



Carpathian Healers!

Legends and Facts

In the Carpathian Mountains of Western Ukraine there is an area, which is called Hutsulshchyna, and its inhabitants are called Hutsuls. Forest-covered mountains of sublime beauty, dales overgrown with lush grasses, fast and foamy mountain rivers, tall, magnificent conifers make Hutsulshchyna an exceptionally beautiful place. The Hutsuls are people of great dignity and of proudly independent ways. Old legends and unusual stories of the times of old are still popular in their land. Each village has its own set of traditional legends that the villagers will gladly tell visitors. There will be no end to stories about mysterious forest creatures, warlocks, witches and wonderworkers.

Old Hutsuls tell stories about Bisytshas who, according to them, used to inhabit the forests of Hutsulshchyna in great numbers. Bisytsha is a forest girl of exceptional beauty, with long braids and enchanting voice. If a man happens to be walking all alone through a forest some time in the evening, he runs a good chance of being seen by a Bisytsha. The moment she catches sight of the man, she begins to sing and then reveals herself to the man for a moment. Her voice is so sweet, gentle and mesmerizing, her appearance is so bewitching, that the man immediately falls under the spell of the Bisytsha's voodoo powers, forgets everything — his relatives, his village, the whole world, and blindly follows the Bisytsha wherever she chooses to lead him. She keeps luring him ever deeper into the thicket, using all her magic spells, and then, when he has completely lost his way, she disappears. Or worse — she may bring the unfortunate man to a deep pit, which cannot be seen in the darkness and the man, blissfully unmindful of it, takes the last tragic step and falls in.

There is also a Chuhaister, a wild man-like creature of the forests. He is very horrible to look at but he has a kind nature and treats people well. Sometimes, he can even protect people from evil spirits. So, if a man hears a Bistrytsha's call that can lead to his destruction, he should strike a tree, nearest to him, three times with his fist, and a Chuhaister will turn up, ready to rescue the man from peril.

Also, a visitor to a Hutsul village is likely to be told stories about a folk hero named Oleksa Dovbush and about the treasures that he hid somewhere putting a spell on them so that no one could find them. The search is still going on. Dovbush was the leader of a band of intrepid freedom fighters, always ready to help the oppressed against the oppressors in the times of old. As a child, he was feeble and sickly, but one day, high in the mountains, he met an old man who turned out to be a molfar, that is a sorcerer and healer. This molfar made Oleksa enormously strong and even impervious to bullets or swords. Nobody could overpower him in a fight; no bodily harm could be inflicted upon him. But his lover who turned out to be a perfidious and treacherous woman had black and cruel things on her mind and in her heart. She looked for and found an evil molfar who taught the wicked, faithless woman how to have Oleksa Dovbush killed.

The storyteller will continue to explain who these molfars are, what kind of powers they possess. Molfars are believed to be healers, sorcerers and warlocks; sometimes they are even regarded as demigods who are almost omniscient, they know secrets of the earth and of the water and of the fire and of the forest; they can prevent a bad storm and hail from damaging the grain fields, they can turn into wild beasts, they know how to cure illnesses and overcome harmful spells. But the evil ones can do a lot of mischief; they can deprive a man of his reason or even of his life by their black magic...

If you hear these stories for the first time at this point you may inadvertently betray your disbelief by raising questioning your brows, but the old Hutsul would just nod his head in confirmation of his words, suck at his pipe that has come down to him from his great-great-grandfather, and say: "Aye, aye, sir, but it's true."

When I learnt that in the village of Verkhny Yaseniv there lived a man possessing skills and powers of a molfar, I decided to go and investigate.



*Mykhailo Nychai, a molfar,
or master of white and
black magic.*

It is a small village sitting high in the mountains on whose tops one can still find ruins of heathen temples. The dirt road was narrow, climbing steeply uphill, so one can get to the village only on foot. I crossed a shaky and rickety suspension bridge over the Chorny Cheremosh River and when I walked into the village, I, as though guided by intuition, stopped at a house with all kinds of medicinal herbs fastened above the door. Hardly had I knocked, when the door opened and I was greeted by a tall, skinny man, well advanced in years. He had a gentle and friendly smile and piercing blue eyes. That was the man I was looking for, Mykhailo Nychai, "Grandpa Nychai" as he is lovingly called by the villagers. In fact, he is quite well known outside his village too, as he has cured many people who come to him for help from all parts of Ukraine. He is a molfar, one

of the last in the line of molfars who have been keeping a tradition of magic used for treating diseases. And for other things too.

I was invited to step into the house and was told to make myself comfortable. I did not have to explain for long the purpose of my visit. Grandpa Nychai began telling the story of his life and of his magic powers.

One of his ancestors was Danylo Nychai, a valiant and audacious colonel of the Zaporizhska Sich Cossacks. The colonel was known to be a kharakternyk, that is a man possessing some special powers. Kharakyernyks were sorcerers, witch doctors, healers, and so Mykhailo Nychai, descendent of the Cossack colonel could be also called a kharakternyk, in addition to being a molfar.

“Karakternyk is a person who is very just, spiritually pure and full of love for people,” explained Grandpa Nychai. “Here, in the Carpathians, kharakternyks are called molfars.”

“Does the word molfar itself have any meaning?” I asked, eager to find out as much as possible.

“This word is derived from the ancient word “molfa” which means a thing on which a spell has been put. The main power of a molfar is in the words and chants he uses. A molfar can do both good and evil.”

“In other words, a molfar may possess the powers of either black or white magic?”

“That’s correct. Every molfar has his own, as it were, style of work. Some molfars are born with their magic powers, they are hereditary molfars, the knowledge is passed from generation to generation within a family. Others are taught. Some possess black magic powers, others — white magic powers.”

