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### SOME EARLY MEDICAL CONTACTS WITH THE KALMUCK TRIBES OF SIBERIA\*

In a recent article relating to early nineteenth-century Bible translation and printing in Mongolian, Professor Bawden mentions in the text of his article and again in a footnote,<sup>1</sup> a medical handbook translated from Russian into Kalmuck which was published in 1823. This book is now in the library of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine.

The Kalmuck tribes constituted one of the many peoples who occupied vast areas in Central Asia between the Altai and Tien Shan Mountains, the Gobi Desert, and Lake Balkash. They were nomadic, mongol by race, and their language related to Mongolian and other similar languages of Central Asia.<sup>2</sup> By 1646, a large part of the Kalmuck tribes had submitted to Russian authority, although they retained their tribal system of government and their traditional khan or ruler. Some Kalmuck tribes settled under Chinese sovereignty around the Blue Lake, others migrated westwards during the eighteenth century and settled in the vicinity of the Volga. One Kalmuck tribe which was practically destroyed by the Chinese in the eighteenth century, emigrated to areas of Russian control, but found European tyranny even more oppressive and so returned to the rule of their old oppressors; other Kalmuck tribes lived successively by the side of the Volga, the Ural Mountains, and on the banks of the River Don.<sup>3</sup> Today, they occupy a sparsely populated area of the Soviet Union, situated to the extreme south-east of European USSR, west of the lower Volga and adjacent to the Caspian sea.

This book, one of the first printed in the Kalmuck language, witnesses the increasing European interest in the peoples of Siberia during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>4</sup> Many accounts describing Siberia survive from this period, but most of

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<sup>1</sup> C. R. Bawden, 'W. A. Unkrieg's correspondence with the British and Foreign Bible Society: a contribution to the history of Bible translation and of printing in Mongolian in Russia in the early nineteenth century', *Zentralasiatische Studien*, 1980, 14 (1): 66–108, especially p. 83 and note 65.

<sup>2</sup> From the Mongolian script, the lama Zaya Pandit (actually bLo-bzan-p'rin-las) created in 1648 the Kalmuck script which is used by the Kalmucks who settled by the lower Volga at the beginning of the seventeenth century. See H. Jensen, *Sign, symbol and script: an account of man's effort to write*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1970, p. 418.

<sup>3</sup> See article 'Kalmouk' in P. Larousse, *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, 1873, p. 1151.

<sup>4</sup> The great embassy of Lev Vasilevich Izmailov in 1719 shows Russia's growing interest in her Asian dominions. John Bell, an Englishman, joined Izmailov's mission as a physician and eventually embodied his personal experiences – together with stories related to him by others – in his work, *Travels from St Petersburg in Russia to diverse parts of Asia*, 2 vols., Glasgow, 1763. See also, R. Burgess, 'Thomas Garvine – Ayrshire surgeon active in Russia and China', *Med. Hist.*, 1975, 19: 91–94.

them were the work of Russian government officials, who were bound to strict secrecy, an obligation most visitors, official or otherwise, respected. In spite of this limitation, we have a number of distinguished accounts of eighteenth-century Siberia by physicians, who not infrequently undertook official missions for the Russian government. Their powers of observation as physicians appear to have equipped them well to record the natural characteristics and inhabitants of Siberia. One such traveller was Daniel Amadeus Messerschmidt (1685–1735), who was born in Danzig and studied medicine at Halle. His Siberian expedition took from 1720 to 1726 and his achievements were so fundamental that his work remained a model for all scientists who participated in subsequent travels and explorations in Siberia.<sup>5</sup> Later in the century, the German physician Peter Simon Pallas (1741–1811)<sup>6</sup> led an important expedition to Siberia. In 1767, Pallas accepted a call to St Petersburg to become professor of natural history and to lead an exploratory mission into south-eastern Russia and Siberia. The task of the expedition consisted of the investigation and description of the natural surroundings in Siberia, including the life and customs of the native population. In line with government policy, Pallas avoided in his writing detail of the social conditions he met with in Siberia.<sup>7</sup> Fortunately, however, he did leave an interesting account of the nomadic existence of the Kalmucks.<sup>8</sup> He found that, although hot-tempered, the Kalmucks lived at peace among themselves and were hospitable to strangers but also inclined to indolence. He described their homes as felt tents built around wooden frames and their diet consisting mainly of milk, butter, and cheese from their extensive herds, and meat from the animals they hunted. They also collected roots for food, and those sojourning by the Caspian Sea ate fish. They drank alcohol made from fermented milk and enjoyed smoking tobacco when available. Pallas was unable to give much information about the health of the Kalmucks, although he describes an illness much dreaded by them, which they called *Chatun-Ubetshin*. This was a fever, usually fatal, which lasted eight days and which Pallas attributed to the decayed state of the meat that was often consumed. The disorder he witnessed most frequently was scabies, which he also attributed to the poor diet and the harsh climate. The mission included three other medical men – a Pomeranian pharmacist, Johann Georgi (1735–1802),<sup>9</sup> a Swedish physician, Johann Peter Falck (1727–1774),<sup>10</sup> and Ivan Lepekin (1740–1802),<sup>11</sup> also a physician and the most

