



ASHKENAZI HERBALISM

REDISCOVERING THE
HERBAL TRADITIONS OF
EASTERN EUROPEAN JEWS

DEATRA COHEN AND
ADAM SIEGEL

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CONTENTS



Preface	xi
PART I: A HISTORY OF ASHKENAZI FOLK HEALERS.	1
PART II: MATERIA MEDICA	55
1 <i>Aloe arborescens</i>	59
2 <i>Aristolochia clematidis</i>	65
3 <i>Artemisia absinthium</i>	71
4 <i>Chelidonium majus</i>	81
5 <i>Cichorium intybus</i>	89
6 <i>Cynoglossum officinale</i>	97
7 <i>Delphinium consolida</i>	103
8 <i>Equisetum arvense</i>	107
9 <i>Filipendula hexapetala</i>	115
10 <i>Fragaria vesca</i>	123
11 <i>Hypericum perforatum</i>	131
12 <i>Lavatera thuringiaca</i>	141
13 <i>Lepidium ruderales</i>	151
14 <i>Myristica fragrans</i>	157
15 <i>Nymphaea alba</i>	165
16 <i>Paeonia officinalis</i>	171

17	<i>Plantago major</i>	177
18	<i>Polygonum aviculare</i>	185
19	<i>Potentilla anserina</i>	193
20	<i>Quercus robur</i>	201
21	<i>Rubus idaeus</i>	209
22	<i>Sedum acre</i>	215
23	<i>Symphytum officinale</i>	219
24	<i>Trifolium pratense</i>	227
25	<i>Urtica urens</i>	237
26	<i>Viola mirabilis</i>	247
PART III: AFTERWORD		255
Appendix 1: Pale of Settlement Towns Referenced in “Materia Medica” with Significant Ashkenazi Populations circa 1926		
		260
Appendix 2: Timeline of Sources Referred to in Text.		
		263
Glossary.		
		265
Notes		
		269
Bibliography		
		295
Index		
		303
Acknowledgments		
		331
About the Authors		
		333

PREFACE



ON THE SURFACE, HERBALISM, OR HERBAL MEDICINE, seems a simple enough concept. It's the reliance upon plant medicine to heal a body from disease, with an eye toward returning that body to its natural state of balance. But herbalism is a much more complex practice than one might assume.

According to the American Herbalists Guild:

Herbal medicine is the art and science of using herbs for promoting health and preventing and treating illness. It has persisted as the world's primary form of medicine since the beginning of time, with a written history more than 5000 years old. While the use of herbs in America has been overshadowed by dependence on modern medications in the last 100 years, 75% of the world's population still rely primarily upon traditional healing practices, most of which is herbal medicine.¹

Human reliance on the medicinal properties of plants is ancient and worldwide, but as universal as our connection may be, our ways of working with the plants can vary. One reason for this is environmental: every part of Earth is distinct, with its own indigenous fauna and flora that are each dependent on their unique natural surroundings and each other. The plants and animals that settle and evolve in one region become accustomed to that region's local weather conditions, soil composition, and all the other organisms and creatures with whom they share their habitat. In this way, for example, native peoples living near the equator are familiar with completely different circumstances than those who call the Arctic home. These two distinct ecosystems provide very different life experiences—and challenges—for the humans and other living organisms who settle there.

But humans are not the only ones who endure the conditions of our domains. Plants also need to maintain vitality within the dynamic conditions of their environment. To overcome the hardships they've encountered, plants have learned how best to persist in the face of environmental adversity. It's these verdant secrets of survival that have drawn humans and other organisms to the flora that flourish in our midsts. Through our contacts with the plant world, we've learned not only how to survive over countless generations but also how to thrive on this tumultuous planet we call home.

When I began studying herbalism, the program where I was enrolled encouraged students to get to know our own ancestral healing practices.* This idea isn't unique to any particular herbal school; most if not all herbalists are curious about their own ancestors' traditional practices and often look there for inspiration and guidance.

When you consider our ancestors' relationship with plants for healing and sustenance, over thousands of years, it makes sense that our bodies, on a physical level at the very least, would have traces of the essences that contributed so much to our well-being.

In fact, humans have relied on plants for almost all of our basic needs: food, drink, housing, utensils, tools, clothing, energy, companionship, warmth. Plants have even been the subject of some of our most memorable stories. Who doesn't remember the three magic beans that grew overnight into the stalk Jack climbed up into the clouds to find the giant? Or, in more contemporary literature, the endless sea of red poppies that lulled Dorothy and her friends into sleep on their way to see the Wizard? We've had a long and intimate relationship with the plant world, and whether our minds are conscious of it or not, our bodies seem to remember more than they let on. Examples of stored memories might come in the form of an allergic reaction to strawberries or peanuts, salivation in response to the taste of any bitter herb, or, in my case, a vaporous memory conjured in my forties when I experienced the scent of a linden tree in bloom for the first time. To my knowledge I'd never come across this kind of tree before, and yet as soon as I was aware of its fragrance, I felt like I'd come home. On a purely

* The first-person singular is used by Deatra throughout to describe her impressions and experiences in researching and writing this book.

PREFACE

visceral level, we're already familiar with many of the plants we encounter, and our individual interactions with them are based on long-forgotten connections waiting to be reawakened.

Having been a professional librarian for many years, I was looking forward to researching what I assumed would be a good-sized collection of resources devoted to the medicinal plant knowledge of the people I call my ancestors. Both sides of my family are Ashkenazi from the Pale of Settlement. My father's family emigrated to the United States and Canada in the early twentieth century from what today is Ukraine, specifically the cities of Kiev and Cherkassy. Both of my mother's parents were from the same region of Poland; one branch of that family can be traced back to their town's founding in the early eighteenth century, where they stayed put until the outbreak of the Second World War.

