

A story of Eliza Orzeszkowa's Herbarium from the Poznań collection summary

Ethnopharmacology is an interdisciplinary field, which brings together elements of medicine, pharmacy, history of pharmacy, pharmacognosy, ethnography, anthropology, botanic, zoology and mineralogy. This definition is not distinct, however, and it is variously interpreted by different authors.

On the one hand the main object of ethnopharmacy is acquaintance with unscientific knowledge of the plant kingdom, the healing properties of herbs and traditional herbalism of different ethnic groups, whereas on the other it makes use of a present-day pharmaceutical knowledge, which let verify the old uses of the healing herbs. Moreover, it establishes connection between medical care and culture heritage.

That knowledge gave good foundation for analyzing the Eliza Orzeszkowa's herbarium from the Poznań collection. The results of this work are discussed herein.

In the past, village inhabitants were learning about the healing herbs simply by prediction their properties from morphological features or accidentally through experience that some plants harmed. Even they never wrote a word, their knowledge was passing on verbally, in this way creating a folk medicine with some mystic elements.

Herbal healing was very often a secret experience of healers and women herbalists, thus it was not easy to be introduced to it. The first necessary condition of being brought into that field was to win folk herbalist hearts and trust. Eliza Orzeszkowa did it. Afterward, she published the results of her „field studies” in the journal „Wisła” with the common title „Peoples and flowers from the Niemen area”. Additionally, in order to record that knowledge and to preserve it for posterity, she made flower compositions and herbaria, which are currently stored in Poznań, Grodno, Wrocław, Warszawa and London.

The Eliza Orzeszkowa's Herbarium, from a special collection of the the Poznań Society of Friends of Art and Sciences in Poznań (PTPN), was given to the Library by the writer in 1911. This event is certified by an order form dating from February 8, 1911 as well as by accounts of the PTPN.

Karol Maliski, a pharmacist, made a commitment to prepare that herbarium, and on March 7, 1911 he showed it to the members of the Faculty of the Natural Sciences.

In October 1939 the Nazis entirely overtook the PTPN's collection. Since that time the Eliza Orzeszkowa's herbarium was regarded as missing for many years. Luckily, thanks to Jerzy Wojciech Szulczewski from Puszczykowo it came back to that collection in January 1966 and was exhibited again in December 1993 during a formal scientific session on the occasion of a forty anniversary of the Pharmaceutical Commission of the PTPN's IV Department.

Perfectly preserved herbarium is bound in a hard, dark blue, cloth cover. It has 120 penciled numbered pages, the last 23 of which are blank. There is a flower composition on the title page with an upper handwritten inscription: „The herbarium of Eliza Orzeszkowa”. In the right bottom corner the author listed the names of places from which the plants were collected: „From the fields, meadows and forests of the Niemen area: Miniewiczze, Poniżany, Hledowicze, Koszów, Ponemuń, Horny and Kołpaki”. 3 to 5 specimens are placed on each page, all of them marked with Latin, Polish and trivial names. Stems, leaves and flowers made their main fragments, whereas in most cases they devoid roots. It seems very unlikely that at the beginning the plants were gathered without any systematic order. In the second section of the herbarium, however, the whole plants with the upper and lower parts are preserved; all of them arranged thematically, i.e. ferns, water environment plants, marshy plants or species from the same genus. Undoubtedly there is seen a noticeable influence of Jerzy Aleksandrowicz, a professor of botany at the Main School, and later at the University of Warsaw, who was an outstanding researcher of the European flora and an organizer of the first gardening school in Warsaw.

There is no exact evidence of the period at which the plants were collected and placed into the album. In all likelihood, however, the herbarium took its shape between 1887 and 1898, as it results from the Eliza Orzeszkowa's letters. The first notes on the herbarium appeared in 1887 in her letter to J. Karłowicz, whereas the last remarks about the botanical excursions dating from 1898, from a letter to Leopold Méyet.

The herbarium of Eliza Orzeszkowa brings a lot of information about varied plants, which were in use at the turn of XIX and XX centuries in the Grodno region. Moreover, it shows richness of a folk terminology. The writer spent many hours on discussion with two women herbalists: Lucia from the Hledowicze village and Hanulka Wysocka from the Poniżany village; studying the healing herbs with them and learning the colloquial names of the plants. Later, she wrote a series of articles, thanks to which we are getting to know that many a time different species were known by the same name, which resulted from their morphological resemblance. Additionally, in the neighboring villages the same plant was called and used differently.

