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Health Care and Roma People

A few data of the history of Roma people

The centuries-old relationship between Gypsy/Roma people and health care is quite complex; their poor health status, typical co-morbidity, early mortality is often – and deservedly – talked about, while their active engagement in public health and folk medicine is rarely mentioned. In my study I aim to present the relationship between Gypsies and health care from this aspect.

Folk medicine, magical therapies

Folk or traditional medicine is a healing system besides academic and alternative (complementary) medicine.¹ But what does folk medicine mean exactly? All those magical tools and workings „*that were created by the spirit of the people through the secret relationship between diseases and the supernatural and superhuman world.*”² In folk medicine curses, evil eye, and divine punishment were considered as the main cause of diseases, therefore spells, curses and practices against evil eye were often used as treatment. In folk medicine – which was part of the traditional common culture – belief and knowledge are combined. General methods of healing were known in every family (mostly by women), and there were also specialists – healers, wise women – in each community. Magic was used for „removing” diseases, including strictly regulated actions (with an emphasis on place and time) and the utterance of pre-defined words. Instruments of magic: traditional actions (purifying, chasing, closing and expelling acts, etc.), traditional tools (e.g. sacramental), traditional accompanying elements (actions performed silently, at crossroads, on a doorstep, at a cemetery, after sunrise or sunset, etc.). An essential part of folk medicine was the knowledge and use of folk herbs as well. Good herbs (e.g. centaury, angelica) had healing power, while bad herbs (e.g. herb paris) induced curse, abortion or death. Today, the efficiency of certain therapies preserved in folk empiricism – especially herbs and numerous other therapies – is justified by ethno botanical and ethno pharmacological studies. Ethno medicine focuses on the healing

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- 1 Koltay Erika: Népi orvoslás – és természetgyógyászat. In: Lázár Imre-Pikó Bettina szerk.: Orvosi antropológia. Medicina Könyvkiadó Zrt., Budapest, 2012. 187.
- 2 Szendrey Ákos: Betegség, gyógyítás. In: A magyarság néprajza I-IV. (1933-37) Sajtó alá rendezte: Czákó Elemér. Egyetemi nyomda, Budapest. 1933. II. kötet 110-111.

effects of magical therapies, „spells”,³ healing rituals⁴ and „magic words”,⁵ too. Today not only the text but the psychological and healing effects of these spells are also examined. Psychophysical and biochemical effects of spells, healing rituals (the removal of curse or disease) are already shown; endorphin is released in the body which has stress relieving effect.⁶ By shaking off tension, giving out problems, „performing actions that helped others”, and the faith in recovery can trigger a positive change and healing. Faith in demons of disease was also an important element of folk medicine. It faded away by the 19-20th century, but they can be detected in cursings: „*May you be eaten by hell*”, „*May you be hit by stroke.*” or „*May you be broken by disease.*”⁷ These demons of disease must have been important subjects of early medicine! Every community around the world has always been responsive to the practices of folk healers due to bad public health circumstances or spiritual need. According to Soós József: „*magical-global approach is deeply rooted in the spirit of people. Magic means spiritual tension, and medicine retreats from that.*”⁸ Frazer said the following: „*Magic is the false system of natural law, but only from outside of the given belief system. From inside (from the perspective of someone living in a given community) it is part of everyday life regulated by the internal law of the system.*”⁹

Gypsies and folk medicine

According to our current knowledge, the first crews of the ethnic group called Gypsies appeared at the borders of Europe in the 11th-12th century. By wandering further, in the 13th-14th century they arrived to the Greek colonies of the Republic of Venice, the peninsula of Peloponnese and surrounding islands. The first authentic date of the appearance of Gypsies in the territory of historical Hungary is 1455.¹⁰ Gypsies wandering in various-sized families were received by curiosity mixed with mistrust. These “oddly” looking and dressed groups who practiced jugglery – fortune telling, magic, superstition – soon earned the antipathy of the church. Despite the fact that their appearance and behaviour was often considered repulsive as written in one of the entries of the Bologna chronicles in 1422 – “...*It should be noted that such abominable people have never set foot in this area before. They were skinny and black, eating like pigs. Their woman walked the*

