

Medic-Care

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Health care practices from by-gone times have been an interesting topic both in published books and in family folk-lore stories. What was done by the German Colonists in Bessarabia had similarities to what was done in the rest of Europe. I would, however, like to share some of my childhood experiences in Bessarabia.

When I was a toddler, I contracted diphtheria. I became urgently in need of professional medical care. Time was running out. By then we did have a doctor in town, and my Dad went out in the middle of the night to call for the doctor. Along the way, Dad also stopped at my grandparents, who lived across the street from the doctor. They all came back in grandpa's two-wheeler one-horse carriage. Dr. Frank looked in my mouth, confirmed the diagnosis, and instantly noticed that I was in a very serious condition. He ordered Dad to send someone immediately to the Apotheke (drugstore) in Arzis, some 8 km. away. Grandpa went to work to unhitch the horse from the carriage, and then one of Dad's workers took off on the horse toward Arzis. Understanding the urgency, he traveled as fast as he could. When he arrived at Arzis, being in the night, the Apotheke was closed. But he knocked on the window of the Apothekers residence, who then got up and filled the prescription. Dad's worker then rode the horse hard back to Teplitz. Both horse and rider were in a sweat when they completed their journey. Mom told me that I had only seconds or minutes before I would have died. But the medicine arrived in time, and I survived.

In those days (1933-1934), doctors and druggists understood they could not hold to "office hours." Being called into service was part of their business. If callers had gotten into a habit of only showing up at odd hours, that would have been different. In Bessarabia, not every town had a doctor, much less an Apotheke. Many people avoided patronizing either, due to the cost. People generally relied on folk-knowledge to treat their aches and pains. Women skilled at folk-medicine not only cared for their own ill family members, but often were resources for others in the community.

The folk medicines and treatments they used were things inherited from the elders and ancestors of by-gone times. Basic remedies were teas, diet, and massages - often using mixtures of herbs found in nature's garden. My Grandma Regge Opp had a pair of hands as strong as a bricklayer, and yet a touch as gentle as a feather. She was often called upon to massage people's limbs. My Dad was stricken with rheumatic fever in 1936. The pain was so severe that he cries could be heard outside the house. He would not let my Mom touch him to move him in and out of bed. Rather, he called on his mother, my Grandma Regge Opp, to do it.

One day, I came down with an infected tooth. My face was swollen on one side and was very painful. Dad went with me to Dr. Frank, who was a big, friendly man. Dr. Frank told Dad to hold me tight while he went to work. There was no icing or pain relief of any kind to calm me down. What worked was Dad's warning me to hold still, or else! That was enough said. I opened my mouth and the tooth was pulled out.

Another family story in my past was that my great-grandma Regina (Gerber) Mueller had a gallstone problem that could only have been cured by surgery. The family heard about a surgeon in Odessa who was known to be a very good surgeon, but expensive. Great-grandpa was quite well-to-do and wanted to take his wife to the surgeon in Odessa. But she would not go under any circumstances. She refused to go such a distance away to expose her body to a strange man, doctor or not. That was that. A short time later she died. My grandma Regge Opp never went to a doctor in her entire life. She looked after her own medical needs. She also died of gallstones.

I have seen much illness and death in my lifetime. To me, that is a natural occurrence. What is not natural is to see the agony of people, including children, as they are starved to death. Both my little sister and my youngest brother were victims of starvation in internment camps after WWII in Poland. My Dad, a civilian with a heart weakened by rheumatic fever, was arrested and forced into hard labor under starvation food conditions in a labor camp in the Ukraine after WWII ended. He was worked to death under these horrible conditions. Those of us who survived those conditions were helpless to help our own family members. The frustration and pain is with me to this day.

The war taught me many lessons. The hundreds and hundreds of war dead that I have seen were the result of acts of hate. I can only deal with such memories by forgiveness. To take an innocent child and nail it to a cross, just to get even, I cannot and never will understand. My mother told me about one of the last moments of my sister's life - I truly cannot repeat it....