Many folk names of the herbs signature their indications and mystic importance. They refer indirectly to plant appearances, the manner of their harvest or blooming period as well as likeness to another organism and things. Lobelia, a popular bedding plant, is called as „ziuziulki słozki” (cuckoo tears), because of its blue flowers, which bring to mind teardrops. The shape of the lady's mantle leaves gave rise to the colloquial name of

this plant: „Husine łapki” or „gęsie łapki” (goose paw). Another charming name is „Rahulka”, which means „a crescent roll”. Pasqueflower was known as „zajaczyj sen”, because of its characteristic fluffy fructifications. By and large, the trivial names of plants reflect their healing properties. One of such example is mugwort wormwood – *Artemisia vulgaris* L. Its folk name „czarnobola” indicates that the plant was advised in strong pains, when one was seeing spots before eyes. *Centaurea Jacea* L. (brown-rayed knapweed), known as „północnik”, is another interesting plant, which was recommended to crying children for sedation. *Datura stramonium* L. (thornapple), generally called as „wiesiałucha” or „durec”, can be very toxic while fallen into the wrong hands. The local healing women, however, made use of its properties in order to intoxicate sick person and in that way to reduce pains. *Silene inflata* (inflated catchfly or bladder silene) appears as „skrypica”, which means „to creak”. The last name is related to the applications of its infusions in children hoarseness. *Plantago arenaria* (whorled plantain or branched plantain) is another example. Its trivial names „żywotobolnik” reflects seed properties, which bring relieve in stomach, flatulence and constipations.

It is evident that the herbarium specimens and their colloquial names make a fundamental source of ethnopharmacological information. A searching analysis of the modern pharmacognostic literature shows that use of many healing plants was later confirmed by the presence of active constituents. The last refers to e.g. common toadflax (*Linaria vulgaris* L.), known as „a flax of a Holly Virgin”.

About 5% of the trivial names indicate the blooming period of the plants or their harvest time, as in case of „wodzianoje Swiatojańskie ziela” – water St. John’s herb (golden lossestrife), which is in a full blossom in June. Lada, the goodness of spring, gave her name to some plants that are in flower in this season of a year, e.g. hedge vetch, tiny vetch, meadow pea vine. It is possible, though, that all of these plants were treated as one species. Marsh marigold is a harbinger of summer, which is reflected in its name „łatoć”. August is a Virgin Mary month, thus the names of plants blooming in this period refer very often to Our Lady, e.g. butter-and-eggs, which is known as a flax of a Holly Virgin.

A strong believe in a magic power of herbs partly determined their use in folk medicine. It shows a close relation between two worlds of the countrymen – the world of their faith and wildlife. One example is lady’s love („boże drevko”), the name of which dates back to the Proto-Slavic period and is common for all Slavic languages. Dark mullein and gladiolus (prescribed for children disorders, which were believed as being gifts from unclean spirits) also support this theory.

The herbarium of Eliza Orzeszkowa was not a unique collection of herbs that came into being on the Polish lands in those days. The members of an intensely growing physiografic movement called for such kind of activities. Orzeszkowa was a leading representative of that trend, who translated words into action. The value of her work was acknowledged by the outstanding experts in this field J. Aleksandrowicz and B. Hryniewiecki.

As Orzeszkowa emphasized in her letters, the main goal of that undertaking was to preserve the colloquial names of the plants as well as their importance for a rural population. Therefore, she put the main stress on the traditional names of the species, whereas the Polish and Latin nomenclatures are not free of some errors. It is necessary, however, to credit her for a great effort in delving into botany in order to gain a correct professional terminology. She got plenty of information from the specialists in botany, biology, medicine, as Antoni Ślósarski, Witold Wróblewski, Edmund Jankowski (the author of „Work of gardening in Poland”, 1923 and „Work of a prevalent gardening”, 1938), the mentioned above J. Aleksandrowicz and many others. Even the writer was only an amateur and treated the ethnopharmacological studies as a hobby, nevertheless her herbarium has some cognitive values and it shows floristic resources of the Grodno region. Eight specimens from this collection are protected plants, very uncommon in nature. B. Hryniewiecki says that her work helped to broaden the range of appearance of some species.

Although the Orzeszkowa’s herbarium is on display at the Poznań Collection of PTPN since 1966, any studies have been done on it so far. Moreover, it has not been mentioned in any biography of the writer. Accounts of this herbarium appeared, however, in the PTPN’s reports. What is more, it was discussed in a paper published in „Farmacje Polska” by the late pharmacy historian Witold W. Głowacki and also during a jubilee scientific session of the Pharmaceutical Commission of PTPN.

Bolesław Hryniewiecki, a great expert of Orzeszkowa’s work, in one chapter („Eliza Orzeszkowa’s contribution to botany”) of his manuscript entitled: „Nature in the artistic work of Eliza Orzeszkowa” is making the following remarks about her achievements in this field: „The contribution of Eliza Orzeszkowa to botany is of both popularizing and scientific values. She did not want to stop half-way, so aside from that valuable information, which were published in the journal »Wisła«, she kept doing herbaria, trying in that way to get to know the flora of the Niemen area. Moreover, she was planning to write a comprehensive work on different plants, about their importance and relationship to the live of the local communities.”

The present publication includes reproduction of the original pages from the Eliza Orzeszkowa’s herbarium.

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