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- 3 Diószegi Vilmos: „Visszafelé számláló” ráolvasások. Néprajzi Közlemények, 1957. II. évf. 3-4. sz. 162-173.
 - 4 Penavin Olga: Halotti búcsúztatók, imák, koldusénekek, gyógyító ráolvasások. A Hungarológiai Intézet Tudományos Közleményei, 1977. IX. évf. 32. sz. 5-22.
 - 5 Pócs Éva: A népi gyógyászat és a néphit kutatásának határterületei. In: Antall József szerk.: Orvostörténeti Közlemények, Supplementum, 1979. 11-12. 61-75.
 - 6 Hoppál Mihály: Népi gyógyítás. In: Hoppál Mihály szerk.: Magyar Néprajz VII. 1990. 693-724.
 - 7 Koltay Erika: Népi orvoslás – és természetgyógyászat. In: Lázár Imre-Pikó Bettina szerk.: Orvosi antropológia. Medicina Könyvkiadó Zrt., Budapest, 2012. 190.
 - 8 Soós József: Falusi orvos, falusi nép. Gyógyászat, 1937. 11. sz. 171-173.
 - 9 James G. Frazer: The Golden Bough 1890. /Az aranyág. Századvég Kiadó, Budapest, 2002.
 - 10 Szabóné Kármán Judit: A magyarországi cigányság I. (Cigányok és romák). Semmelweis Kiadó Budapest 2016 (Judit Szabóné Kármán: Hungarian Gypsies I. (Gypsies and Roma). Semmelweis Budapest 2016.)



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streets by turns, wearing coarse clothes attached to their shoulders with rings in their ears and long veils on their head.”¹¹ – ordinary people used their fortune telling and corresponding services. In his explanation to the documents of the Council in Trullo (692) even Theodore Balsamon – a 12th-century canonist – threatened with six years of excommunication those members of the church who engaged in fortune telling, superstition, magic, or making and selling amulets against evil eye while travelling around the world. Their ability of ventriloquism was straight-out considered as cooperation with Satan and was referred to like witches, false prophets and other suspicious companies were. At the beginning of the 1300’s Athanasius I, a Patriarch of Constantinople also took actions against jugglery and superstition. He sent a letter to the priests of the credulous Byzantines requesting them to defend their believers from *athinganos*, not to let him in their homes because they do diabolical acts. Decades later Joseph Bryennius (1340/1350-1431), a monk and preacher from Byzantium stated in one of his essays¹² that among other things, the misfortune of the empire is the result of people meeting jugglers, magicians, and *athinganos* on a daily basis. Furthermore, the punishment of those who engaged in a conversation with fortune teller, magician gypsy women or let them in their houses was an anathema of five years by a 15th-century canon. The church had the strong suspicion that gypsies – especially due to their behaviour, „crafts”, and aversion from the church – were actually heretics. The papal bulls of the 1500’s such as

11 Sir Angus Fraser: A cigányok. Osiris Kiadó Budapest 2000. 76.

12 Referring to George C. Soulis, Original text in French translation: L. Oeconomus: L'état intellectuel et moral des Byzantins vers le milieu de XIV e siècle d'après une page de Joseph Bryennios. Mélanges Charles Diehl I. (Paris 1930)

Licet ab initio (Pope Paul III. 1542), then *Immensa Aeterni Dei* (Pope Sixtus V. 1588)¹³ that confirmed the roman inquisition to take action against heretics and those who became detached from faith, thus making it possible that sanctions against gypsies – even without naming them – to created. The church leadership of the following century also distanced itself from them; the decrees of the Trnava Synod of 1611 and 1629 – which however did not name gypsies but made obvious references to them – ordered the clergy against their activities:

„Spells, magic, fortune telling, casting of lot, palm reading, quackery is often scourged in sermons, and if superstition turns out about someone, the bishop shall be informed.”

