

Russian Remedies

To a degree that astonishes Western visitors, the residents of the Soviet capital rely on folk medicine—a pervasive system of beliefs, superstitions, and amateur medical practices. For many reasons—shortages of commonly needed drugs, impurities or dilution of existing drugs, lack of information about modern medical techniques, enduring mistrust (founded and unfounded) of chemical preparations of all kinds—folk medicine plays an important role in the average Muscovite's health care. Nancy Condee, a specialist on the Soviet Union, here describes some of the more popular nostrums that she and her husband, Volodya Padunov, encountered during a research stint in Moscow.

by Nancy Condee

Folk cures vary enormously in Moscow, depending on which folk is ill. An Armenian student was shocked to learn that my husband, Volodya, was cooking chicken soup for me, his ailing wife. "Chicken soup! Have you lost your mind?" he shouted. "That's all wrong. Melons! That's what she needs for a cold." And off he went to fetch the care package sent each week from Yerevan by his mother.

By far the most common material ingredients in Russian folk medicine are, not surprisingly, potatoes, garlic, onion, and vodka. A cold, for example, may be cured, or at least made more bearable, in a variety of ways:

- Dig up a potato with the earth still clinging to it. Boil it in its jacket and inhale the vapors.
- Drink pepper vodka. Better yet, one

taxi driver joked, drink a mixture of vodka and water every hour: one glass of vodka to each drop of water.

- Buy pig fat and stick garlic cloves in it. Rub the chunk of fat all over your body before going to bed at night. When you wake up the cold will be gone. Try badger grease with oil of mint as a variant.
- Heat a clove of garlic in warm water and stick it up your nose.
- If an earache accompanies the cold, place a sliver of roasted onion in the ailing ear.

One literary critic, a reformed drinker, had the simplest cure. "Just drink," he advised me, waxing nostalgic for the good old days. "When I was younger and used to drink a great deal, I never suffered from anything. Now that I've stopped, I'm ill all the time."

Vodka may be the best general pana-

cea, but the most common Russian cure for a chest cold is mustard plasters (*gorchichniki*). Ten of them may be bought for five kopeks (about seven cents) in any Moscow pharmacy. Slightly larger than playing cards, the dry plasters must be dipped briefly in warm water and then placed, mustard side out, along the back and side, avoiding the spine. Depending on the strength of the mustard, the patient's torso may be wrapped first in newspaper to protect the skin. The torso is then rewrapped in newspaper, flannel, a wide scarf, or whatever is at hand, and the patient must endure both the burning sensation and the unpleasant odor as long as possible, so as to produce maximum circulation of the blood in the affected area.

Avoiding the Kidneys

Increased circulation is also the primary purpose of *banki*, or cupping glasses, still widely used in Moscow. Small, thick jars with rounded bottoms about the size of shot glasses, *banki* are said to cure all severe respiratory problems. Any stick, such as a knitting needle, a pencil, or, best of all, a pair of scissors, is tightly wrapped in cotton wool and dipped in alcohol. The cotton swab is then lit, quickly swirled inside the jar so as to create a vacuum, and the jar is applied to the oiled torso, avoiding the kidneys, nipples, and the heart.

This is easier said than done, and easier done than experienced, my friends tell me. If the cotton swab is inserted into the cupping glass too quickly, the vacuum will be too weak and the glass will fall off. If the swab is passed too slowly around the glass, the overheated

jar will burn the patient's skin.

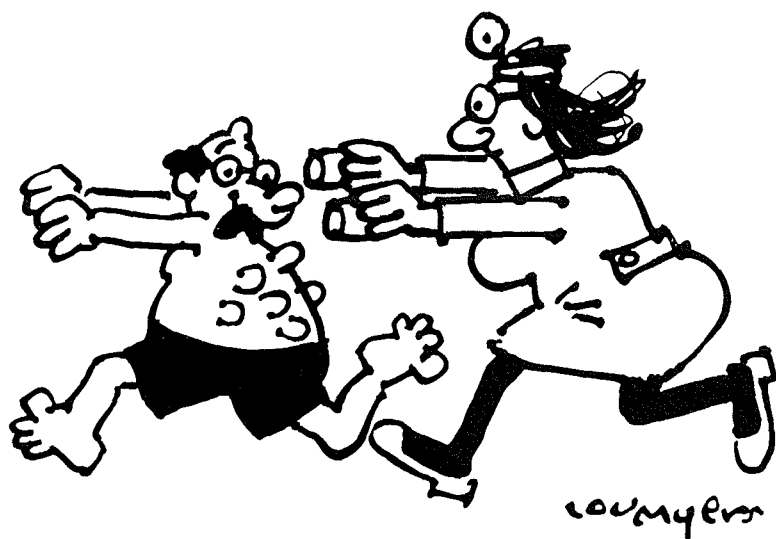
Properly administered *banki*, I am told, will adhere to the spot where the cold is located and will suck out the illness. After the treatment, the suction is carefully broken by inserting a finger under the glass. Even when correctly applied, *banki* will leave black-and-blue welts on the skin for up to a month.

