

## **MY SON THE FELDSHER**

I once had a patient by the name of Joseph Feldsher (Felcher) who was born in Poland. He didn't know of any physicians in his family, but remembered that as a child in Cracow sometimes his sleep was disturbed by loud banging on the apartment door and urgent cries of "Feldsher, Feldsher." He explained that was what many doctors were called in Eastern Europe and probably someone who had a toothache or other ailment had seen their family surname on the mailbox. My patient told me that he had an uncle who when he was drafted into the Russian army was assigned to the medical unit because of his name. He was afraid to admit that he had no medical experience and risk being sent to the front, so he kept quiet - and he had a meteoric career. Eventually he was appointed the head of an army hospital and was personally decorated by Joseph Stalin! When I heard that, I wondered who and what were feldshers? Do you know?

Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were few trained physicians in rural areas or the small villages and towns in eastern Europe and feldshers constituted an important underclass of health practitioners. The first feldshers were medieval barber-surgeons who were recruited into the German and Swiss armies as mercenaries. (see Appendix) The original German word *feldscherer* literally meant a military man working in the field with shears. In fact, the French father of modern surgery Ambroise Paré (b. 1510) began as a barber surgeon.

Since God was considered to be the Supreme Healer, in Christian Europe medicine was exercised mainly by priests and monks. During the Middle Ages the Church distrusted all forms of surgery and early in the 13th century it became so disturbed about excess use of bloodletting by monks that it prohibited them from continuing the practice. By default, the technique was assumed by barbers so that in addition to cutting hair, shaving whiskers and curling wigs, a barber might draw blood as well as pull teeth, dress wounds and even do minor surgery.

Although the phenomenon of feldsherism began in western Europe, it gradually spread eastward. Before the 17th century in Imperial Russia no one shaved, from the Czar to the humblest peasant, so there was no call for barbers. But Peter the Great (1672-1725) forced his nobles (*boyars*) to cut their beards, shave and wear wigs that were popular in Western Europe. In his army Peter used barber surgeons extensively as field surgeons - comparable to modern corpsmen. Every unit was required to have several and by mid

19th century their status was elevated not only in the army but the general public as well. Eventually, distinctions were made between those who shaved beards and those who shaved corns and bunions but the tradition persisted for centuries.

The first medical schools were founded in Salerno (c. 850 CE), Montpellier (c. 1025), Bologna (c. 1200) and Padua (1222.) Now graduates of their programs were given medical degrees (as were graduates of law and divinity.) So the medical profession was divided into two distinct branches - the generally well respected medical doctors and the disrespected surgeons who were considered crude, unsavory and unskilled. Even as late as the 20th century there were guilds of barber-surgeons.

The profession was abolished in Austria during the reign of Joseph II, but each year the thirty best feldshers were permitted to attend a two-year course at a military medical school in order to become *bona fide* doctors. Later this was increased to four years and more training was required but the name feldsher or feldscherer was officially forbidden. One veteran was so humiliated by the downgrading that he shot and killed himself. He left an explanatory note that said, "I do this only because the world despises me. Because all men who have aged in army service are treated in such a manner, I advise all honorable men in the imperial-royal army to forsake the career of surgeon."

Feldshers were especially popular within Jewish communities because they communicated in Yiddish and encouraged folk remedies. They would administer leeches, apply cupping glasses (*bonkes*), perform blood letting, extracted teeth - and sometimes even used a stethoscope just like a physician. In the Kingdom of Poland by 1887 feldshers outnumbered physicians five-fold, 1,051 to 198, and in Russia 28% of all feldshers were Jews versus just over 6% among trained physicians. **So if a Jewish mother boasted about "my son the doctor," most likely he *really* was a feldsher!**

Smaller communities didn't have physicians but practically all had feldshers and if they were licensed, hung outside their office was their official insignia of three plates on a rod derived from the barber's basin as was described in this story of a feldsher known as Shloyme, the Healer of Bilgoray (near Lublin):

*Three brass plates hung by the healer's door, the symbol of his craft. Actually he hadn't finished his degree; he had served as a medic in the Russian army and when his tour of duty was over, he became the town healer. He wore a stiff*

