Irreplaceable Good: Herbs in Poland in 1919-2004

Herbal medicine may be defined as the practice of treating illness using plants despite a lack of research on their safety and efficacy. At the present, herbal products have different legal status in particular countries. They can be considered as cultural heritage because they represent very old healing traditions, e.g. Arabic, Hindu, Chinese, which flourished before western biomedicine developed. Furthermore, herbal products can be registered as medicines or food supplements. For example, the same herbal products are registered as food supplements in the U.S., but in Poland as medicines.

The history of herbal medicine in Poland is interesting because it sheds light on the development of herbal market in Eastern-Central Europe. From time immemorial, herbs and their derivatives played an exceptional role in the Polish health care. According to old chronicles, the word “Poland” derivates from a tribe living in the western territory of Poland, “Polans”, which was taken from the Polish word “pola”, which means “fields”, where this tribe had lived cultivating crops and being in touch with nature, especially plants and their biological activity.

Until the end of the eighteenth century, it was customary for the Poles to supply themselves with herbal remedies as teas, tinctures and preserves, which were stored in medicinal cabinets or larders. Prescriptions were taken from handed down from generation to generation family diaries and botanical-medical books published in the 16th and 17th centuries, among them the most popular were these written by Marcin Siennik (1564) and Szymon Syreniusz (1617). Although medicinal cabinets were organized in the most of manor houses in Europe, their role in Poland was exceptional because they substituted community pharmacies until the end of the 18th century. Peasantry, the largest segment of the Polish population in the past, provided herbs for medicinal cabinets still at the beginning of the 20th century.

During the first industrial revolution, Poland was deprived of its own statehood for more than 100 years. The superpowers as conquerors, Austria, Prussia and Russia, focused on the exploitation of Polish natural resources rather than on investment in industry. However, in the 1870. some Poles organized the first single-species plantation patterned on English and American ones. At the end of the nineteenth century, other Poles learnt medicinal plants cultivation. First of them was Jan Biegański (1870-1938), a pharmacist and owner of the small herbal garden next to his pharmacy. In 1898 he wrote and published on his own expenses the first Polish textbook of herbal cultivation.

Other Polish botanists, pharmacists and herbalists acquired knowledge about medicinal plant cultivation during the First World War, being forcibly conscripted into the Austrian or Russian Army. For example, Jan Dobrowolski (1866-1958), a botanist, organized
herbal plantations to supply morphine to the Austrian Army. Jan Muszyński (1884-1957) and Waclaw Strażewicz (1889-1950) were forcibly conscripted into the Russian Army and run herbal plantations to supply plant medicines, especially painkillers, to the Tsar Army.

When Poland regained political independence in 1918, these four men became the pioneers of modern herbal production and medicinal plant cultivation in their fatherland. To develop herbal plantations, Biegański gave lectures and organized exhibitions for farmers. Muszyński and Strażewicz organized from scratch an exemplary herbal garden of the Polish University in Vilnius, where 755 species grew on 9 hectares (about million square yards) of the land. Dobrowolski organized a herbal garden of the Department of Botany and Cultivation of Medicinal Plants of University in Poznań. Among pioneers of modern herbal medicine in the inter-war Poland was one woman, Maria Chmielińska (1890-1967), a graduate from the University in Lvov and the School of Horticulture in Warsaw, who gained first practical experience working with Dobrowolski. In 1929 the Polish National Culture Fund granted her a scholarship to learn modern organization of plant cultivation, experimentation, industrial production and trade in Germany, Austria, and Czechy. When she returned Poland, she became the general manager of herbal production in Poland. It was difficult to start herbal plantations in Poland in the inter-war period. On the one hand, at the western territory, previous German Poland, farmers were not interested in medicinal plants cultivation because they took more profits from crops, fruits and vegetables. On the second, at the eastern territory farmers were so poor that they couldn’t afford to buy needed tools and equipment.

In 1919, Poland was less industrialized than other countries in Europe and America, hence, in the following years traditional medicine gave place to western biomedicine only partially. In 1929, Strażewicz found the Society of Support for Production of Medicinal Plants in Poland for better collaboration of herbalists, herbal medicines producers, salesmen, and pharmacists. When the Society picked up first statistical data on the Polish herbal market, the government showed interest in development of herbal production to decrease international trade deficit. The Council of Ministers gave attention to wastelands at eastern borderland of Poland, unquestionable largest in Europe, where numerous species of medicinal plants grew being important source of income for many herb pickers. The government analyzed herbal market and worked out strategy how to maximize export of herbal products.

In 1930 the government established the Polish Herbal Committee to help herb pickers, farmers, salesmen, exporters etc. It was patterned on the Münich „Hortus-Gesellschaft”. Thanks to governmental subsidies and social support, the Committee coordinated investigations of the Polish folk herbs, organized collective plantations in smallholder farms, initiated standardization of medicinal herbs, developed herbal market, contributed to export predominance over import in Polish international herbs trade. For example, children from primary schools picked up herbs to help their poor and often unemployed parents and in this way pharmaceutical industry was provided in plant materials.