In trying repeatedly to find someone who would apply *banki* to me, I discovered a curious and contradictory rule of modern medicine: As such treatments as *banki* become increasingly outmoded, the knowledge of their application becomes correspondingly limited to medical experts. While many friends and acquaintances have had *banki* applied to them, no one was confident enough to apply them to someone else. Find a nurse, I was told. Having found one, I met the next obstacle: I needed a sound medical reason to have *banki* applied. Curiosity would not suffice. In desperation, I offered up Volodya, then suffering from a severe chest cold, and the nurse finally agreed. Volodya, however, did not. Had he been feeling better, he explained, he would have tried it out. But with a cold and all, it was difficult to be enthusiastic about welts.

The Marvels of *Mumiyo*

Lest the reader suspect that I am making this up as I go along, I would like to stress here that there are all kinds of other Russian folk remedies that I have chosen not to include, remedies of which the average Muscovite is no longer even aware. These range from the quaint—birch leaf baths, for example—to the bizarre (earthworm salves, urine rubs,

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bee-sting therapy, potato suppositories).

However resistant Soviet city-dwellers are to taking pills when a concoction of crushed daisies (for the skin), fennel tea (to help you sleep), or red bilberries (for rheumatism) will work just as well, they are now much harder to convince that malaria might be cured by wearing amber beads; that colds might best be treated by abstaining from all liquids for 24 hours; or that an epileptic seizure may be halted by stepping on the little finger of the epileptic as he or she is writhing on the floor.

No explanation of contemporary folk cures is complete, however, without a description of *mumiyo*. A black, congealed substance like tar, *mumiyo* is sold under the counter at farmers' markets and by other unofficial suppliers of folk remedies.

Mumiyo was originally discovered by hunters, who noticed that injured ani-

mals always returned to specific spots where they would lick an oozing resin from crevices in the rocks. Scraped from the rocks and boiled down into a hard, concentrated form, this resin was found by the hunters to have healing properties, and became used for a wide variety of ailments.*

Whatever lengths hunters went to in their search for *mumiyo*—the many *versts* traveled over rough terrain to scrape the precious substance from the rocks, stalking wounded animals to their secret healing places; the return trips in the dead of night, when other hunters could not follow—their enthusiasm for the miracle substance seems mild in

* *Mumiyo* has been identified, variously, as bitumen (as in asphalt or tar) or as a coniferous oil or resin. Ancient Persians and Greeks, thinking that this substance was used for the preservation of human corpses in Egypt, mistakenly dubbed those preserved bodies "mummies." In fact, the Egyptians used the substance only for the preservation of animal corpses.

comparison with that of the Moscow intelligentsia. Theirs is a zeal that borders on religious.

Mumiyo, as it turns out, has all the necessary elements of a cult cure: It is found only in the remote wilds; it cures animals; it is rare. No one knows exactly what it is. And above all, it is ugly.

As a rule, the curiosity of the academy lags far behind that of the public. In the case of *mumiyo*, however, the opposite is true. The reader will be gratified to learn that the first scholarly *mumiyo* symposium took place in Dushanbe as early as 1965. Seven years later, at a medical conference in Piatigorsk, Professor E. N. Kozlovskii presented a definitive set of guidelines for the use of *mumiyo*. For the treatment of diabetes, for example, he recommends the following 25-day regimen:

1. For the first 10 days, a tablespoon of *mumiyo* solution (17.5 grams of *mumiyo* dissolved in 500 grams of water) three times a day, 30 minutes before eating.
2. For the next 10 days, a tablespoon and a half of the solution three times a day before eating.
3. For the next five days, a tablespoon of the solution three times a day just before each meal.

