

Wanted: Matches

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April 06, 2011



Rinat is selling his grandmother's matches. They are more than 40 years old, still have the original matches inside and still work, he says.

"I thought they would be useful to someone," said Rinat, who is asking 100 rubles (\$3.55) for each box.

He didn't know why his grandmother, now deceased, kept the matches. Perhaps she was a collector who liked the charming images on the covers, or more likely she hoarded the matches for times of trouble.

When times are bad, the cliché goes that Russians store up on essential products and matches — in the days before disposable lighters were one of those essentials.

Rinat did not know how many boxes he had so he counted them while he was on the phone, out loud in threes. "Three, six, nine," all the way up to 33. Each one has an image on the front: Two have drawings from the circus, a trapeze artist and a pony-tailed woman on a white horse; one is a cartoon of a man on his motorbike carrying home a ginormous fish; and two of

them have government-styled warnings — one shows a bucket on a hob and warns that when boiling your linen make sure that the bucket is properly on the gas ring.

The matches are all from 1968, not that long ago, but a time when a washing machine was as rare as a Beatles record in the Soviet Union. Another box shows a gas cooker with the words “Don’t let children or people who do not know how to use it near the gas.”

Matchboxes in those days were ubiquitous and often used as a way of social advertising. The Real USSR web site has a wonderful, if frightening, collection of government warnings from 1959. One matchbox shows two children crossing a railway track as a large train heads for them. In another, two men are on the roof of a train speeding toward a low hanging bridge.

Another has a man running from a huge flame on a train with a warning not to bring inflammable things onboard. Bringing matches on board may have been the real problem.

Collecting matchboxes was a huge craze in the Soviet Union, and one of the most famous matchbox factories, the Balabanovsky Experimental Match Factory, released special matchbox covers for the collectors. The first matchbox collectors club was only set up in 1957 in the Soviet Union. Collectors of anything, even matchboxes, had been looked on suspiciously before as bourgeois lackeys, which was unfortunately not Soviet code for nerds.

Matchboxes were a definite part of life, a familiar shape and size so that in some cases, notably in drug deals, it became a standard measurement for a deal.

And still is in certain circles.

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/04/06/wanted-matches-a6166>