

## Hans Steffen's herbal

Among the many fascinating ethnographic objects on display at the exhibition, a unique natural monument is also showcased. These are herbarium sheets over 100 years old, belonging to the German botanist Dr Hans Steffen. They come from the collections of the Heimatmuseum in Olsztyn (Regional Museum) and enriched the collection of the Museum of Warmia and Mazury in 1945. The pre-war herbarium sheets, along with a small collection of animals and geological specimens, formed the foundation of the natural history collection of the Nature Department established in 1956, now known as the Museum of Nature in Olsztyn (a branch of the Museum of Warmia and Mazuria).

Steffen's herbarium consists of 446 sheets. The specimens were collected between 1915 and 1928, mainly from the area of East Prussia, and partly from the regions of Ducal Prussia and Upper Prussia. The herbarium collections represent 310 species of seed plants and 14 species of ferns. Dr. Hans Steffen's herbarium is a valuable source of information on the flora of the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship and serves as excellent material for scientific research.

The well-preserved herbarium specimens allow for analysis of plant distribution, reconstruction of the history of plant colonisation in various areas, and, most importantly, document the presence of rare and endangered plant species in our region that no longer exist today. Its scientific importance and uniqueness are heightened by the fact that Hans Steffen's pre-war collection of dried plants was saved by the first staff members of the Masurian Museum in Olsztyn.



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W OLSZTYNIE



OLSZTYN - ZAMEK  
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Patroni medialni



## From the traditional herbal. The role of plants in the cooking, healing, and beliefs of Warmia and Masuria

The exhibition tells the story of the use of herbs and plants in folk tradition. It presents this subject in a multifaceted way and places it within a specific cultural and historical context, covering the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. It shows how widespread the knowledge of the medicinal, culinary, and magical properties of plants and herbs was. Among the important cultural competencies of the inhabitants of the old village was the knowledge of how to cultivate or gather herbs, how to use them, how they could aid people, and what symbolic and magical significance they carried.

In folk culture, herbs played a significant role, as their versatile properties had been known for centuries. Even primitive humans were aware of their benefits, despite not yet knowing how to cultivate fruits, grains, or vegetables, relying solely on gathering. Some herbs still in use today, such as mint, coriander, and castor bean, were already known in ancient Babylon, thus having a tradition that spans over a thousand years. Plants have been used for centuries for medicinal purposes and as an addition to dishes. They were also present in folklore and used in magical rituals.

The primary way of harnessing the benefits of herbs was their use in the kitchen. They were cultivated in home gardens, which served as natural spice reserves and, at the same time, were a distinctive feature of the landscape of the old Warmian and Masurian villages. Home gardens often contained wormwood, dill, black cumin, mint, caraway, sage, parsley, thyme, marjoram, and lovage, as well as mustard seeds, which were especially valued for making preserves, pickles, and homemade mustard. The rich use of herbs in regional cooking is evident in many traditional recipes from Warmia and Masuria, for example, *green eel* and *Olsztyn's signature herb dumplings*. Herbs were commonly used in the homemade production of alcoholic drinks, particularly popular liqueurs like mint or juniper, the latter known in German as *Jägermeister*.

Herbs are appreciated not only for their taste but also for their beneficial effects on health. In the past, knowledge about the medicinal effectiveness of plants was common in the countryside. Herbs could be used to cure a wide range of illnesses.

Yarrow, sorrel and wormwood, gathered from fallow fields, were ideal for treating stomach ailments, while alder and coltsfoot leaves were used to heal ulcers on the hands and legs of undernourished children. Plantain, which grew along forest paths, was used to heal any wound that was slow to heal. Thyme, hawthorn, and linden flowers were used to reduce fever. People used bilberries to purify the blood and juniper berries to support digestion.

Knowledge of the effects of herbs and other medicinal plants often allowed folk medicine to manage without doctors. Herbal medicine was mostly practiced by women. As protectors of the household hearth, they cared for the home and family, especially those who were ill. More complicated ailments requiring greater knowledge were treated by village herbalists and healers who were skilled in medicinal plants. They frequently combined their treatments with magical rituals as well. In folk culture, healing cannot be separated from magic, and the basic healing practice was incantation.

*The chief means of treating all kinds of illnesses is the practice of incantations (folk healing rituals). For the Masurian, the doctor is seen as entirely superfluous, merely lying in wait for his money. When they are admonished for neglecting this matter, they all offer the same excuse: 'In this place and that, the doctor could do nothing.' Some are even convinced that seeking medical help, like the use of a lightning rod, constitutes an intrusion upon divine will (Działdowo).*

(M.P. Toeppen, *Wierzenia mazurskie [Masurian Folk Beliefs]*, Dąbrówno 2008).

People believed that medicinal herbs gained their strength by being picked at specific times, either before dawn or at midnight. During the harvest, spells had to be spoken to ensure the desired properties of the gathered plants. In Warmia and Masuria, people widely believed that herbs had to be picked before St John's Day, as after that witches would curse them and the herbs would lose their magical strength.

Besides their practical use in medicine and cooking, herbs also possessed symbolic properties and featured in beliefs, magical practices, and folklore. A good example is common rue, which is a symbol of innocence. Young girls planted rue in pots so they could make a wedding wreath from it when the time came.

Plants also feature in the rituals of traditional folk festivals. An example of this is St John's Eve, when wreaths made of herbs were woven and thrown into flowing water or through the fire during the lighting of night bonfires. They were used for marriage divinations and served to protect against witches who roamed on St John's Eve. Plants such as wormwood, burdock, and cornflower were believed to have apotropaic properties – that is, the power to ward off evil – so they were placed behind the doors of homes and farm buildings for protection.

The significance of herbs in folk beliefs is reflected in the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, commonly known as the Feast of the Herbs (15 August). This is the oldest and among the most significant Marian festivals, marked by the custom of blessing bouquets crafted from herbs and flowers. In Warmia, before the service held that day, the priest would recite three prayers, including a request for the blessing of nature's gifts, for healing of the body, and for a blessing over the flowers and herbs. The people of Warmia kept the blessed bouquets in their homes. People believed these bouquets provided solace and protected against harm. They were placed, for example, in a child's cradle before going to baptism or wrapped together with grain intended for the first sowing. These herbs were placed into the first sheaf laid down in the barn. A small portion of the consecrated bouquet would be burned in times of storm, to ward off lightning.

The main theme of the exhibition – plants in the folk culture of the region – also serves as an excuse for a journey into the world of traditional rural life. It aims to showcase this world in various aspects: the everyday bustle of the village kitchen, the winter provisions stored in the larder, and the formal chamber where a symbolically important place is the 'holy corner' adorned with a blessed bouquet. The exhibition allows visitors to experience the realities of past life, where beliefs, superstitions, and magical spells played a significant role. It invites contemplation of old folk culture, particularly those elements that are experiencing a resurgence today – like embracing nature, extensively using plants' healing qualities in beauty treatments and cooking, and the move towards healthier living and natural remedies.