<sup>5</sup> See 'Nachricht von D. A. Messerschmidts sieben jähriger Reise in Sibirien', *Neue Nordische Beyträge III*, 97–158, and more recently D. A. Messerschmidt, *Forschungsreise durch Sibirien 1720–1727*, (Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte Osteuropas VIII, ed. by E. Winter *et. al.*), 4 vols., Berlin, 1962–68.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Simon Pallas was born in Berlin and studied medicine and science first in Berlin, then in Halle, Göttingen, and Leyden. At the age of twenty, he visited London and within two years was made a member of the Royal Society and other eminent scientific bodies. See O. F. Guglia, 'Peter Simon Pallas (1741–1811): ein Berliner Gelehrter "entdeckt" Russland', *Adena Mitteilungen*, (Graz), 1966, 9: 14–16.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *A naturalist in Russia: letters from Peter Simon Pallas to Thomas Pennant*, ed. by C. Urness, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1967, and J. R. Masterson and H. Brower (editors), *Bering's successors, 1745–1780*, translated from the articles of P. S. Pallas, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1948.

<sup>8</sup> P. S. Pallas, *Reise durch verschiedene Provinzen des Russischen Reichs in einem ausführlichen Auszuge*, Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1776–78; see vol. 1, pp. 231–309.

<sup>9</sup> Georgi was Professor of Chemistry at St Petersburg from 1783 until his death in 1802.

<sup>10</sup> Falck was a lifelong friend of Georgi: both had been pupils of Linnaeus and were keen botanists. Falck was of a somewhat neurotic disposition and finally took his own life early in 1774. See O. Bergquist,

prominent Russian in Pallas's party. Georgi incorporated his very careful physical and geographical descriptions in two large volumes, which were published in the course of the next thirty years.<sup>12</sup> Falck travelled extensively in the Kalmuck steppe, but early in 1774, he committed suicide, leaving copious notes which Georgi edited into a three-volumed description along the same lines as Pallas's reports.<sup>13</sup> Lepekin's contribution was embedded in a diary which appeared in Russian but was soon made available to the learned world through a German translation.<sup>14</sup>

The flow of physician-explorers in Siberia continued in the nineteenth century,<sup>15</sup> one of the more notable accounts being that of the Swiss-born physician, Hans Jacob Fries (1749–1801). Fries emigrated to Russia in 1770, where he trained as a physician. During his training, he accompanied a mission to Siberia lasting from 1774 to 1776, which he recorded in a diary that was subsequently published. In his diary, Fries describes the Kalmucks as nomadic, living chiefly by hunting and raising cattle. He marvelled how they survived the fierce Siberian winter and described the progress Russian missionaries had made in converting the Kalmucks to Christianity. The Kalmucks, he observed, adhere to their poor ways of life and eat as their most delicious dish the entrails of dead horses. The general lack of cleanliness appalled Fries and must have added to his wonder at the rude health of these people.<sup>16</sup>

Although a number of physicians visited Siberia and came in contact with the Kalmuck tribes, Conrad Neiz or Neitz was one of the few during the eighteenth century who appears to have made a sustained effort to improve their condition. He made his first acquaintance with the Kalmucks in 1768 and spent the next forty or more years learning the Kalmuck language while practising as a physician.<sup>17</sup> Neiz belonged to the Mission of the United Brethren, commonly called the Moravians, who were the earliest Protestant translators of the Scriptures into any form of Mongolian. The Moravians established a colony at Sarepta in 1765, and by 1809 had begun to translate the Gospel of St Matthew into Kalmuck. This was subsequently printed at St Petersburg in 1815. From the same type it would appear that a medical handbook translated from Russian was published at St Petersburg in 1823.<sup>18</sup>

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'Andero Falcks brev till Petersburg', *Lychnos*, 1965/6, 123–158.

<sup>12</sup> Lepekin took his medical degree at Strasbourg and became a member of the Academy of Sciences at St Petersburg in 1768. His later career, however, did not match the promise he had shown in earlier years.

<sup>13</sup> J. G. Georgi, *Geographisch-physikalische und naturhistorische Beschreibung des russischen Reiches*, Königsberg, 1796–1802.

<sup>14</sup> J. P. Falck, *Beyträge zur Topographischen Kenntniss des Russischen Reichs*, St Petersburg, 1785–86.

<sup>15</sup> I. Lepekin, *Tagebuch der Reise durch verschiedene Provinzen des russischen Reiches 1768–1771*, translated by C. H. Hase, Altenburg, 1774–83.

<sup>16</sup> Numerous other expeditions took place in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but medical men, although taking part, did not leave important accounts or play major roles. Dr Georg Langsdorff says of his hurried winter progress of 1806/7 through Siberia "A hasty winter progress such as mine was furnishes . . . few observations worthy of being recorded", *Voyages and travels, 1803–1807*, Carlisle, 1817, p. 616.

<sup>17</sup> See *A Siberian journey: the journal of Hans Jacob Fries 1774–1776*, trans. and ed. by W. Kirchner, London, Frank Cass, 1974, pp. 48–53.

