

Chapter 12

Folk Pharmacy in Latvia

Signe Pucena

SERDE Research and Publications

By the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century Baltic societies had undergone radical transformation processes that could be described as a shift from the Soviet Union to the European Union. The questions that the Interdisciplinary Art Group SERDE (*Serde* in Latvian signifies 'core' and 'pith.') is interested in include: how opening borders to global influences brought about changes in cultural practices due to media availability and access to consumer goods, and how we look at these changes from the perspective of cultural heritage. These are personal stories about recent local history and skills preserved during the Soviet Era because of very limited access to consumer products in shops and markets. These stories include historical background and show how certain skills were preserved from before the Second World War and maintained during the Soviet period, when consumer products were not readily available and so had to be home-produced or collected from nature.

This article is about SERDE's research and publications in the field of preserving living practices. It describes how research was done in collaboration with researchers of folklore and traditional culture and artists. This article highlights the organisation and development of SERDE's activities—fieldwork and expeditions to different rural areas of Latvia to investigate traditions—maintained from generation to generation, as well as how to collect stories about recent history still preserved in living memory. The gathered materials—namely, the *Notebook of Traditions* publication series and additional hands-on workshops with reconstruction of old recipes or storytelling events were presented to the local communities and wider audience nationally and internationally.

RESEARCH METHODS

Established in 2002 in Aizpute, a small rural town in Latvia, in 2005 the Interdisciplinary Art Group SERDE began to collaborate with researchers of folklore and traditional culture in response to the perceived loss of important living practices and memories. This activity included fieldwork/expeditions to rural areas of Latvia to investigate traditions—maintained from generation to generation—and to collect stories about recent history still preserved in living memory. The gathered materials were published by SERDE in the *Notebook of Traditions* book series in which two distinct themes emerge: the preservation of living practices and the preservation of stories/memories.

Preserving Living Practices. This theme includes memories and practical skills referring back to the day-to-day Soviet Era in which consumer products were not readily available and had to be home-produced or collected from nature. As research objects we chose vodka and beer production, pig slaughtering, and foraging in the forests and meadows (this includes traditional medicinal knowledge). We included contributors from different rural areas in Latvia, all of whom were active practitioners of specific skills passed down from parents or grandparents and preserved throughout the Soviet Era.

Preserving Stories. These books are dedicated to memories gathered from various communities. The principle theme here relates to the Second World War, for example the 'Narratives about Jews in Aizpute' were gathered from people who were children and young adults in

Aizpute at the time of the Holocaust. 'Closed Zone' is a collection of memories of inhabitants of seaside villages that were military zones and closed to the general public. Another book deals with the experiences of an Old Believers community, and 'Suiti Stories' is themed around the Latvian refugees who escaped to Gotland in Sweden.

The principal method employed by SERDE is fieldwork/expeditions, inviting specialists of folklore/living culture, artists and students to the chosen rural areas. The folklore specialists compile questions and organise interviews, whilst artists document the environment, processes and people. The gathered audio interviews are later transcribed and together with colour photo documentation are designed and printed in book form. Public events are held to celebrate the book publication, including a presentation of the book and additional hands-on workshops with reconstruction of old recipes or storytelling events in which the local community are invited to publicly recount their personal stories.

Analysing the positive impacts of the post-expedition events for the local community, it can clearly be seen how the process positively affects the contributors by means of the value and esteem attached to their knowledge. It disseminates the knowledge and links generations. Our experience shows that workshops often attract visitors who also wish to share their knowledge and a younger generation who are eager to learn, hence a transfer of knowledge and preservation of skills continues to take place.

SERDE believes its preservation practices are important and vital because knowledge is slowly disappearing for a variety of reasons, such as new regulations and laws concerning food and drink production, the development of consumerism in Latvia and generational change. Activities like fieldwork and expeditions that culminate in presentations and workshops for the community in which the knowledge was gained, "safeguard the intangible cultural heritage" and "raise awareness at the local, national and international levels of the importance of the intangible cultural heritage", as it is also stated within the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003).

Since 2005, SERDE has organized fieldwork and expeditions to document practices, skills, stories in different communities in Latvia. Since 2008, SERDE has collaborated with the Latvian National Commission for UNESCO, organizing several folklore studies and expeditions for UNESCO Associated School Project teachers and youngsters from Alsunga and Riebiņi.

