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Review Of "Baba's Kitchen Medicines: Folk Remedies Of Ukrainian Settlers In Western Canada" By M. Mucz

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Mucz, Michael. *Baba's Kitchen Medicines: Folk Remedies of Ukrainian Settlers in Western Canada*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: The University of Alberta Press, 2012. Illustrations, Maps, Appendices, Selected Readings, Index. xxv+265 pp. \$34.95 (paper). ISBN-13: 978-0-88864-514-2.

Although the folklife of Ukrainians in Canada has been the topic of a number of valuable studies, some traditions or memories of traditions were passed on only orally until now. Michael Mucz, a professor of biology with interests in ethnobotany and herbal medicine who teaches in the University of Alberta system, offers a well-rounded and fascinating study of the folk healing practices of Ukrainian communities in Canada in *Baba's Kitchen Medicines: Folk Remedies of Ukrainian Settlers in Western Canada*. Mucz briefly but effectively outlines the historical context of Ukrainian settlements in Canada, noting that compact settlements in isolated areas meant both a need for mutual aid and a greater likelihood of preserving traditions, whereas consulting scientific medicine and trained doctors involved both distance (difficulty) and expense. A chapter on ancient healing practices reaches back to Classical Greece, while another outlines the specialized kinds of healers who could be found in the Ukrainian communities: bonesetters, mostly men who had learned the skill while serving in the Austro-Hungarian Army; midwives who helped women in childbirth; herbalists, found much less often than the bearers of "kitchen" herbal medicine; and spiritual healers, who would crack eggs into water or use other folk methods to advance psychological well-being. Mucz's informants come from a variety of religions and places of origin, but the data is based on extensive interviews with children and grandchildren of the original settlers. (There is also just a glimpse of aboriginal healing practices, as picked up by the Ukrainian communities.) The best part of the book offers tables with lists of medicinal preparations, often providing quotations from individual informants and other kinds of context for the healing practices cited.

The book is richly illustrated with maps and black-and-white photographs, which include both historical photographs of

Ukrainian settlers and contemporary pictures of some of the plants mentioned in the text. There are no photographs of actual healing in practice, which underlines the private and domestic, occasionally even secretive, nature of many of the treatments. Besides these pictures, Mucz offers a treasure trove of data: tables with information about his informants and the lists of remedies reported used for a variety of ailments, mentioned above. One chart conveys almost 4000 “individual healing situations” (38); others break the information down into smaller categories. Tables of results indicate the “treatment value” of the home remedies, depending on how many informants reported use of a certain remedy.

The text asserts several times that later generations of Ukrainian Canadians rejected traditional healing practices not because they were ineffective, but because they considered them old-fashioned and embarrassing, a reaction not unusual for assimilating second-generation immigrants (18, 46 and elsewhere). Thus the book makes two arguments: first, that these traditional ways of healing are part of the heritage of Ukrainian Canadians; and second, that these healing practices have many virtues, not least their reported effectiveness. Mucz otherwise offers no judgments, which will make this book friendly to anyone who might want to use the information for actual healing practice, as well as for ethnographers and other scholars. The conclusion of the one-page disclaimer that opens the book makes clear that this is intended: “Know your limits and recognize that good sense and health not only go together but are also life’s greatest blessings. Make your personal health a valued and lifelong task” (vii). The book is interesting for comparative work as well, since many of the healing practices or substances are widely accepted in other cultures as well (a preparation of blueberries for diarrhea; cranberries for urinary problems), as well as possible ancestry for or insight into many alternative therapies today (11).

Mucz is a somewhat diffident authorial presence but both likable and efficient. Many readers will find his clear language and avoidance of jargon appealing. (An understandable exception is

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when he draws on the vocabulary of botany or medicine, as when explaining why weeds may contain useful chemicals (“secondary metabolites” (60-61).) Other readers might regret that he has not pursued the fascinating material in this book in theoretical directions, especially since the book’s title makes clear the importance of age and gender in the realm of folk healing. At one point, Mucz notes, “Women, being generally more sensitive and caring in nature, were typically the family’s health care providers” (15). One might ask whether this is Mucz’s own opinion or that of his informants. Indeed, an informant is cited shortly thereafter, noting the predominance of woman as healers in a much more neutral way (16). One other possible criticism is that several small sections of the book are repeated verbatim in various places—though that means that a reader who dips in rather than reading through the whole is more likely to see those ideas.

Elsewhere in the book, Mucz is more careful to clarify his sources for statements on gender traits or the gendered nature of certain kinds of healing, and this enhances the book’s value for readers interested in that aspect of history and traditional culture. He notes that some of his data was limited too: “Female concerns were seldom openly discussed, because cultural and gender boundaries made it difficult for informants to address such topics comfortably with a man, let alone a stranger” (39). It is regrettable that he could not have invited a female colleague to collaborate on this part of his research.

These few objections do not obscure the importance of Mucz’s thoughtful work. The book is a tribute both to Ukrainian heritage in Canada and to Michael Mucz’s patience and imagination in gathering the information over many years, and *Baba’s Kitchen Medicines* is recommended to every one of the several audiences to which it will appeal.

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