

Historical note

KOSTA MARKO CEPENKOV 'HEALER OF THE POOR', 'POOR MAN'S DOCTOR' FROM PRILEP

A contribution to the history of folk medicine in Macedonia

In the memory of Haralampie Polenakovic

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A b s t r a c t: This contribution is about Kosta Marko Cepenkov, a medicaster from 19th century from Prilep.

The data about the treatment of diseases have been collected from the Autobiography of his son, Marko Cepenkov, the famous collector of Macedonian folk literature. The Autobiography was published in 1958 in Slavistics journal Macedonian Language in Skopje (Year IX, Vol. 1-2, 109-145).

Key words: medicaster, diseases, 19th century, autobiography, folk literature, book on healing.

The lack of doctors and other medical personnel, the economic, political, cultural and educational backwardness of our people in Macedonia in the past, and their deep-rooted belief in destiny and superstition, resulted in a widespread use of folk medicine and the appearance of a considerable number of what have been called people's doctors among our people in the past as well as among other peoples in the Balkans and in the world in general.

In the last few years I have turned my attention to this interesting phenomenon from our past and have begun gathering data about the methods of treatment of our ancestors, particularly those mentioned in memoirs, and also

seeking out what were called 'books on healing' and 'notes on cures'. I have been fortunate enough to look through several 'books on healing' originating from Macedonia in the 19th century. I have also gathered from memoirs considerable data on how our ancestors were healed. Thanks to certain of our writers and cultural activists of the 19th century, the names of certain people's healers who worked over a longer period in various regions of Macedonia have been preserved.

On this occasion, I will deal with a very interesting Macedonian character from the century before last who ended his eventful life as a people's healer.

As can be seen from the title, this article is about Kosta Marko Cepenkov, a medicaster from Prilep. Interesting information about Kosta Cepenkov is provided by his son Marko Cepenkov, the famous collector of Macedonian folk literature, poet and playwright (b. Prilep 1829 d. Sofija 1920). In 1896, Marko Cepenkov wrote his *Autobiography*, of which a complete version was published in 1958 in the Skopje slavistics journal *Macedonian Language* (Year IX, Vol. 1-2, 109–145), since only a fragment of the *Autobiography* had been published on the occasion of Marko Cepenkov's death.

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While writing about his own life, Marko Cepenkov also writes in detail about certain events in his father's life.

From what Marko says, one can conclude that his father was a really sturdy fellow: "Up to the age of 15, I went round without any underpants on," the father used to tell his son, adding: "I didn't even pay the poll-tax." His son also reports that up to the age of 20 his father had had no trade or employment, adding: "He lived as he pleased, went hunting, kept geese and used to take his gander to fight other ganders." (p. 113). When he saw that it was time to take up some more serious work, Kosta Cepenkov became a carpenter for a while, then a woodcutter, a baker and a grocer. However, he could not settle down to any one job. Like many of his fellow countrymen, Kosta went abroad 'to earn his bread' – to Wallachia in Romania. He worked there as servant to a judge then returned to Prilep, and somewhat later, having spent the money he had saved, together with his brother Nikola, a coppersmith, he went to Serbia in search of employment. While Nikola was working as a coppersmith, Kosta started working as a policeman in the service of Prince Miloš Obrenović. Marko Cepenkov's claims concerning the composition of Miloš' police force sound a little odd: "All the policemen that served Miloš at that time were from Macedonia. Most of them were mounted policemen guarding Miloš," writes Marko Cepenkov. Having given an account one of his father's adventures from his life as a policeman, Marko goes on with his father's biography, which is full of interesting details. According to Marko's account, on giving up the life of a policeman his father Kosta went to Smederevo, where he opened "a coffee house, bakery

and tavern right by the Danube." (p. 115). In Smederevo too, Kosta had various adventures with heyducks (brigands) who tried to rob him. He goes on to say how he also planted a large vineyard, left Smederevo and returned to Prilep. Later, Kosta again went abroad to Romania in search of work, together with his brother Nikola, and took part in the Foreign Uprising, the uprising of the foreign workers – most of whom were Macedonians – against the Romanian boyars. After the uprising was suppressed, Kosta came back via Austria to Prilep.

