and his disciples, whose thinking focused on the combined curative powers of magical belief and natural medicine.⁴¹

In the Pale, healers of different faiths and communities (Jewish, Russian, Polish, etc.) shared a trust in natural medical and alchemical remedies. Jewish Kabbalists, Polish paramedics, and private physicians of the Russian court were all engaged in the procurement and application of medicinal herbs. The inventories of commercial pharmacies in the larger towns of eighteenth-century Poland

were made up of the same array of herbal concoctions relied upon by the ba'alei shem in the shtetl.⁴² Jewish healers have left behind copious written evidence, such as handwritten prescriptions declaring *timtza be-apotek*: “You will find it in the pharmacy.” These confident assertions indicate that the ba'alei shem were intimately familiar with the commercial and secular world of the pharmacy and its wares, the key resource for the unique elements necessary for formulating their healing remedies.⁴³

EARLY JEWISH FELDSHERS

As mentioned previously, early modern Europe witnessed the expansion of a new paramedical profession, the feldsher. Paramedics were an integral part of the European medical landscape as far back as the Middle Ages. The complex history of the feldsher is tied to advances in both military technology and anatomical knowledge. In very general terms, feldshers were the military (“company”) barber-surgeons, as opposed to the civilian barber-surgeons (known in Poland as *cyrulicy*) who practiced alongside doctors and traditional healers throughout Europe.⁴⁴ Cyruliks were trained in shaving and bathing (i.e., barbering) as well as setting fractures, bloodletting, treating wounds, and so on (i.e., surgery). The cyrulik’s trade was often passed down within families, father to son, and many remedies were closely guarded secrets used over generations.

Attaching the barber-surgeon to armed forces to treat battlefield wounds and other afflictions common to military campaigns is what led to the rise of the feldsher, a word derived from the German *Feldscherer* (literally, “field-shearer”). The earliest feldshers specialized in the barber’s trade, shaving soldiers and cutting their hair, but over time, as warfare and medical knowledge evolved, their duties became more complex, eventually including tasks such as setting bones, administering medications, cupping, bloodletting, surgery, and amputations. Ultimately the feldsher supplanted the civilian cyrulik, as the rise of large standing armies along with near-constant warfare created an ongoing supply of battled-tested, experienced paramedics throughout Europe.

While we will likely never know the first Ashkenazi Jew to serve as a paramedic, the historical record suggests that he may have served in Swiss mercenary forces as early as the thirteenth century. The documentation indicates

that many Jews were community physicians tasked with combating epidemics. Given their representation in the medical trades, Jewish conscripts likely would have entered Swiss military service as feldshers.⁴⁵

When the position of *Feldscherer* was created in the Austrian army, the feldsher (drawn from the ranks of the civilian *cyruliks*) made his official debut in Eastern Europe. By the early seventeenth century it was obligatory for every company in the imperial army to employ a feldsher.⁴⁶ It's almost a certainty that the army of King Jan Sobieski of Poland, legendary for his lifting the Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683, included Ashkenazi feldshers: Sobieski's attitude toward Jews was extremely liberal, and while on the throne he granted the Ashkenazi communities of the Commonwealth many privileges and exemptions.⁴⁷

In addition to working as battlefield surgeons—amputating limbs, affixing leeches, and stitching up lacerations—feldshers were responsible for administering medications and were expected to be knowledgeable about herbal treatments. Per a journal entry written by a late seventeenth-century feldsher who participated in Sobieski's campaign:

*[Hospital] fumigation is carried out with juniper, wormwood, and even orange peel. The patients are treated with purgatives, emetics and perspirators. They do not spare the blood-letting and cupping glasses. They also heal with brandy, though it's difficult to get.*⁴⁸

Herbal fumigants were a widespread treatment in Ashkenazi Jewish communities well into the twentieth century. In his memoirs, the Polish Jew Yuri Suhl (born in 1908 in Podhajce, present-day Pidhaitsi, Ukraine) recalled the room where his mother lay dying. With a good deal of effort, his father was able to buy an orange, a scarce commodity in those days. The patient was given the fruit to eat, and the precious rind was cut up and placed around the sickroom, the traditional method, according to the author, for clearing the contaminated air in the room of the infirm.⁴⁹

Other early modern feldshers' natural healing remedies also continued to be used for centuries. The same seventeenth-century feldsher's journal notes the treatment for a gunshot wound:

