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It Isn't Easy Being Green

By Clare Taylor

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Ever heard the one about the expat woman who takes her own plastic bags to a Russian hypermarket that already provides free plastic bags for its customers?

No?

Neither have the cashiers, apparently. I swear I'm known as "That Expat Bag Lady," based on the number of raised eyebrows and confused expressions I get when, each week, I stop the person at the checkout from packing my shopping for me and pack it myself into a motley collection of reusable over-sized shopping bags.

"Reduce, reuse, recycle": three not-so-little words that, if you live in the UK, at least, may as well be engraved on top of your rubbish bin, are enforced by waste-collectors, and are often parroted at you by your children, who have been indoctrinated with the philosophy by their schools from a very early age. Most homes are equipped with bins for glass, bins for paper and card, and bins for tins and aluminium. Depending on where you live, there may be compost bins for your leftover food, too, and also drop points for used batteries.

And so, to Russia, where there are just about none of these things. I was told once by a Russian friend that during Soviet times, recycling was a civic duty as well as a practical necessity, but that nowadays it's seen very much as something that they used to do rather than a requirement of modern life. This may account for the not-infrequent sight, during drives outside the city, of clearings in the forest filled with domestic rubbish — or perhaps that's just the result of unscrupulous waste collectors fly-tipping once they are out of view of the village they've just collected from.

Another friend of mine here, who likes to make her own pickles and jams, tells of ongoing battles with her cleaner who, given half the chance, will clear the top shelf in the pantry of all the glass jars lovingly collected over the last few months in preparation for pickling season. The cleaner dumps them in the bin because, of course, you can buy ***new*** glass jars cheaply at most supermarkets at the right time of year, rather than using those second-hand ones....

Visiting friends and family from Western Europe are appalled when they see all our refuse going into the same bin, but since there are no alternatives, that's where it all ends up. Hence my determination that when supermarket shopping at least, I will try and make my own small difference and take my own bags. It's not entirely selfless, I have to admit: I can fit into one of my reusable bags the same amount that the cashier would distribute between three of the flimsy "pakets" (sic) that they provide, thus reducing trips between car and house on top of giving me that feel-good moment when I return the empty bags to the car boot in preparation for their next outing.

But if one more cashier looks at me as if I'm a crazy woman when, having raced to get all my purchases onto the belt in enough time to be at the other end of the till to pack it all myself once it's been scanned through, I swear I will have to start wearing a t-shirt with the words, "It's the Environment, Stupid," (in Russian, obviously) every time I do the weekly shop.

They'll still think I'm crazy, of course. But then no one ever said it was easy being green...

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