The Committee was active among doctors, pharmacists, scholars, chemists, foresters, and salesmen, encouraging them to start any herbal activity. Hence, such outstanding minds as Prof. Bronislaw Koskowski (1863-1946), Prof. Jerzy Modrakowski (1875-1945), and Prof.
Bolesław Hryniewiecki (1875-1963) carried out research on medicinal plants growing in Poland looking for herbs decreasing glucose level in blood and, mentioned above, Maria Chmielińska became the Editor-in-Chief of the journal “Wiadomości Zielarskie” (“Herbal Information”). She organized herbal training, advised how to establish herbal plantation and gave an opinion on farmer’s applications for bank loans to start with herbal production as well. Working out the list of endangered medicinal plants, the Committee contributed to adoption of the first Polish Nature Conservation Act in 1934. Summing up, in the inter-war period the Committee developed herbal plantations, production and market in Poland.

During the Second World War, these plantations were destroyed by Nazis. In 1945, the Polish boundaries were moved from east to west and Poland lost almost all herbal plantations. From nearly 700 hectares before the war, only 14.5 hectares remained within post-war borders of Poland. Political and economic changes were of crucial importance. Poland became a member of “The Communist Block”. The new political and social order was founded on a socialized economy that was based on nationalization and central planning. As result, private herbal plantations were nationalized and herbal production was included into central planning. In communist regime such social bodies as founded in the inter-war period the Polish Herbal Committee had not raison d’être.

But traditional folk medicine played an essential role in the Polish health care system after World War Second because access to western biomedicine and global pharmaceutical market was limited. Herbal products became substitutes for modern chemical and biotechnological medicines as cheaper and produced on the spot.

In 1945, a non-governmental organization was established to develop herbal industry but was politicized soon and replaced by another one, incorporated into the central controlled economy system. The herbal holding monopolized herbal production and trade for decades. In the same year, the members of the Chamber of Agriculture in Krakow found a new society for herbal medicine, production and trade, the Polish Herbal Union. Members of the pre-war Committee, e.g. Muszyński and Chmielińska, as well as farmers, pharmacists and herb pickers, involved in the Union activity enthusiastically. They published the new journal on herbal medicines entitled „Przegląd Zielarski” (“Herbal Review”). The Institute for Research on Medicinal Plants with a research station in the mountains of Tatry was founded at Jagiellonian University.

The Union has been politicized soon and in 1948 replaced by another body, the Association of Planters and Herb Pickers (“Zrzeszenie Plantatorów i Zbieraczy Ziół”), strictly subordinated to the communist government and incorporated into the central planned economy system. This bureaucratic Association was responsible for material delivery to herbal industry. Its membership was obligatory for farmers, who received allotments of tools, fertilizers, and seeds only by the Association.

In the short-lasting political renewal in the mid-fifties, the greatest in Eastern Europe herbal holding, the “Herbapol”, was established, the umbrella organization of the all Polish herbal companies at the time.
It is worth to mention that a dozen of other herbal organizations were founded in post-war Poland too. Strongly politicized and subjected to the communist government, they came into being for a few years. For example, in 1949 the Polish Herbal Union was dissolved; in 1957 the Polish Union of Planters and Medicinal Plant Pickers was established and dissolved in 1961, in this year the Polish Herbal Union was reactivated but nine years later dissolved; in 1970 the Polish Herbal Union was reorganized into the Association of Planters and Herb Pickers; in 1974, this body was reorganized into the Association of Producers of Medicinal Plants dissolved in 1981, when the Polish Herbal Union was reactivated. Finally, in 1993 the Polish Herbal Committee was reactivated as a symbol of political transformation of Poland.

The role of herbal medicines in Poland was ambiguous. On the one hand, they were cheap and non-toxic. On the other, the communist state took an obligation to provide free health care but from 1965 to 1995 the average life span in Poland decreased significantly. It reached its lowest value for male (66.1 years) at the beginning of nineties. The possible cause of deteriorating of health condition could be the limited access to modern chemical and biotechnological medicines, for example heart medicines, antibiotics etc.

In 1980s, a strong economic crisis revealed the weakness of central economy planning in Poland and touched the herbal industry as well. In the following years, herb pickers and manufacturers of herbal products had to face many problems resulting from new legal regulations and restrictions of sale. At the turn of twenty-first century, when Poland implemented the Commission E and ESCOP standards, doctors’ and pharmacists’ interest in traditional medicines decreased and herbal production collapsed. Although the European Union regulations are hampering the growth of production of herbal medicines, pandemics of chronic and degenerative diseases could increase interest in alternative and complementary medicine, including herbal medicine, in future.

Literature:

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