On November 11, the feldsher applied herbal concoctions and ointment compresses . . . plasters of bread mixed with saliva and cobwebs to prevent

*gangrene and . . . when squadrons began to complain about frostbite . . . ointments prepared from herbs that were excellent for prevention of the condition were applied.*⁵⁰

Another twentieth-century Polish Jewish memoir, this from Apt (present-day Opatów, Poland), attests to the persistence of this practice: the author reminisces how, as a boy, he and his friends would use spiderwebs to bandage any cuts and wounds they had suffered during a day's adventures.⁵¹

Nowhere in Eastern Europe was the feldsher as deeply integrated into medical care as in Russia. Introduced into the Russian military in the seventeenth century, the feldsher, owing to a dearth of trained physicians and the great size of the tsarist army, was a crucial component in medical service in the Russian and later Soviet armies well into the twentieth century.⁵² A significant part of this expansion was precipitated by the late eighteenth-century partitions of Poland and Russia's acquisition of much of its territory. After 1795 most Ashkenazi Jews became Russian subjects, including any feldshers who had served in the former Polish army and, with compulsory conscription, would have subsequently continued their military service under the Russian flag.⁵³

The Russian government's treatment of its Jewish population was mutable. During the partitions of Poland, in order to assimilate her new subjects into the Russian Empire, Catherine the Great granted Jewish merchants permission to live and trade in the newly acquired towns in the districts of Mogilev and Polotsk. Jews were also granted similar permissions in formerly Ottoman regions conquered in 1793. These grants, however, were geographically fixed into the notorious confines of the Pale of Settlement, which had been drawn up in 1791. These were the boundaries that restricted the movements and activities of Russia's Ashkenazi Jews, and it was these discriminatory borders that persisted for more than a century, right up to the First World War.

Under these complex circumstances, Ashkenazi feldshers throughout the new jurisdictions continued to practice their trade and adapt to the dictates of the era as best they could. If they managed to survive long terms of compulsory military service, which at times was twenty-five years, they often returned to rural areas of the Pale, where there was generally little or no sanctioned medical care, in order to earn a living.

Several specific factors distinguished the Pale's Ashkenazi feldshers from their non-Jewish counterparts. While all of Eastern Europe's feldshers would have undergone similar on-the-job training, Jewish feldshers observed customs that made their healing methods distinct from those of other feldshers.

One of these differences lay in the simple act of shaving. Throughout the Pale, even as late as the twentieth century, shaving was prohibited for Jews. An Ashkenazi feldsher (or *cyrulik*), with a practice that mainly served his co-religionists, would not be expected to provide this service. Thus, unlike the Christian barber-surgeon, who might specialize in the former rather than the latter part of the hyphenated profession, his Jewish counterpart would have concentrated almost exclusively on the healing aspects of the profession rather than the tasks of grooming.⁵⁴

Another difference lay in the Jewish feldsher's community standing. Because sanctioned medical care in Ashkenazi communities in the Pale by the nineteenth century was generally provided by feldshers rather than trained physicians (the restrictions that barred most Jews from attending Russian universities, along with the draft, played a large role in this), their social standing was rather high for a paraprofessional trade. Feldshers were considered "folk physicians" by their communities, and Ashkenazi Jews affectionately referred to their community feldshers as *rofe*, or *royfe*, Hebrew for "doctor." As they were so often "of the people," their down-to-earth reputation created a strong and trusting bond between feldshers and their communities. Assuming they were able to choose between a trained physician and a feldsher when seeking care, Jewish patients were far more likely to confide in the latter, particularly when discussing their reliance on traditional healing.⁵⁵ Because of their close and intimate ties to their communities (both as enforced through the restrictions of the Pale and the rooted hereditary lineage that shaped their practices), feldshers regularly interacted with other traditional folk healers, knew their remedies, and often made extensive use of that knowledge. As a result, the feldsher's medical repertoire was enriched by the variety of herbal and other traditional remedies they encountered.

A third difference that distinguished the Ashkenazi feldshers from their non-Jewish counterparts was their use of the remedy books, the *segulot ve-refu'ot* described earlier. These handbooks with their secret plant-based remedies were as important to the Jewish feldsher or *cyrulik* as they were for the *ba'alei shem*.