*black top hat and a pointed little beard and he was the only man in town who wore a short jacket. He used to wash with perfumed soap, and it was whispered among the women that the healer ate tomatoes, which were held to be nonkosher. When he made a house call he was received with great honor and the family hung on his every word. He asked the invalid to describe his pain, checked his pulse and took out various instruments from the little bag he carried with him. He checked the patient's throat and then gave him aspirin...In addition, he applied cups and leeches, painted throats and gave enemas.*

As Jews gradually emerged from their isolated shtetl lives, they retained many of their popular old beliefs in folk medicine. When home remedies failed, first a call might go out to the local "enema woman." Since the cause of illness was presumed to be something that got in, it had to be got out. So the enema woman was a dreaded figure for many children in the shtetl because her equipment which included a calf's bladder and a goose quill was threatened as a cure for any ailment - including naughtiness.

The next level of care required a *rofe* (*roife* in Yiddish) or untrained healer who might administer leeches and apply *bonkes*. Although rationalists denounced the use of magic and amulets, they had little influence and in one form or another superstitious practices persisted and continue to persist in some places - even to the present day. If you've ever listened to east European Jews talk, their speech often is sprinkled with *kaynahoras*, the contraction of the Yiddish *keyen aye hore*, meaning "May there be no evil eye." Q: "How are you?" A: "*Kaynahora*."

The evil eye was like a free-floating malevolence that attacked the most vulnerable and favored - the young, the talented, the attractive. To evade the evil eye you needed to avoid any expression of happiness or praise. For example, the answer to the salutation "How are you?" was *not* "Fine" but "Not bad" or some other less-than-enthusiastic response. Precious glass should be broken at a wedding and amulets called *hamsas* worn in the shape of an outstretched hand and containing a holy verse. A child might be given an ugly name or a protective red string would be tied around the wrist or neck to avert the evil eye.

The idea that some eyes have the power to harm at a glance was an accepted phenomenon in *midrashic* literature. One rabbi said that "ninety-nine people of one hundred people die from the evil eye and only one dies a natural death" - that's a

terrifying statistic. A historian listed over eighty anti-evil eye practices and a two-volume book written in 1910 was described by its author as “the inadequate work of a beginner.” Later, he published two more volumes. People believed that the spirits of the dead could help them in earthly matters. They also believed that when a person died their spirit spend eleven months in *Gehenna*, a kind of purgatory, where they were tormented for their wrongs and misdeeds. *Gehenna* had seven levels of punishment - and heaven also had seven levels - that’s the origin of the expression of “seventh heaven” for the highest level.

In addition to the evil eye, there were many other superstitious beliefs related to health: Frightening a person may scare the invading spirit out - for example, frightening away hiccups. What tastes vile to the patient also is vile to the demon - the more odious the more potent. I suppose that explains the medicinal value of a stew made of foreskin of a newly circumcised boy, virgin blood of a bride, devil’s dung, fried frogs, placenta of a newborn child and stag’s testicles. I’ve always wondered where they obtained the ingredients? Perhaps your ancestors swore by such things. My father-in-law once told me that when as a child he got a cut, they’d rub spider webs into it to stop the bleeding. You laugh? Consider the fact that leeches are making a comeback and in many places *bonkes* are still popular!

Evil demons could be outwitted by prayer, giving charity or changing a name. It was as if the one who changed his name said to the demon, “I am not the person who you are seeking.” (Fake News.) Listen to this account from the autobiography of Chaim Aronson that describes what happened when as a child in a small Lithuanian shtetl he contracted a high fever:

*The first remedy my father tried on me was one prescribed by the rabbi: he had to write over all the doors and windows of the house and to chalk upon all the walls in large letters “The boy Hayyim is not at home.” The idea was that when the demon of malaria came to visit me, he would see written everywhere that the boy he was seeking was not home and, therefore, would turn away and go back to wherever he came from. Unfortunately, the demon of malaria did not read Yiddish and so he paid me constant visits.*

Because most feldshers relied on empiric observation they often were the laughingstock of the more sophisticated classes who would exaggerate their ignorance. This was exemplified by the following story about a cobbler who suddenly took sick:

*The feldsher was called, diagnosed a severe case of typhoid and muttered to himself, "There's no hope." Overhearing these words, the cobbler feebly prayed to be given one last pleasure before dying. To his taste nothing was sweeter or more palatable than sauerkraut. Could he have a last dish? The healer agreed, the cobbler had his fill of sauerkraut and miraculously recovered. On hearing this, the healer was overjoyed and wrote in his prescription book, "A tested cure for advanced typhoid is sauerkraut." Soon afterward, the same healer was called to the bed of another patient, this time a tailor. The diagnosis again was severe typhoid. Of course, sauerkraut was prescribed but the next day the tailor was dead. Unperturbed, the healer wrote in his book, "Sauerkraut effective only under the condition that the patient is a cobbler. It will not work in case he happens to be a tailor."*

Only when the feldsher became alarmed was a trained physician called in as a specialist consultant. However, few people could afford their fees and because they generally were called only as a last resort, the results of their treatments were little better than that of their rivals. The highest accolade for a prosperous physician was the title "professor," but that was more a mark of general distinction than of academic achievement. This next story illustrates the special status afforded the physician:

*In extreme cases, with both reluctance and fear, the doctor is called...a figure of awe, waited on hand and foot deferred to by everyone. He sits in state while the family stands around him, the women craning and staring. His instruments, his learning, his foreign appearance and manner inspire wonder and uneasiness. Everyone competes to bring him whatever he asks for - a spoon, some water, a towel - and to fetch his coat when he is ready to leave. As he goes, the father timidly shakes hands with him and shyly presses the fee into his palm.*

By mid-19th century almost all East European towns with a Jewish population of at least 20,00 had a Jewish hospital staffed by one physician and several feldshers and midwives. For the most part civilian feldshers were retired military corpsmen (or moonlighting medical students) who practiced in the small towns. Most of them were

better attuned to the culture of the local people, spoke their dialects and were considered as one of their own. When a new breed of assimilated medical graduates of Padua returned home, they were seen as deviants who were not to be trusted. They were derided as “Italians” - some shaved their beards or smoked cigars, rarely were seen in synagogue and rode in public on Shabbat.

But with emancipation there were increased opportunities for young Jews to enter medical schools in France and Austria and in Russia under the relatively tolerant thirty year reign of Czar Alexander II the number of Jewish university students rose one hundred fold. By 1881, 9% of all Russian doctors were Jewish including many women. (11% of dentists and 20% of pharmacists were Jews.) Nevertheless, even today in rural areas of Russia, partially trained feldshers continue to provide primary care equivalent to physicians' assistants in this country.

## **APPENDIX**

Johann Carl Buettner was a non-Jewish feldsher who fought during the American Revolution. (nearly 20,000 Hessian soldiers fought in the war on the British side.) He was a care-free young German who in 1828 wrote a colorful memoir about his early life. As a youth Buettner was apprenticed, as he said, in order to learn “to trim beards and other accomplishments of the surgical skill.” He was told that “surgery was the one profession that could take one through the world because it was necessary everywhere.” There always was need for someone to trim beards and clean ears so he packed his razor and a sword and traveled widely through Europe, at the same time gambling, carousing and losing his entire inheritance. So Johann signed up for a term as an indentured servant in order to get passage to the land of gold and plenty across the ocean. Once arrived, in effect, he worked as a slave for a New Jersey planter, until he escaped to join the Continental army. Buettner had many fascinating adventures before being captured by the British; then he escaped, was recaptured and when he was wounded at the Battle of Princeton, he told the leading American doctor of that time that he was a surgeon, he was signed on again. So he continued to shave and draw blood and performed minor surgery and later when stationed on Long Island he treated local women for venereal diseases. Then an English physician in New York told him that if he attended medical lectures for a half year that he would be made a full surgeon and assigned hospital duties. Before long he switched sides again and wound up as a full surgeon in the American army. After the war Johann Buettner returned to Germany, passed exams that licensed him as a surgeon and took over his aging father-in-law's medical practice. It goes to show that an enterprising young feldsher could go far even in colonial America.