„Ordinary people easily become superstitious, wise-women heal with superstition and use spells.”¹⁴

According to early documents it is obvious that immigrant Gypsies (women in particular) discovered an already existing demand and adapted to it – just like many other times during their history. They took advantage of the niche; despite of the teachings, the resistance and the regulations of church, people needed their magical services of removing disease, spells and curses, which became an important way of making a living for centuries. Leaders of certain communities can be found in ethnographic researches: village scowlers, wise-women, people of folk medicine besides „farewell leaders”, „wailers”, dancers, story-tellers; chiropractor women of Zselic, wise-women of Ősi and Nagysárrét, magicians along the Drava, and many others. Gypsy women fit in this list with their own practices and services. A red ribbon on the wrist of the newborn child against curses and evil eye, a blunt knife or scissors under the pillow or the doorstep¹⁵ for the same reason, spitting and spells show similarities to therapies of non-gypsy women (and sometimes men). Gypsy demons (melalo, lilyi, thulo, tharidyí)¹⁶ of disease also fit in the list of personified diseases in Hungarian folklore (stroke, misery, etc.) in spite of having different forms and names.

Public health, medicine and Gypsies

Notes from the 15-16th century prove that Gypsies in historical Hungary – after their arrival in the 15th century – usually fulfilled functions in public health besides magic and quackery. They became professional pound masters – an occupation despised by na-

13 Várnagy Elemér: A cigányok és a katolikus egyház In: Várnagy Elemér szerk.: Keresztény Pedagógiai Nyári Egyetem Pécs, 1994. JPTE Pécs 96.

14 Magyar Katolikus Lexikon – babonaság szócikk: <http://lexikon.katolikus.hu/B/babona.html>

15 Szabóné Kármán Judit: A magyarországi cigány/roma népesség kultúranropológiai és orvosantropológiai megközelítésben. Romológiai Füzetek 2. DRHE Romológia Tanszék Debrecen, 2018. 48.

16 Szabóné Kármán Judit: A magyarországi cigány/roma népesség kultúranropológiai és orvosantropológiai megközelítésben. Romológiai Füzetek 2. DRHE Romológia Tanszék Debrecen, 2018. 49.

tives – which meant not only the collection of animal carcasses and stray dogs in towns but often the cleaning of outhouses. Other occupations held by Gypsies were metal-worker, smith, horse-dealer, executioner and many other. During the Turkish rule when the country was divided into three parts, their fortune evolved differently. On the ruins of deserted villages, an ethnically and religiously colourful and multicultural society was created with Turkish support; South Slavic Serbs (orthodox Serbs and Muslim Bosnians) settled followed by Vlach, Bunjevci, Slovak people. Gypsies found their place in this community. They either had been living there, or arrived with Turkish groups, or were settled by the Turkish. It is certain that Gypsies who arrived with Turkish groups¹⁷ established an independent Gypsy paramilitary organization (named *dzseámet*) in the army of the Ottoman Empire; including smiths, metal workers, musicians and surgeons. During the Turkish rule, an independent district of 50-60 Gypsy families was established in Buda (named „*zingarorum civitas*”), and the residents gradually converted to Islamic. The occupation of these residents was documented by the tax census in 1546, according to which most of the Gypsy people were working as goldsmith, wine merchants, or executioners, and a doctor called Musztafa Tehim was also recorded.¹⁸ According to subsequent censuses – e.g. from the archives of Nógrád county in the 1830's – it is revealed that there were Gypsy midwives¹⁹ in certain villages. In the 1893 Gypsy census 22 midwives were mentioned among intellectuals, and half thousand knackers, pound masters were recorded.²⁰

The 19th century was determining regarding public health and the fortune of the Gypsy population, as a law was passed which provided opportunity for regular inspections of Gypsy settlements, forced washing and delousing of the people living there until the end of the 1970-1980's. The Act XIV. of 1876 on the arrangement of public health was the hallmark of the modern Hungarian public health stating that „...any violations against the sustenance of public health is subject to police jurisdiction. Periodic inspections and surveys may be carried out by authorities even without the receipt of any complaint.”²¹ Although, no ethnic group or social class is highlighted by the law – since it was created to settle the situation of the general public health –, forced and often humiliating bathing of Gypsy people became possible and a general practice with the help of gendarmes. Forced washing at Gypsy settlements become commonplace, and

17 Varga Szabolcs: Pécs nemzetiségei a török korban. Digitális változat: http://arkadia.pte.hu/tortenelem/cikkek/pecs_nemzetisege_a_torok_korban (2018. 05.06.)