“And you are, if I am not mistaken, a hereditary molfar?”

“That’s right. My grandma Anna has given me my knowledge of magic powers. She was a molfar herself, she knew all kinds of medicinal herbs, and she was a healer, too. When I was six, she began passing her knowledge to me. She took me to the mountains, she showed me how to find the right herbs, which herbs to use for what purpose.”

“What kind of person can become a molfar?”

“Well, ahead of anything else you have to love every living creature, to love the Earth, to wish all the things animate and inanimate well, you must try to do good every minute of your life.

Then this energy of love and good will come back to people and will give them strength. And what’s most important — a molfar should serve God and people not for material gains. He or she must develop his or her spiritual side. Only spirit is eternal.”

“Can we say then, that a molfar gives himself totally to others?”

“Yes, I’ve given myself completely to helping people in whatever way I can. On the day I receive and treat people, I sleep two or three hours, have one meal a day. But all my inner forces and strength that I give to people, come back to me from the Cosmos. A molfar must be a deeply religious person, since he addresses God and the celestial forces with requests to help. If a molfar does something wrong, violates the laws of Nature, he can lose all his powers.”

From all that the old man said it became clear to me that being a molfar was no easy thing. Grandpa Nychai invited me to have a look at his “study” and “a reception room” — a small room filled with a strong scent of herbs and medicinal concoctions. Many people, suffering from all kinds of diseases, had been received in that room, and many of them had their health restored. Grandpa Nychai treats people with herb teas, roots, minerals and water blessed by a priest. And of course he uses incantations and spells. He offered to put me through a health-improving short treatment and I accepted his offer. He began whispering words that I could not make out as they were pronounced too fast for me to catch, and I felt that negative thoughts, all kinds of bad feelings were leaving me. After this refreshing treatment I continued to ask my questions with a renewed vigour. I asked which herbs he was using and at what time they should be collected.



*Pysany Kamin
("A Rock with a Picture"),
a huge rock in the
vicinity of the village
of Bukovets,
with the representation of
a cross
carved on its surface.*



*The village of Kryvorivnya
in autumn.*

“Oh, there are so many, you would not know the names anyway and I would not know the scientific names for them, they are local Carpathian names. I collect all the herbs myself. Not only the season is important, but the time of the day. Some roots, for example, should be collected only in the afternoon, and what grows above the ground of the same plant — only in the morning. Some herbs must be picked only before sunrise, and others only at night. You see, every plant has its own bio-field, its own intrinsic peculiarities and it is upon them that the time of picking this or that herb or any other plant depends. There are plants with very powerful bio-fields. Arnica is one of such plants. It can be used for treating heart and respiratory track diseases. There are many stories connected with curative powers of this plant. One of them is several centuries old. Once upon a time there lived a prince by the name of Danylo Halytsky, he had what was called “dykhavytsya,” shortness of breath, and now we would call this disease asthma. All kinds of medicines were used and none helped. Then, an old molfar was brought from the mountains and he had with him flowers of arnica. The molfar said that a potion made from arnica, if properly prepared and regularly taken forty days and forty nights, would cure the prince from his ailment. And it did...”

After a short pause, Grandpa Nychai continued his story about herbs, explaining which kind of plants could help cure which illness. It was an exciting story. When he finished, I asked:

“What else do you use in your treatment of diseases in addition to herbs and incantations?”

“Music,” he said and pulled out of his pocket something that turned out to be a small lyre-shaped musical instrument called drymba.

It is small enough to be easily held between fingers. It is made of metal and is played by being placed between the teeth; it gives twanging tones from a metal tongue struck by the finger. It is very similar both in shape and in the manner you play it to an instrument, which is known in English as Jew’s harp. A similar instrument is also used in Tibet and by shamans of some northern peoples.



Mykhailo Nychai not only plays the unusual instrument known in the Carpathian Mountains since time immemorial, but also makes drymbas himself. He played it for me. It is absolutely impossible to describe what kind of sounds he produced but it seemed to me in those magical sounds I heard whispers of the forests, ripple of the rivers, whistling of the winds, murmur of the ancestors.

“There is magic in the music that you make with this drymba,” said Grandpa Nychai, “the sounds produced by drymba can heal both body and soul, they can bewitch, they can tame a wild beast. They are like musical incantations.”

“There are so many people who come to you seeking help,” I said, “but does it ever happen that you, for some reason, cannot provide this help?”

“Every human being is a creation of God, so I cannot refuse to receive anyone who comes to me for help. But sometimes I am powerless to help or the request is such that I refuse to help. In the first case, the disease itself is a sort of God’s punishment or a result of karmic twists. In the second case, when I am requested to put a bad spell on someone, I naturally refuse.”

“Have you ever been asked to work a miracle in public?”

“Oh, I am asked to do that quite often. But I explain to people who ask to see a miracle performed, that magic is a very serious thing, you can’t play with it, like you mustn’t play with fire, or you can get very badly burned.”

These words prevented me from asking further questions about Nychai’s magic powers though I was burning with both personal and journalistic curiosity. Grandpa Nychai continued his unhurried story about all kinds of things that a molfar could do; also, I heard ancient legends, fables and folk tales.

Now the visit to the distant village in the Carpathian mountains and the long talk with the molfar seem to have been not quite real, like a visit to a fairy-tale land. And I keep repeating in my mind Grandpa Nychai’s words, with which he concluded our conversation:

“Being a molfar is a heavy cross that you carry all your life. It’s a great responsibility, you must be so careful with every word you utter or even think, because the word is the most powerful thing in our Universe.”

By Hromovytsya Berdnyk

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