If nausea results from the ingestion of the *mumiyo* solution, Professor Kozlovskii advises adding a half tablespoon of warm mineral water.

By 1976, *Mumiyo and Its Healing Properties*, the major work on *mumiyo*, appeared. According to its authors, Iu. Nuraliev and P. Denisenko, *mumiyo* is capable of curing chills, epilepsy, giddiness, and anemia. Their work contains many helpful charts and diagrams, cardiographs and scales, photographs of *mumiyo* chunks with little rulers under them, illustrations of the ecological sources of Asiatic *mumiyo*, tables documenting the influence of *mumiyo*

on white mice, rabbits, and rats, whose ailments range from traumatic neuritis to infected paws.

Thanks to the work of these two scholars, links have been established between *mumiyo* and other miracle cures such as Indian *salodzhit*, Arabian *arakuldzhibol*, and even the well-known Mongolian remedy *brakshun*.

Most important, however, is the research by these two scholars demonstrating that *mumiyo* was recommended more than 2500 years ago by no less a figure than Aristotle. Among the ailments for which Aristotle thought to provide *mumiyo* cures were congenital deafness, nosebleeds, and hiccups, for which you coat your tongue with a mixture of *mumiyo* and honey.

During the last 10 years, *mumiyo*'s popularity has spread to virtually all sectors of Moscow society: cashiers, students, hairdressers, journalists, cleaning women, teachers, train station porters, shop clerks, taxi drivers, and Party officials. As its reputation grew, so did its curative powers. "You know us," one Moscow State University student explained. "We are a people of extremes. If we find a cure for something, it works for everything."

And so, apparently, it does. "Broken bones, colds, cancer, burns, ulcers," enumerated one taxi driver, as we raced to a particular pharmacy in a vain search for leeches and *mumiyo*, "and, of course, old age. It can make you look younger."

Back to Banki

As the interest in the cure reached epidemic proportions, counterfeit *mumiyo* began to be manufactured and sold around Moscow. Panic seized the *mumiyo* market, and with good reason. There is no fear as great as the fear that the snake-oil salesman is selling you imitation snake oil.

Hunters in the Pamirs have had more success stalking the elusive *mumiyo* than I have had in the farmers' markets

of Moscow. Perhaps it is all for the best. Given the going rate of about eight rubles (\$11.28) a gram, I could only afford to look at it.

One flower-seller, however, offered to sell me what she claimed to be an equally effective miracle cure, a hard brown object that resembles something left by an inattentive dog owner. This curious substance, *propolis*, is ostensibly made up of the residue that builds up on the inside walls of beehives and is scraped off by the beekeeper at the end of the summer.

Grated into a liter of vodka—that go-send to folk medicine—*propolis* cures a cough when taken internally, and heals a burn or an aching muscle when rubbed on the skin. The flower-seller was most willing to part with a 100-gram chunk for a mere 20 rubles (\$28.20). She was less willing to part with it for 10 rubles, but finally agreed.

I brought the prized object that same evening to a nearby Moscow family, in hopes of further enlightenment on the use and benefits of *propolis*. As luck would have it, the family had another visitor, Ania, a *banki* expert. And so the events of the evening took an unexpected twist.

The female contingent gathered in the back room, armed with *banki*, cotton wool, and alcohol. I was asked to strip to

the waist. Ania was indeed an expert; I felt at most a warm, tugging sensation as the *banki* took hold, sucking my skin up inside the glasses in harmless, mushroom-shaped globs. Once removed, however, the *banki* left my back spotted with enormous welts—perfectly round, bright red, the size of my palm—where the blood vessels had burst beneath the skin. My back looked as if I had yielded to the amorous ministrations of a very large octopus.

The evening was not over. To my horror, Ania insisted that I now apply *banki* to her, as a trial run in case my husband should fall ill and require *banki*. I replied, with a cheery insistence that bordered on hysteria, that my husband never really got ill. Everyone nodded politely, but my gambit failed. I was then led, step by step, through the administering of *banki*. I kept telling myself that, in case of severe mutilation, the *propolis* might fix things up. To my great surprise, I managed to apply the *banki* without permanently scarring my patient teacher.

Finally, when we had both rested, as is of course required after the application of *banki*, I was sent home, welts and all, to my husband and child. Having listened to the story of my initiation into the mysteries of *banki*, Volodya was oddly insistent that his cold was much better.