FORAGING/HERBOLOGIES NETWORKS

In June 2010 SERDE coordinated the first international expedition in the framework of *Foraging/Herbologies Networks* events, which was organized by artists and organizers Andrew Gryf Paterson (SCO/FI), Ulla Taipale (FI/ES) and Signe Pucena (LV). This program initially started in Helsinki (Finland) and in the Kurzeme region of Latvia, but later extended geographically. In a series of events during 2010, it explored the cultural traditions and knowledge about herbs, edible and medicinal plants, within the contemporary context of online networks, open information-sharing, and biological technologies.

The cultural and experiential knowledge about edible and medical wild plants found in Nordic landscape has changed dramatically over the last two generations. Grandparents and parents of the current



Dried herbs at a folk pharmacy, Aizpute, Latvia, 2010



Traditional medicine shelf in the Latvian countryside, 2010

generation knew many things about the plants and roots surrounding them in the countryside. However, with the mass shift of families away from rural settings to city and urban locations, this knowledge is being lost, slipping away from the younger generation, at a time when information and media sharing online is booming.

Across the Baltic Sea, many middle-aged and older Latvians still carry everyday knowledge with them into the woods, meadows, to the coast, forest and fields. However, even this is becoming less common. There are many materials published in medical or pharmacy books, but very few stories are shared in a cultural context—regarding how to gather, how to prepare, how to use, reflections on use and how such knowledge is learned. To gather these stories the expedition was organized in two rural Latvian towns, Aizpute and Alsunga. Organizers hosted and invited an international and interdisciplinary group of guests to build upon their experience of engaging cultural heritage subjects as an arts organization. SERDE organized a series of fieldwork excursions to learn about the contemporary practices and cultural heritage related to the use of wild plants, and created temporary media/transcription lab to process the documentations. More than thirty participants including guests from Latvia, Lithuania, various places in Finland, Southern Sweden, Poland, Spain and Belgium were involved in the project. International guests split into groups with one Latvian guide in each who helped with questions and one translator who translated the participants' questions to the teller and back to participants—the tellers' replies. Most Latvian participants were from the youth centre Idea House in Aizpute, and they took on the translator role during the interviews and later the interviews were translated from Latvian into English. Questions about 'why the foraging tradition was better preserved in Latvia and the Baltics than in the Nordic countries' were addressed in interviews. For example, in an interview with retired nurse Velta Kreičmane in Alsunga, she explained "sometimes there was no medication and we went to meadows to pick the herbs and make medicine". Another situation mentioned in many of the interviews (Cecīlija Salpiņa (C.S.), Antonija Kalēja, Romāns Sedliņš etc.) was how medicine from the pharmacy were are too expensive and/or



Visitors' recipes at a folk pharmacy exhibition, Riga, 2010



International Herbolgies-Foraging Exhibition, Riga, 2010

not effective. Many of those interviewed mentioned Soviet-era experience—‘doctors could not help or there was no medication at all’. Unique, but very popular for this area is medical use of mushrooms, such as stink horn (*Phallaceae*) “which you can drink to treat cancer” (C.S.) and amanitas (*Amanita muscaria*) “for muscles, for legs or when I have something wrong with veins” (C.S.).

The expedition data was processed in two weeks’ time and it was called expedition sprint because twenty-two interviews were transcribed and translated during this period, and the photo and video materials were selected. The selection of stories was published in the book *Foraging in Central Kurzeme* (2010).

FOLK PHARMACY

The *Herbology/Foraging Networks* expedition raised SERDE’s interest to continue with more specific research about indoor plants and their use for medical purposes. Much fieldwork and many interviews were organized by Signe Pucena, Ieva Vitola and Una Smilgaine. After medical plant research, a special newspaper with folk recipes was issued by SERDE, and it was presented during the exhibition *Folk Pharmacy*. The *Folk Pharmacy* exhibition contained very diverse things—from an old-fashioned kitchen cupboard full of herbal tea jars and tinctures and four large size (2m x 1,3m) wall charts where, besides the photos of plants, visitors were invited to write their recipe of what they do when they feel sick. The written recipes were exchanged for a *Folk Pharmacy* newspaper copy. So those who wanted to get the newspaper had to write the recipe. There were several *Folk Pharmacy* exhibitions—in the framework of contemporary art forum *White Nights* in Riga, RIXC exhibition *Growing Ability in ‘Kim?’*, in the Open air museum, *Zemlika* music festival in Durbe and at SERDE residence centre in Aizpute. The final result of this research was the book *Folk Pharmacy* published in 2011 where, besides the stories about the medical use of indoor plants, recipes were also published which had been collected from exhibition visitors.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE RESULTS OF ACTIVITIES

