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Getting By (Part Two): Colic, Curing the Common Cold, and Mumiyo

I

In one's own culture, or so I have heard, learning to care for a firstborn baby is a confusing enterprise. It involves stepping into a world where logic is of even less help than it normally is; where information is both plentiful and scarce; and where any advice, however foolish, is invaluable if only because it contradicts earlier, discredited advice and allows for the painful resurrection of the same chimera: a single day of predictability, confidence, and tranquility. Each new theory is simultaneously and self-evidently true and false, scientifically based and patently absurd, depending on how one understands the universe to be constructed on a given afternoon. "Babies know what's good for them; they are born with a strong survival instinct." "Babies don't know what's good for them; after all, they are only babies." The new parent is an accommodating soul. Like babies ourselves, we can adjust to almost any childrearing theory.

Learning to care for a first baby in a foreign culture adds yet another dimension of Alice-in-Wonderland eeriness to daily attempts at getting by. Having never taken care of anyone else's baby--either as a sitter, a friend, or a doting relative--my husband Volodya and I sit in our Moscow apartment reading Doctor Spock with avidity and confusion, a little the way two horticultural enthusiasts might read a manual about growing tulips on Mars: the bulbs might be the same, but the planet is very different.

Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care has in fact been translated into Russian many years ago, and enjoys enormous respect here, despite the fact that it is no longer obtainable in Russian. Tattered copies in English, French, or any other commonly-read foreign language are passed from hand to hand, painstakingly deciphered by one generation of mothers after the other. "Read Spock" is the most frequently heard reply here to questions about child care, for many of the same reasons as in the West: he is reassuring, consoling, and doles out advice with a sense of humor and sympathy for the new parent. His "free regime," as it is misperceived here, provides a welcome contrast to earlier, more rigid systems of childrearing, originating in Germany. "Be calm" ("Bud' 'Spok'"), a Russian slang wordplay on his name, has become a byword among Russian mothers, as well as a motif in the story "Upbringing According to Dr. Spock" by the contemporary prose writer Vasilii Belov. Yet for all his popularity, Spock, like his German colleagues before him, must coexist with centuries of local wisdom and practices.

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In the past several months of living here with a small baby, I have accumulated a number of suggestions relating to child care, some of them based on folk beliefs, some on accepted medical practice. Being myself a novice, I will not presume to comment on the effectiveness, much less the advisability of the practices described below. Why it is, in my own culture, that pills of one color cure one illness, whereas pills of another color cure another illness is already a mystery to me. Therefore, here I merely describe without judgment.

Mother's milk is a crucial element in the child's physical and psychic well-being, and therefore its supply must be maintained at all costs. What malt beer is to the Germans, tea with milk is to the Russians. Beer and all other forms of alcohol should be scrupulously avoided; tea with milk should be drunk in copious amounts. To increase the milk supply still further, two or three walnuts--Greek nuts, in Russian--should be eaten just before bedtime.

The breasts should be covered at all times, and kept thoroughly warm, particularly in winter. Chilling, or even the wearing of low-cut blouses may result in a cold in the breasts. One woman editor warned that calcium supplies in the mother can be seriously depleted during breastfeeding. To counteract possible calcium deficiency, she advised, one should boil Soviet toothpaste three times and eat the chalklike substance that results.

Mother's milk has a number of virtues above and beyond its use as a dietary essential. Rubbed on the baby's face after each feeding, an actress informed me, it would enhance the child's beauty. Administered as a nasal douche--presumably after expression from the breast--it cures a baby's cold, according to one woman writer, the mother of two children. As a precautionary measure, the mother should administer her milk to her own nose as well. Apples or plums, eaten ten to fifteen minutes before nursing, will enter the milk supply immediately and relieve the baby's constipation, according to one schoolteacher, the mother of three girls. Another common cure for a baby's constipation is dill water, either home-brewed or purchased in the pharmacy. Clear and aromatic, the liquid is mixed with mother's milk and fed to the suffering infant. This is in fact the baby's version of a favorite adult cure for constipation: dill vodka.

While Pampers have yet to reach Moscow, babies here are diapered in podguzniki, disposable liners that reduce the constant task of washing soiled diapers. Cheesecloth, bought up by pregnant women in vast quantities, is used to clean the baby's bottom. Diaper rash can be avoided by slathering the baby's bottom at each changing in sunflower oil. Used by adults as a mouthwash each morning, one writer advised, sunflower oil will also stave off cavities and gum disease. A sociologist recommended towels soaked in sunflower oil and wrapped around the chest as a surefire cure of chest coughs and bronchial infections.

In a society without Q-tips, swabs may be fashioned by twisting cotton wool around matchsticks. The match is then removed, and the resulting swab is used to clean the baby's nose and ears. While Russian parents are as baffled by colic as their American counterparts, they find that Russian babies are soothed by having their tummies rubbed in a clockwise direction around the bellybutton. Our daughter, Kira, was not soothed, but didn't at all mind having it done to her when she did not have colic.