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That is the first, turbulent part of the life of the future Healer of the Poor from Prilep, Kosta Cepenkov. It is from this point that his paramedical activities begin.

Having spent all the money he had brought from Romania, he was left virtually without financial support, so the chance arrival of a 60-year-old medicaster from the village of Lazaropole, near Galičnik, who pulled someone's teeth, happened at just the right moment for him. Kosta was surprised at the ease with which the old man pulled the teeth, and he started examining the dental instruments, the pliers, which were used by the 'doctor' from Lazaropole, and asked him about the use of all the various pliers.

The old man, Hadži Stojan, suggested that Kosta Cepenkov should join him and "heal the sick and the ailing." The two of them "set out through villages and towns in search of sick people to heal." (p.116). In the *Autobiography*, Marko Cepenkov writes about the illnesses that Hadži Stojan treated: "cataracts, glanders, stones, ruptures and all kinds of wounds and other ailments." Observing the way Hadži Stojan worked, in a year or two Kosta Cepenkov, according to his son's account, grasped all the medicaster's secrets. The only problem was that Kosta was illiterate, and "for this craft you have to know books so that you can remember the herbs used for healing, since without books you cannot remember them," – as the old man used to say to his future colleague. Kosta, who spoke several languages well, Greek, Aromanian, Romanian, Albanian, Turkish and Serbian – "he was already completely a Serb" – asked his teacher of folk medicine to help him learn the alphabet so that he could learn to write. Hadži Stojan wrote out the Greek alphabet for him, and Kosta mastered it in a few days, so that he was able to write letters. After mastering the alphabet, Kosta soon learned to write in Serbian and Bulgarian.

In the course of four years, Kosta learned to cure people better than his teacher. His son Marko writes with pride about his father's abilities as a healer: He treated internal complaints from outside with purges¹, and by letting blood

¹ He would give the patients some sort of laxative, probably of herbal origin, as a purge.

from the arm² if the sick person had heart problems or a high temperature. For the old and weak, he prepared a potion³ of powerful herbs and other things. 'Doctor' Cepenkov was a clever man, as his son Marko writes: "He was *kamil* [perfect]⁴ at telling whether a sick person would recover or die," because "if he saw that someone could not be cured, he would not bother to treat him, since he was unlikely to recover."

According to his son's memory of him, "if a person had a bone broken by a bullet from the elbow upward or from the knee upward" Kosta the healer "did not believe that the person could be cured." According to Marko's account, Kosta was able, at first glance, to determine the way an illness would develop, and he was regularly right.

From Marko Cepenkov's reports, we get the impression that this healer was very moderate in what he charged for his services, and thus the people called him *the Healer of the Poor, the Poverty Doctor*. Marko maintains that it was probably also because of this that the ailing would rather call Kosta the healer than some Philip or Aleksa (most probably doctors or quack doctors from Prilep) who used to charge a lot for their services.

Marko writes with pride about his father and the efforts he made to cure the sick: "When he gave someone a purge to cure him⁵, or when he was inducing a sweat⁶, if he was right, he would sit next to the patient, just as a midwife sits next to a pregnant woman who is about to give birth, to help the person who was sick."

Marko Cepenkov also writes about how the patient would pay his father to an amount that he thought was suitable after he had been healed. There were also various gifts that accompanied the money. When he was criticized at home for agreeing to accept small rewards for his efforts, Kosta the healer would regularly reply that he had accepted the money only "for the sweat of his feet" going to and from the patients, while he treated them out of the kindness of his heart. Kosta did not insist on a price agreed with the person who was sick or with their relatives. "In a word," the son writes of his father, "he was very charitable to the poor and he was not mercenary." This is what a typical

² *Letting blood from the arm*, probably by means of a needle tap or biopsy or else cutting the vein in order to release blood.

³ He prepared an electuary, a syrup (Tur. *pekmez*) or paste (Tur. *macun*), (see Siniša B. Bogdanović, *Farmakologija*, Beograd, 1959, p. 663).