SERDE's fieldwork and expeditions focused on local knowledge and traditions. The results of research were published in the SERDE series *Notebook of Traditions*—currently 19 books, although the process is ongoing. Free copies of each publication from the series are delivered to the Latvian National Library and local libraries in Latvia. In all *Notebook of Traditions* publications dialect characteristics, as well as use of various local words and expressions, have been respected. Except for the first two books, the rest openly recognise and identify various people who participated and shared their knowledge.

Almost all of the research expeditions were followed by a public presentation back to the local communities. From our observations, such expeditions and later presentations promote and support the capacity building of locals on how to carry out such research and how important it is to document the process. The most important aspect of all the expeditions carried out by SERDE is organizing a closing event and once again bring together all the people who were involved during the expeditions. SERDE's experience in the safeguarding of intangible culture heritage is based on close collaboration with communities and individuals who are willing to share their stories and skills.

At the same time, working also within contemporary art and technology processes, SERDE, together with artists and cultural workers, offers educational introductions and workshops (on how to boil soap, make candles, brew beer, forage for medical plants etc.) to reinvigorate local knowledge and traditional skills. Internationally SERDE's projects and performances that are strongly connected with Latvian

Winter stocks, Aizpute, Latvia, 2010



traditions were shown in art and culture festivals in Finland (Helsinki Kiasma and Botanic Gardens, Tampere Herbologies-Foraging networks), Germany (Duisburg ISEA and Berlin Ueber-lebenskunst), Switzerland (Freiburg Belluard Bollwerk and Bern Auawirlieben), Sweden (Oland Art & Agriculture and Stockholm Supermarket Art Fair), Ireland (Ennistymon The Future is Domestic), Lithuania (Klaipeda Šakotis and Nida ResArtis meeting) and Estonia (Tallinn Art Depo).

SERDES's creative and innovative approach to the intangible cultural heritage work was recognised with the Latvian Folklore Grand Prize in 2007 and local history nomination in 2015 by the national poet Imants Ziedonis Foundation Viegli. In 2016 SERDE was accredited by the UNESCO General Assembly of the States Parties to the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage to provide advisory services to the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article présente la recherche et les publications du SERDE dans le domaine de la sauvegarde des pratiques vivantes. Il décrit en particulier deux recherches sur les connaissances traditionnelles des herbes, des plantes comestibles et médicinales, réalisées en collaboration avec des chercheurs spécialistes des cultures traditionnelles et populaires, et avec des artistes. Cet article aborde l'organisation et le développement des activités du SERDE, les travaux de terrain et les expéditions dans différentes régions rurales de Lettonie pour enquêter sur les traditions transmises de génération en génération. Les documents recueillis—à savoir la série de publications *Notebook of Traditions*—et des ateliers pratiques supplémentaires, avec la réalisation de recettes anciennes ou des récits, ont été présentés aux communautés locales et à un public plus large à l'échelle nationale et internationale.

En juin 2010, le SERDE a coordonné sa première expédition internationale « Réseaux d'alimentation et d'herboristerie ». Cette expérience a suscité l'intérêt du SERDE pour poursuivre des recherches plus spécifiques sur les plantes d'intérieur et leur utilisation à des fins médicales. Après une recherche sur les plantes médicinales, un journal contenant des recettes traditionnelles a été publié par le SERDE et partagé lors de l'exposition sur la *Folk pharmacy* (pharmacie populaire), dans lequel tous les visiteurs ont écrit une recette qu'ils réalisent lorsqu'ils sont malades. Le résultat final de cette recherche et les recettes des visiteurs de l'exposition ont été publiés en 2011.

REFERENCES

Pucena, S., Vītola, I. (2011) Tautas aptieka. Rīga: SERDE. (In Latvian)

Pucena, S, Smilgaine, U., Laizāns, M. (2010) Vācēju kultūra Viduskurzemē/ Farging in Central Kurzeme., Rīga: SERDE. (In Latvian/English)

www.serde.lv

www.facebook.com/SERDE

<https://vimeo.com/smgserde>

<https://issuu.com/smg.serde>