During the nursing period, conception is unlikely but possible. Contraception is possible but complex. Diaphragms can rarely be found in more than one size, and are one of the least favorite of birth-control methods. Pills, when available from Hungary or the G.D.R., often cause bloating, nausea, and other side effects. Condoms may be purchased in some pharmacies, but are of a shape, thickness, and quality that cannot adequately be described here. Or will not, at any rate. In the last decade, spiral I.U.D.'s have become by far the most sought-after method of medically-advised contraception. As in any culture, many folk methods exist as well: aspirin suppositories, urine-soaked rags, and cotton wool dipped in lemon juice are among the recommendations I have heard. Abortion is an all too common birth-control method. Women friends with whom I have spoken on this subject have had as many as eight or nine abortions, before contraception became an irrelevant concern.

If conception is the source of one set of worries, sterility is the source of another. Leeks are believed by some to increase fertility. Sitting on the cold ground, or on a cold rock increases the likelihood of a cold in the female reproductive organs, and is often cited as a potential contributor to sterility.

In those leisure hours that parents by definition never have, the baby's growth can be lovingly charted from one month to the next by dipping his or her foot in beet juice and printing it on a piece of paper.

II

Folk medicine for mother and baby is only a small part of a vast system of beliefs, superstitions, and amateur medical practices here. For many reasons--shortages of commonly needed drugs, impurities or dilution of existing drugs, minimal information about current medical practices, enduring mistrust (founded and unfounded) of chemical preparation of all kinds--folk medicine plays an important role in the average Muscovite's health care.

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

1. Dig up a potato with the earth still clinging to it. Boil it in its jacket and inhale the vapors.
2. 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.
3. Buy pig fat and stick garlic cloves in it. Rub the chunk of fat all over your body before going to bed at night, and when you wake up the cold will be gone. Try badger grease with oil of mint as another variant.
4. Heat up a clove of garlic in warm water and stick it up your nose.

5. If an earache accompanies the cold, place a sliver of roasted onion in the ailing ear.

One literary critic, a reformed heavy drinker, had the simplest cure of all. "Just drink," he advised, 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."

Folk cures vary enormously here, depending on which folk is ill. An Armenian student was shocked to learn that Volodya was cooking chicken soup for 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 he went off to fetch the care package sent each week from Erevan by his mother.

Undoubtedly the most common Russian cure for a chest cold is mustard plasters (gorchichniki). Ten of them may be bought for five kopeks (about 7¢) 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 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 effect maximum circulation in the affected area.

Increased circulation is also the primary purpose of banki, or cupping glasses, still widely used here. 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 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. The 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, as my medical cannon fodder, and the nurse finally agreed. Volodya, however, did not. Had he been feeling better, he explained, he would try it out. But with a cold and all, it was difficult to be enthusiastic about welts.

III

Lest the American 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 judiciously chosen not to include here, 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, live ants, 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 hard to convince any longer that malaria might be cured by wearing amber beads; that colds might best be treated by abstaining from all liquids for twenty-four 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.¹

No description 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 from unofficial suppliers of folk remedies. It was originally discovered by hunters, who noticed that injured animals 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 the enthusiasm with which mumiyo was adopted by hunters--the many versts travelled over rough terrain, stalking wounded animals to their secret healing places; returning in the dead of night undetected by other hunters to scrape the precious mumiyo from the rocks--it was no doubt muted in comparison with the enthusiasm with which the Moscow intelligentsia embraced the concept of mumiyo. Mumiyo 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; above all, it is ugly.

As a rule, the academy lags considerably behind popular interest. In the case of mumiyo, however, the opposite is true. The reader will be gratified to learn that the first scholarly mumiyo conference took place in Dushanbe as early as 1965. By 1972, at a medical conference in Piatigorsk, Prof. 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 twenty-five-day regime:

1. For the first ten days, a tablespoon of mumiyo solution (17.5 grams of mumiyo dissolved in 500 grams of water) three times a day, thirty minutes before eating.
2. For the next ten days, a tablespoon and a half of the solution three times a day before eating.