⁴ *Kamil*, a Turkish word of Arabic origin, meaning *perfect* (v. Abdulah Škaljić, *Turcizam u narodnom govoru i narodnoj kniževnosti Bosne i Hercegovine*, Sarajevo, I, p. 157).

⁵ A syrup as a purge: he used a laxative based on concentrated sugar.

⁶ Inducing a sweat in someone suffering from a cold.

payment he charged a sick person looked like: "He charged a poor person 100 *pari* [coins] for visiting him, and 20 *pari* for pulling out a molar, and so on for all the complaints he treated. Cepenkov writes that Kosta's wife often complained to her husband on account of the small payments, and she would ask him why he wasn't thinking about leaving some money to his family for after his death, and Kosta the healer would reply to her that he had left a lot of good deeds, which are worth more than money. "Look at what good I have done, and you yourself will recall it: I removed the turtle⁷ from Lakaša's wife's neck, I removed the glanders⁸ from Crvenko's child's legs, I managed to remove the glanders⁹ from round the throat of the little Turk Yuse, I got rid of the wart¹⁰ on Angelko from Bela Crkva's lip. I cured Božin Sekoin from the village of Lazani, who had been hit by two bullets and three *balatinje* from a gun¹¹. I cured Nasim the miller from Kruševo whose nose had been eaten away¹² and and put silver on it, and there he is, alive. I removed a bullet weighing 8 drams from Božin the Priest from the village of Krapa, who was shot with a rifle by some robbers, and he is alive, too. I cured Mijalče, the Vlach from Kruševo, the *sandik emini*¹³ [cashier] in Kičevo, who was shot with a rifle. Do you want me to go on with the list? With God's help I have treated as many sick and ailing as I have hairs on my head, and all of them say, God bless you! That is why, my wife, I do not want you to sing me requiems or rail at me, since the many good deeds that I have done for the sick and ailing are sufficient for me, because God has allowed me to exchange blessings with thousands of people. If that blessing and forgiveness is not enough for me, neither will the singing of requiems be. So don't worry about it."

According to Marko Cepenkov, it appears that his father had "specialized" in vaccinating against pox. Kosta had thoroughly noted how to "treat pox"¹⁴. He learned how to vaccinate from another medicaster from the Vlach village of Magarevo, near Bitola, who was vaccinating children in the villages

⁷ This refers to a scrofula (v. the description of this disease in K. Šapkarev, *Po narodnata medicina i neinata nomenklatura v Makedonia, Sbornik za narodni umotvo-renija*, X, Sofia 1894, p. 330)

⁸ This refers to a type of scrofula.

⁹ This refers to a type of scrofula.

¹⁰ This refers to a verruca (v. description by K. Šapkarev, *op. cit.*, p. 326, No.5).

¹¹ Bullet wounds from a rifle.

¹² The nose has been eaten away by disease (Tur. *Yenmek*, to be eaten/consumed) – a malignant skin tumor or lues.

¹³ *sandik emini*, a Turkish phrase of Arabic origin, meaning a manager or cashier of an accounting division (v. Abdulah Skaljic, *Turcizam u narodnom govoru i narodnoj knizevnosti Bosne i Hercegovine*, Sarajevo, II, p. 65)

¹⁴ This refers to *variola vera*, he injected against smallpox.

around Bitola. Later, Kosta the healer became famous for vaccinating children all over Macedonia: in the areas of Prilep, Kičevo, Debar, Ohrid and other parts of Macedonia. He especially distinguished himself in this respect in Kičevo area, where he vaccinated about 1000 children. "None of the vaccinated children died," Marko Cepenkov notes his father's success with pride. The Greek bishop of Kičevo also gave Kosta a written recognition for the success he achieved in vaccinating¹⁵ (page 124).