One might assume that Ashkenazim, who have a well-documented history in Eastern Europe's Pale of Settlement (the Pale) dating at least as far back as the Middle Ages, would have an exhaustive and distinguished canon dedicated to their healing practices, which would, no doubt, include the reliance upon plant medicine. But that assumption couldn't be further from the truth.

Once I started my research, I was at first surprised and then shocked at the complete absence of any information whatsoever on herbalism in any Ashkenazi communities of the Pale. And I wasn't alone in my discovery, or lack thereof. A few other students in my class who were of similar background also came up empty-handed. Out of frustration, one of us joked, "Well, at least we have chicken soup!" She was just as amazed as I that there was literally nothing else to be found, but she consoled herself with the belief that of course older generations had relied on plant medicine. And if they hadn't, it was probably because of religious restrictions.

I mulled all this over. Even though I hadn't been raised religiously and know next to nothing about Judaism, it seemed doubtful that any religion, no matter how strict, would keep the people from taking care of themselves. What little I did know was that the Jews had endured countless hardships and, despite these, had survived for thousands of years. There must have been a little bit of help from the natural world they lived in, and this would have included any medicinal plants in the vicinity.

Falling back on my librarian roots, I figured someone somewhere in the last century must have conducted an ethnobotanical study of the Ashkenazi people of the Pale. It seemed natural that an objective third party would have facilitated a basic survey of such a well-known population.*

But even a thorough search of the ethnobotanical literature proved fruitless. Information I assumed would be abundant was nonexistent. My husband, who speaks and reads multiple languages, many of them relevant for this research, foraged through multiple sources of every possible linguistic angle regarding the subject. It eventually became undeniably clear that not only was an ethnobotanical survey of Eastern Europe's Ashkenazim nonexistent, but there was next to nothing published describing the healers themselves who would have applied the medicinal plant knowledge.

I could not accept this turn of events. For better or worse, my past profession dogged me and I became more relentless in my mission to find evidence of Ashkenazi herbalism. Was this the ancestors urging me on? Who knows. But I do know that I didn't want to feel like an herbal interloper, forever having to refer to other peoples' traditions, never knowing what plant knowledge my own grandparents had relied on. I was certain that if I continued searching I would eventually stumble on some evidence I knew was out there.

My persistence led to more than a few dead ends, but every so often I came across tantalizing fragments of an Ashkenazi herbal past that were like a diaspora in their own right. I occasionally had the minor breakthrough, like the night I was half-heartedly searching for images of healers in a database dedicated to the Holocaust. Instead of portraits, I found a photograph of what looked like a vintage milk bottle. When I zoomed in to get a better view, its intact label hinted at a fascinating and completely unexpected story. This was a bottle of "bitters," a liquor infused with medicinal herbs, such as gentian, for digestive health. Later I found that these aperitifs were common in Ashkenazi communities both in and outside the Pale.

* According to the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, *ethnobotany*—which became an academic discipline in the 1890s—focuses its attention on the plant lore of Indigenous cultures and also the systematic study of such lore.

PREFACE

Another image search for the elusive folk healers of the Pale led me to sources I might not have found otherwise. One of these is a catalog to an exhibition. It features photographs taken in the early twentieth-century towns and villages of the Pale during the An-Sky expeditions. Who was An-Sky and why is his work important to discovering the herbal legacy of Eastern Europe's Ashkenazim of the early twentieth century? An-Sky's ethnographic work is one of many sources I wove together to bring the story of Ashkenazi herbalism into better focus in the pages ahead.

Another source was an ethnobotanical field study of sorts undertaken by the Soviet government between the world wars in an attempt to locate inexpensive medicines after domestic supplies had been depleted. The author of the study managed to bring the original research with her to the United States after the Second World War and, through government agencies that existed at the time, had an excerpt of that field work translated into English and published as part of a Cold War series on Eastern Europe. This document ostensibly covered the Eastern Europe of my ancestors; however, its vague language at first distracted me from understanding its true contents.

There was something undeniably mysterious about this book, but its presentation made it difficult to interpret. On the surface it looks like an outdated government document that easily could have been the victim of a vigorous weeding project at any public library. For some reason still unknown to me, I decided to more closely explore the data it so innocuously presented.

While the author never truly identifies the folk healers interviewed for the study, one of the book's appendices lists many of the towns that were targeted for the surveys. On a whim I started to investigate the towns identified, and almost immediately it became clear that most of these were located along the Dnieper River in what is present-day Ukraine. A large percentage of these were on the right bank. They were Ashkenazi towns and villages (Yiddish: *shtetlekh* and *derfer*) of the Pale of Settlement.

Once I started to untangle the information the book presented, a very unexpected trail of clues emerged. To make certain I was on the right path, I spent the next six months deciphering the book's anecdotal data. Eventually I had to tape together pieces of graph paper to make a huge table so I could accurately plot the information scattered throughout the document. From there I created a

ASHKENAZI HERBALISM

spreadsheet that I could more easily search and sort. I wanted both to get a better understanding of the hidden content I had inadvertently discovered and also to find any patterns that might emerge from it.

After I finished all of this, the puzzle pieces fell into place. Not only had I stumbled onto the herbs known by Eastern Europe's Ashkenazi healers at the turn of the twentieth century, but I had also found the healers themselves. This is their story.