18 Fekete Lajos: A hódoltság török levéltári forrásai nyomában. Oriental Reprints. Kőrösi-Csoma Társaság –MTA Budapest. 1993. 35. p.

19 Szomszéd András (1987): A cigánysággal kapcsolatos összeírások és statutumok forrásértéke a 17. század második felétől a 19. század közepéig. In: Á. Varga László (szerk.): Rendi társadalom és polgári társadalom 1. Társadalomtörténeti módszerek és forrástípusok Salgótarján, 1987. Nógrád Megyei Levéltár kiadványa 15. 31-33. p.

20 MSK 1895. A Magyarországon 1893. jan. 31-én végrehajtott cigányösszeírás eredményei. Magyar Statisztikai Közlemények Új Folyam IX. kötet Budapest, Athenaeum R. Társulat Könyvnyomdája

A gyepmester dögbíróként is szerepel olykor; feladata (1888. évi VII. tc. szerint) némi fizetség ellenében az állati tetemek szabályszerű eltakarítása volt.

21 1876. évi XIV. tc. a közegészségügy rendezéséről. I. rész. Egészségügyi intézkedések. 1 fejezet. Általános határozatok. 2. és 3. § In: Törvények, jogszabályok CompLex Kiadó.

serious accusations were raised against wanderer Gypsies for jeopardising public health and animal health. Similarly to other roamers and tramps, through their continuous movement, wanderer Gypsies carried and spread diseases such as cholera, vesicular pox and spotted fever which claimed numerous victims in Europe and in Hungary from the end of the 19th century. Settled and wanderer Gypsies were collectively vaccinated against those epidemics as written in an issue of the Newspaper of Pécs from 1907: *„Those wanderer Gypsies that visited the fair of Pécs yesterday will remember that day and most probably will not pay any more visit to our city. They were vaccinated with armed forces. It was not an easy procedure. It was performed by medical expert Ludwig Ferenc dr. on the spot with police assistance. It was hardest for the police. They had to gather the Gypsies.”*²² Wanderer Gypsies meant threat for livestock as well. Numerous charges were pressed against them because of consuming and „processing” dead animals in times of need, and then leaving the carcasses thrown about, lying around, thus spreading animal epidemic.²³ In the beginning of the 1900’s, poverty and overcrowding was the hotbed for various pathogens. Spotted fever spread by lice caused more and more epidemics in the capital city and in the country as well. A number of regulations were created in order to prevent the diseases from spreading; Circular no. 83724/1923 of the Ministry²⁴ of Interior and Decree no. 47.083/1924 of the Ministry²⁵ of Labor and Social Welfare urged the compulsory medical examination of wanderer Gypsies responsible for spreading spotted fever, and more effective disinfection of their houses and settlements. Furthermore, the deputy count of Pest county ordered²⁶ that examined, disinfected, and healthy Gypsies in his region shall possess a health certificate. In the spring of 1924, spotted fever in Kecskemét claimed a considerably high number of victims, including the local doctor himself. In order to avoid further spreading of the disease, a large-scale raid was carried out first in the so-called „Gypsy town” when more than seventy soldiers and police officers evacuated and cleaned and disinfected the gypsy shacks, made everyone take a bath, cut men’s hair bald, then put them in quarantine for two weeks. The Gypsy town was surrounded by a police cordon, no one could leave the settlement, and the almost six hundred people were fed by the city. However, Gypsies still tried to escape. A woman trying to break the cordon was shot by soldiers. The epidemic in the city and surrounding towns ceased only by the end of July.²⁷ The first health

