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Knee-Deep in Knees

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Встать с колен: to rise up from one's knees

A couple days ago I saw a great ad for a new, independent, online news show: "Телевидение лучше делать на коленке, чем на коленях" (Literally: It's better to make television on your knee than on your knees). I thought: Cool word play!

And then: Now what exactly does делать на коленке mean?

But first things first. The news show tagline actually has two levels of wordplay. The structure of the phrase is a play on the saying, Лучше умереть стоя, чем жить на коленях (It's better to die standing than to live on your knees), the Russian translation of a phrase attributed to — or claimed by — a number of mostly Spanish-speaking revolutionaries, with literary antecedents that seem to go back to the dawn of time.

The second wordplay is на коленке (on your knee) and на коленях (on your knees). Коленка

is a diminutive form of колено (knee), and делать на коленке means to cobble something together with whatever you have at hand. When you think about it for a second, the image is clear: Instead of making something properly on a machine or at a work bench with the right tools, you've got it on your knee in the yard and using a stick for a hammer. So the idea of the tagline is that it's better to make (honest) television shows on a shoe string than to make (dishonest) television shows on your knees.

That is, it's better to cobble together low-budget, independent television than to make high-budget television while you're hobbled by the authorities.

Or maybe: With news, it's better to cobble it together than to hobble it. The phrase is particularly resonant in Russian because knees are such a big deal here. In literature, plays, political speeches and chats with your neighbor, Russians are always literally or figuratively falling to their knees, being brought to their knees, or rising up from their knees. Russia must be a great market for orthopedic surgeons.

To kneel, you can упасть (fall), опуститься, встать (or colloquially стать) на колени (get down on your knees). Once you're down on the floor, the verb is стоять (to stand): Он стоял на коленях перед женой. (He kneeled before his wife.) Getting up is встать с колен or с коленей.

Being on your knees is a sign or metaphor of submission, supplication or veneration. That guy на коленях in front of his wife is either telling her he still loves her after all these years or begging forgiveness for that little indiscretion with his receptionist. And according to some Russian politicians, in this century Россия встаёт с колен (Russia is rising up from her knees) — to which I always want to retort: Really? No one ever noticed that Russia was on its knees.

In any case, поставить человека на колени (to bring a person to his knees) is to make him submit to someone's authority. And преклонять/преклонить колени (to kneel, bend your knee) is either a sign of homage or submission. Someone writes: Я преклоняю колени перед ветеранами (I pay homage to veterans.) But someone else asserts: Американцы не привыкли преклонять колени перед авторитетами (Americans aren't accustomed to submitting to authority).

Which is strange because according to some U.S. politicians, Americans are always on their knees begging forgiveness from everyone for everything. What is it with politicians and knees?

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