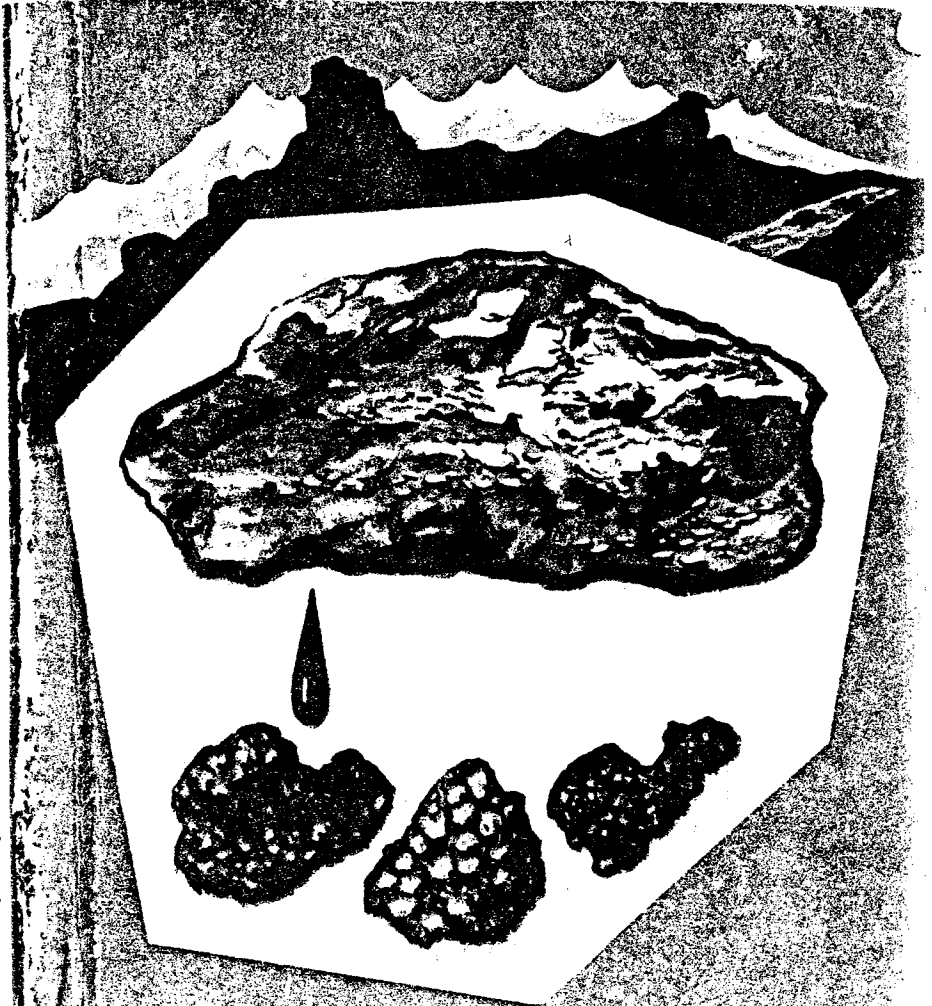
3. For the next five days, a tablespoon of the solution three times a day before eating.

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

By 1976, Mumiyo and Its Healing Properties,² 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 such other miracle cures as Indian salodzhit, Arabian arakul-dzhibol, and even the well-known Mongolian remedy brakshun.

Most important, however, is the research by these two scholars demonstrating that mumiyo has been 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.



Ю.НУРАЛИЕВ, П. ДЕНИСЕНКО

**МУМИЁ
И ЕГО
ЛЕЧЕБНЫЕ
СВОЙСТВА**

Mumiyo and Its Healing Properties.
Iu. Nuraliev and P. Denisenko.
Cover-design artist not identified.

In the last ten years, mumiyo's popularity has spread to virtually all sectors of Moscow society: cashiers, students, hairdressers, journalists, cleaning women, teachers, unofficial 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."

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.

IV

Hunters in the Pamirs have stalked the elusive mumiyo with more success 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 flowerseller, however, offered to sell me what she claimed to be an equally effective miracle cure, a hard brown object that resembled something left behind by an inattentive dog owner. This substance, propolis, is ostensibly made up of the residue that has built up on the inside walls³ of beehives, and is scraped off by the beekeeper at the end of the summer.

Grated into a litre of vodka--that godsend to modern medicine--propolis cures a cough when taken internally, and heals a burn or an aching muscle when rubbed on the skin. The flowerseller was most willing to part with this treasure for a mere twenty rubles (\$28.20). She was less willing to part with it for ten 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 evening took on 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 blobs. 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 an elephant.

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. Precaution prevailed, and I was 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 surprise, I managed to apply the banki without permanently scarring my patient teacher.

Finally, when we had both rested, as is 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.

МЕД И МЕДОЛЕЧЕНИЕ

Стоймир Младенов



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Honey and Honey Cures. For information on the use of propolis.
Stoimir Mladenov.
Cover-design artist not identified.
Illustration shows a device for inhaling steam from a solution of honey and hot water.

NOTES

¹These and other historically interesting folk cures are described in Paul M. Kourennoff's and George St. George's Russian Folk Medicine (New York: W.H. Allen, 1970).

²Iu. Nuraliev and P. Denisenko, Mumiyo i ego lechebnye svoistva (Dushanbe: Irfon, 1976). I am grateful to Maria Carlson for bringing my attention to mumiyo.

³For more information on propolis, see Stoimir Mladenov's Med i medolechenie, tr. T.I. Ianevoi (Sofia: Zemizdat, 1974).

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