<sup>18</sup> Neiz was esteemed the most eminent translator of the Scriptures into Kalmuck. His name appears in Benjamin Bergmann's work, *Nomadische Streifereien unter den Kalmücken in der Jahren 1802 und 1803*, Riga, 1804–5, Pt. 1, pp. 20, 26.

<sup>19</sup> See Bawden, *op. cit.*, note 1 above, for a full discussion of the complicated history of early printing in the Kalmuck language.

This handbook was written in response to a decree concerning medical education in seminaries and first published in Russian in 1802. It was intended as a manual of elementary medical care for the use of teachers in the Russian countryside where there were no doctors. The success of the handbook may be judged by the many editions it ran to and the several languages, including Armenian and Georgian, in which it was published. The main section of the work was written by Osip Kirillovich Kamenetskii (1754–1823), the closing section by Yakov Sapolovich, i.e. pp. 1–119 and 123–160 respectively in the Kalmuck edition of 1823, which was translated from the Russian edition of 1811. It appears from his name that Yakov Sapolovich was Russian, but as no further trace can be found of him and he published no other work, he was of relative obscurity. His name does not appear on the title-page of the Kalmuck edition. Kamenetskii, on the other hand, enjoyed a distinguished career crowned by his appointment, in September 1816, as court physician at Moscow, the first Russian-trained physician to hold the position. He began his medical training at the Chernigov Hospital, moving in 1778 to St Petersburg General Hospital. He then entered the army as a physician attached to various regiments, finally becoming physician to the armed headquarters in 1790.<sup>19</sup> It may have been during his time in military service that he originally had the idea of producing a manual of elementary medical care for peoples living in remote areas of Russia's Asian Empire. It is possible that Kamenetskii would have come into contact with the peoples of Siberia, either in their homelands or as recruits to the imperial army. However, it is evident from the decree of 1802 that the Russian government had begun to take an interest in the health of the peoples under its control.

To a large extent the health of the inhabitants of Siberia during the first half of the nineteenth century continued to depend on the skill of visiting physicians and the efforts of missionaries and teachers. Although the medical handbook ran into many editions, the rarity of the Kalmuck edition would indicate that it was not widely used. An important reform took place in 1864 in which a system of local government known as *Zemstvo* was set up over part of the territory of Russia. Members of these councils sought the improvement of medical services for the rural population and a system of medical care with links between the district hospital and rural medical centres.<sup>20</sup> Although these provisions were in many ways inadequate, some Kalmucks living in Western Siberia would have benefited. However, in spite of efforts to bring modern medicine to peoples living in remote areas of Siberia, traditional methods of the east continued to survive. The Polish physician Benedyk Dybowski (1833–1930) reported that, while on a mission to Siberia between 1879 and 1883, he observed that all physicians among the Kalmucks living north of the Baikal lake in the upper reaches of the Lena river were lamas trained on Tibetan books, who administered drugs prepared

<sup>19</sup> See A. A. Polovtov, *Russkii Biograficheskii Slovar'*, St Petersburg 1896–1918, vol. 8, p. 411. I am grateful to Miss Marianne Winder for bringing this work to my notice and rendering the relevant page in English. See also, L. F. Smejew, *Slovar wratschei, polutshiwshichstepen Dr. med. wImperatorskom Moskowskom Universitete*, St Petersburg, 1855, p. 134.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. V. N. Emel'yanov, 'On the history of public health in three regions of the Upper Volga'. *Proceedings of the XXIII International Congress of the History of Medicine, London, 29 September 1972*, London, Wellcome Institute, 1974, vol. 1, pp. 508–511.





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Né à Berlin le 22 Septembre 1741  
Mort à Berlin le 7 Septembre 1811.

Figure 1. P. S. Pallas (1741–1811). Engraving by Ambroise Tardieu, [n.d.]. (Wellcome Institute Library, London).

Handwritten text in a decorative frame, likely a title page or a section header in a manuscript. The text is written in a cursive script, possibly a form of Arabic or Persian. The frame is ornate with a scalloped border. The text is arranged in several lines, with some lines starting with decorative flourishes. The overall appearance is that of a formal or significant page in a historical document.

Figure 2. O. K. Kamenetskii, *Axarxan surgali ebiciten küügi* . . ., St Petersburg, [s.n.], 1823, vol. 1, title-page. (Wellcome Institute Library, London).

*Illustrations from the Wellcome Institute Library*

in Chinese shops.<sup>21</sup>

The English translation of the title-page of the Kalmuck printed book illustrated is as follows: “Easy Instructions. Treatment of sick people by simple means. Issued by order of His Imperial Majesty. First Volume. Written and published by Doctor Osip Kamenetskii as instructed by the Medical College. Translated from this into Kalmuck by the Titular Counsellor and Cavalier Mikolai Lebedev at St Petersburg. The year of printing this Russian book was 1811”. [In manuscript] “This volume was printed in St Petersburg in the Tiger month of the year 1823”.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> See B. Dybowski, *O Syberii i Kamczatca*, Warsaw, 1912, pp. 58, 275.

<sup>22</sup> Bawden op. cit., note 1 above, note 65.