In his *Autobiography* Marko Cepenkov gives other information about the successes that Kosta the healer achieved in treating patients. One example is of particular significance both for the father and for the son, because it is concerned with the healing of a Turkish officer, a captain, who had glanders on one of one of his legs, which they were not able to cure in the "imperial hospital", the state hospital. In addition to curing this captain, he also cured several other soldiers (the diseases are not mentioned), so that the pasha of that garrison in question wanted to take Kosta on as a military doctor, but Kosta turned down the offer, explaining that he did not want to move from one place to another with his family the whole time. Among the interesting cases that Kosta the healer had in his 'practice' is a case in which Kosta cured a peasant from the village of Labunište who had been attacked and mauled by a bear. Kosta cured him in a short time. In his *Autobiography*, Marko gives a further detail about his father's profession as a medicaster. This concerns the fact that in 1852 Kosta the healer had a *spicaria* – a pharmacy – in the town of Bitola, a herbal pharmacy of course, in which he also sold tobacco, while at the same time 'treating' patients in Bitola.

Writing with enthusiasm about his father's 'medical' abilities, Marko Cepenkov especially stresses his father's ability to cure people very easily: "What he set his eyes on, he would achieve" (page 119).

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From the foregoing it seems to me that we can recognize the personality of a popular Macedonian medicaster from the middle of the 19th century who was known among the people as 'the Healer of the Poor'. When reading what Marko writes about his father, one should always bear in mind that there is a sentimental factor here – the son is writing about his beloved father, and exaggerations cannot be ruled out; but the precise information about the people and the diseases he treated can, I think, be accepted without any particular reserve.

¹⁵ Kosta received this recognition "for having the best serum". The word used for serum is the Turkish *maya*, yeast, leaven, essence, stock (*Makedonski jazik*, IX, 1-2, 124).

As can be seen from the variety of diseases that Kosta treated, his area of work was broad. Starting with pulling teeth, a medical procedure that was carried out in the past by almost all barbers and quack doctors, Kosta prepared various types of syrups and potions for the purging of the sick and the strengthening of the weak. Unfortunately, in his *Autobiography* Marko Cepenkov does not write about the composition and the quantity of the syrups and potions that his father gave to the sick. Kosta cured patients "with heart problems or with a high temperature" by letting blood, which could be some type of venipuncture, in order to ease the increased blood pressure and the irregular function of the heart. Using the process of sweating patients, Kosta the healer treated people who had colds and also, possibly, pneumonia. Kosta the healer also performed certain kinds of surgical intervention, such as the removal of a "turtle" from the patient's neck, which could have been a lipoma or swollen lymph node within the scrofula syndrome, and he removed, that is to say he treated, glanders in different parts of the body, which could also refer to symptoms of the scrofula syndrome; he performed the removal of verrucas and warts. He also dealt with wounds resulting from animal bites, and he removed bullets from wounded people. There were a great number of such interventions, when one takes into account the insecurity of life in the temporary anarchic that held sway in Macedonia in the 19th century. Kosta the healer was particularly successful in vaccination against smallpox, although Marko does not provide information about the composition and quantity of serum he used. Among the more difficult procedures, I would mention the treatment of the nose that had been eaten away, which in my opinion is the result of a skin tumour or lues. There is an interesting statement by the author of the *Autobiography* that his father, having cured a man, managed to mount a silver nose on the patient, which he himself had probably modelled.

Резиме

**КОСТА МАРКО ЦЕПЕНКОВ
„ЕКИМО НА СИРОМАШНИТЕ“ – „ЛЕКАР НА СИРОМАВИТЕ“
ОД ПРИЛЕП**

Придонес кон историјата на народната медицина во Македонија

Во спомен на Харалампие Поленаковиќ

Момир Х. Поленаковиќ

Македонска академија на науките и уметностите

Во овој прилог се зборува за Коста Марко Цепенков, народен лекар од XIX век, од Прилеп.

Податоците за лекувањето на болестите од Коста Марко Цепенков се дадени во Автобиографијата на неговиот син, Марко Цепенков, познат собирач на македонски народни умотворби. Автобиографијата на Марко Цепенков беше објавена во Скопје, во списанието „Македонски јазик“, IX, вол. 1-2, 1958, 109–145.

Клучни зборови: народен лекар, болести, XIX век, автобиографија, народни умотворби, лечебник.

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