One of the most important works was the *Ma'aseh Toviyah* (“The Work of Tobias”), written by the physician Tobias ha-Kohen and first published in 1707, a cornerstone of the Ashkenazi feldsher desk reference for centuries. (Many manuscript copies and printings—from as late as 1908—are extant.)⁵⁶

Feldshers of course also relied on secular European medical literature, such as Tissot. As these works went through the translation process, they were often reshaped to meet communal needs. One such book, Heinrich Felix Paulizky’s *Anleitung für Bürger und Landleute* (1793) was translated into Hebrew (via Polish) as *Marpe le-Am*, and individual chapters were extracted, abridged, and republished (a pamphlet called “*Imrei Israel*” was a standard resource on convulsions). In its Hebrew rendering, *Marpe le-Am* was the key nineteenth-century medical text that incorporated Western medicine, traditional plant knowledge, and the specific religious requirements of the Jewish community; it was widely used by feldshers, physicians, and religious scholars alike.⁵⁷

That the Ashkenazi feldsher relied on medical works with an explicitly religious focus indicates how strongly his approach to healing was directly influenced by Jewish religious sources such as the Talmud or other religious authorities (e.g., Maimonides). These sources generally contained detailed prescriptions for preventing disease by performing ablutions and exercises, the proper preparation of foods and beverages, and the benefit of massages, fresh air, and so on.

As for the Talmud as a medical resource, the majority of its healing prescriptions are based on well over a hundred plants and their derivatives, such as sage, rock soapwort (*Saponaria*), spinach, opium, and olive oil. Many of the Talmud’s prescriptions, sometimes adapted but often unchanged, found their way into the feldshers’ inventory as cures; baths in mineral water were advised for certain skin diseases, and purges using herbal enemas were also recommended.⁵⁸

Feldsher medicines were mainly used to alleviate pain (opiata) or heal wounds through the application of different specialized ointments and plasters. The exact composition of many of these concoctions (reputed to have extraordinary curative properties) was often a jealously guarded secret. The most popular feldsher prescriptions in late eighteenth-century Russia for healing fresh wounds were the leaves of *Herba plantaginis* (*Plantago* spp.) or cabbage. Plantain has been recommended since ancient times for its curative powers. Tobias ha-Kohen in the

Ma'aseh Toviya recommends it for digestive and related ailments; today's herbalists continue to utilize the plant for its ability to heal wounds and other afflictions. In the towns and villages of the Pale, *Plantago major* was one of the chief vulnerary herbs and was highly valued by traditional Ashkenazi healers. (See "Materia Medica": *Plantago major*, p. 177.) Feldshers also relied on common household ingredients when making plasters to apply to wounds: cotton oil mixed with egg yolk, or wheat flour mixed with egg white or honey. For ointments the base was lard, bear grease, cotton oil, and laurel oil (*Oleum laurinum*).⁵⁹

Given the religious proscription against pork, one might question the use of lard in ointments made by Jewish healers for Jewish patients, but it was not unusual for this ingredient to be cited as part of a prescription: for physical weakness, David (Tevle) Ashkenazi recorded in his book *Bet David* popular cures of the day that recommended the sick rub the soles of their feet with hog fat and drink boiled water with the juice of the gentian plant as a tonic.⁶⁰ This remedy is similar to one recorded in the early twentieth century in the town of Yelisavetgrad (present-day Kropyvnytskyi, Ukraine), where a folk healer, most likely a feldsher, gave to those suffering from colds an ointment made from dried nettle flowers mixed with lard, which was rubbed on the legs after a foot steam bath.⁶¹ (See "Materia Medica": *Urtica urens*, p. 237.) Also relied upon by feldshers were "bear's ears" (*uva ursi*), taken as an infusion or dry powder for kidney ailments. Infusions of valerian leaves were drunk as a calming tonic, and valerian roots were swallowed as an emetic. Snakeweed ("*Aristolochia clemat*") was also a remedy for many ailments, and in fact, *Aristolochia clematidis* is one of the herbs employed in Ashkenazi folk medicine far into the twentieth century.⁶² (See "Materia Medica": *Aristolochia clematidis*, p. 65.)

CHANGES BROUGHT BY THE ENLIGHTENMENT

The European Enlightenment inspired a specifically Jewish response: from the late eighteenth century, proponents of the *Haskalah* (Hebrew, "wisdom"), the Jewish Enlightenment, began to chisel away at age-old traditions, especially with regard to health and healing in the Pale. Physicians with Western academic training, together with health care reformers emerging from the nascent Jewish middle classes of Eastern Europe, attempted to reshape popular attitudes