- 22 Vargha Dezső: Cigányokkal kapcsolatos újságcikkek a Pécsi Közlöny 1907. évi példányaiban. In: Márfi Attila – Kosztics István szerk. (2009): Cigánysors II. Emberháza Alapítvány, Erdős Kamill Cigánymúzeum és CKKE, Pécs 88-89.
- 23 Vargha Dezső: Cigányokkal kapcsolatos újságcikkek a Pécsi Közlöny 1907. évi példányaiban. In: Márfi Attila – Kosztics István szerk.: Cigánysors II. Emberháza Alapítvány, Erdős Kamill Cigánymúzeum és CKKE, Pécs, 2009. 197.
- 24 Pomogyi László (1995): Cigánykérdés és cigányügyi igazgatás a polgári Magyarországon. Osiris-Századvég Kiadó, Budapest. 1995. 192.
- 25 Magyarországi Rendeletek Tára, 1924. április 2. 935-936. 1. Idézi: Karsai László: A cigánykérdés Magyarországon 1919-1945. Út a cigány Holokauszthoz. Cserépfalvi Kiadó, Budapest, 1992. 58.
- 26 25531/1923. kig. sz. In: Pomogyi László: Cigánykérdés és cigányügyi igazgatás a polgári Magyarországon. Osiris-Századvég Kiadó, Budapest. 1995. 192.
- 27 Bálintné Mikes Katalin: Adatok Kecskemét város egészségügyi helyzetéről 1919-1936. In: Iványosi-Szabó Tibor (szerk.): Bács-Kiskun megye múltjából IV. Egészségügy. Bács-Kiskun megyei Levéltár. Kecskemét, 1982. 160.

research of Gypsies in Hungary was conducted in 1930. The institute of public health of Tisza István Science University in Debrecen examined one thousand Gypsies of Bihar county in order to explore and reduce the rate of epidemic diseases and infections that were common in their community. Blood collection and examinations were performed by the district medical officer of Berettyóújfalu, and the results were published by the university. It was revealed that 25% of the examined Gypsies had syphilis – every family member in a lot of families – and diphtheria, typhoid, paratyphoid, and spotted fever are quite widespread among them.²⁸

Spotted fever appeared again and again. Certain Gypsy settlements were considered the center of it, where drastic solutions had to be implemented. When spotted fever appeared at the Gypsy settlement of Kiskun in May, 1935 – fifteen people fell sick, one died – the whole settlement was burnt down and the people were put under quarantine.²⁹ During the summer of 1938, typhoid epidemic erupted in the Gypsy settlement of Kurtics in Arad county; the whole village was put under quarantine, the Gypsy settlement was disinfected, and residents had to cut their hair.³⁰ Keeping the settlements clean was not problematic everywhere. The Minister of Interior and the State Secretariat for health were convinced about that during their inspection in Hajdú county; the correspondent wrote the following about their visit in Hajdúböszörmény: "*Minister of Interior Kozma Miklós visited the Gypsy settlement in the suburbs where local Gypsies live in neat houses leading a normal working life under thorough health care service. At the entrance of the settlement Gypsy judge Nagy József reported neatly: "402 is the current headcount" – he said and then added sternly: "I maintain cleanliness, order and discipline!" The Minister of Interior walked through the Gypsy settlement where no sickness had been recorded for a very long time.*"³¹ At the end of the 1930's a Gypsy musician in Budapest earned great respect for pursuing medical studies. *Farkas Józsi* had been playing music in exclusive restaurants during night, and pursued his medical studies during the day. Personal information about the graduate student were published in newspaper articles in 1937; the talented musician – who had played music in the radio by that time – was born into a poor family. He had to earn a living from an early age, which is why he founded a band. Although, he desired to become a doctor of poor Gypsy people. His teachers valued his diligence and supported him. Sometimes they went to the restaurant to listen to his music – as written in contemporary newspapers.³² Some of the descendants of Gypsy groups that arrived to Hungary in the 15th century have been working as doctors for decades among Gypsy and not Gypsy people. A lot of them graduated from universities as researchers, nurses, obstetricians, paramedics – surpassing far beyond the folk medicine and healing practices of their ancestors.

28 Orvosi vizsgálat alá vettek 1000 biharmegyei cigányt. Csendőrségi Lapok 1930. dec. 20. XX. évf. 36. sz. 1093.

29 Tifusz miatt felégetik a kiskuni cigánytelepet. Zalai Közlöny 1935. máj. 14.

30 Magyar Távirati Iroda jelentése: Arad 1938. június 1. 47. MTI „könyomatos” hírek. Napi hírek/ Napi tudósítások 1920-1944. Magyar Országos Levéltár

31 Magyar Távirati Iroda jelentése: Hajdúböszörmény 1936. november 18. 30.

32 Ki tanyája ez a nyárfás...? Orvosnak készül és szegény cigányokat akar ingyen gyógyítani. Új Hírek 1937. 11. 28.