

The Honor Is All Mine

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Честь: honor, reputation, credit

I've become a bit obsessed with честь (honor). Just about every major Russian thinker and philologist wrote about it. True, they wrote different things. Depending on who you read, честь came from the same root word as часть (part, portion) and originally had the notion of partaking in the family bounty, or it came from an Indo-European word that meant thinking, intention or understanding. It was either a local pagan notion or a largely imported Western concept.

What most people agree on, however, is that честь and совесть (conscience) are the two main behavior regulators for Russians. Честь seems to be used in Russian more frequently than honor is used in English, where behavior is also — or more often — regulated by notions of fairness, honesty, justice or the law.

Of course, there are similar usages of честь/honor. We both name or do things в честь кого-то (in honor of someone), even if they are sometimes ridiculous: Президент США Барак

Обама «помиловал» двух индеек в честь Дня благодарения (U.S. President Barack Obama “pardoned” two turkeys in honor of Thanksgiving). We both talk about честь as something that brings honor: Это большая честь для меня (This is a great honor for me). When the honor is bestowed by people, we often describe them as a source of pride: Этот студент — честь нашего института (This student is the pride of our institute).

And although we both talk about долг чести (a debt of honor), личная честь (personal honor) and чувство чести (a sense of honor), честно говоря (to be honest), I can’t remember the last time I referred to anyone’s debt of honor. In the Russian media, I found an article about the financial crisis called, Проблемные кредиты — долг чести или проблема общества? (Bad credit: a debt of honor or society’s problem?). In U.S. publications about the mortgage and foreclosure crisis, the notion of honor doesn’t come up. Instead they speak about what’s fair or legal.

In many cases, Russian честь is the American reputation or good name. For example, the expression выйти из положения с честью is literally “to get out of a situation with honor,” but in English it might be more commonly “to get out of a situation with your good name/reputation intact.” Or here’s a surprising example: Russian bikers have a код чести (a code of honor), which states: Никогда, ни при каких условиях байкер не может задеть честь клуба (A biker should never, under any circumstances, tarnish the reputation of the club). Hats off to Russian bikers!

Оказывать/оказать честь is to do someone an honor, which can sound delightfully old-fashioned in both Russian and English: Ты оказываешь мне честь, которой я пока не достоин (You do me an honor that I am not yet worthy of). Or clearly sarcastic: Эта девица ведёт себя так, будто оказывает мне честь своим присутствием (That chick acts like she’s honoring me with her presence). Hats off to the chick, too!

Sometimes English describes honorable things in terms of credit: Это делает ему честь (It’s to his credit). К его чести, он извинился (To his credit, he apologized). Or in terms of looking good: Принимать гостей на таком форуме делает честь столице (Welcoming guests at such a forum casts the capital city in a good light).

I really like this notion of честь. I just wish it were as visible in deed as it is audible in word.

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