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Telling an Anecdote, or How to Make Russians Laugh Out Loud

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You're visiting some Russian friends, and they blindside you with the unexpected question, "Do you know any anecdotes?"

This is unfamiliar and dangerous territory to be sure. Humor usually doesn't translate. And to be fair, even the idea of telling an anecdote seems a bit quaint and childish to the inexperienced Westerner. Indeed, the first time I was exposed to the pressure of reciting a humorous story, I made the mistake of assuming we were referring to snippets from "Life in these United States", the section of the popular magazine Reader's Digest that I usually turned to during childhood trips to the water closet.

So, allow me to assist you.

If a Russian asks you whether you know any anecdotes, what they really want to know is

whether you know any Russian anecdotes. Tell a blonde or redneck joke only at your own personal risk. In doing so, you might create an awkward anecdotal abyss that will make you a societal outcast and a laughing stock of historical proportions. If you really feel you have to tell a childhood joke, go for it, by all means, but don't blame me when no one laughs, and your once merry party becomes a wasteland of loneliness in the blink of an eye.

You see, anecdotes in Russia are like the legends and myths our forefathers told as stories to be passed down from generation to generation. It makes no difference if everyone in the room has heard the story before- they want to hear your version of this humorous allegorical tale.

Indeed, it is quite normal, a few sentences into your recitation, to inquire whether your audience has heard this specific anecdote before. They will reply with, "Come on! Tell us!" This, in Russian, is code for: "Yes, of course, we have heard this anecdote before, but we want to hear you tell it." So, forge forward my foreign friend! Tell the anecdote; there's no turning back now.

When you tell a Russian anecdote, your Russian friends will grin with patient expectancy and urge you on as you attempt to recall the various details. Indeed, you might spot a bead of saliva forming on their lower lips as they wait in suspense for the punch line to this comical tale that they have known and loved for years. For in telling a Russian anecdote, you are not only providing entertainment, you are extending the olive branch of international peace as you show the highest level of respect for local humor.

Extra credit will be given to the spinner of hilarity for excessive emotion, passionate gestures, epic pauses, and adding your own facts and details to your whimsical tale.

You will definitely need some firepower for the next time you are sweating in the banya or just enjoying a casual drink with Russian business partners. So, without further ado, allow me to tell you my top three Russian anecdotes, absolutely free of charge.

1) The first anecdote is really old but, like fine wine, only becomes better with age. If you are an inexperienced Russian anecdote teller, it is a safe place to start:

A man returns home in a drunken stupor. His wife begins to smack him over the head and scream at him asking, "Are you going to keep on drinking?" The man just sits there moaning which, of course, just upsets his wife even more, so she smacks him even harder and demands, "I asked you, are you going to keep on drinking?" The man is practically sobbing as he squeaks out his answer, "Fine. You talked me into it. Pour me another one."

2) If the first anecdote produced the desired effect, try this one:

Several wealthy Muscovite businessmen go to the far Russian north to go bear hunting .
A local tribal guide begins to lead them from his village across the tundra. They walk for one day, then two days. On the third day, they finally see a bear. To their surprise, their guide just picks up a rock and throws it, hitting the giant bear in the head. The bear becomes angry and begins chasing the hunting group. The group begins running away back towards the village. They run for an hour, then two hours, then four. It is getting close to evening, and the businessmen are getting tired of running, so one of them turns around and shoots the bear. The guide looks at them says, "What did you do that for? Now you get to drag him back home."

3) Is your Russian anecdote confidence growing? Let's see if you can pull this one off. Show that you have the skills. This is my absolute top favorite Russian anecdote. I must give credit to my good friend Roman for teaching it to me, together with the important gestures that imitate both a camel and a desert mouse: If no one laughs, it is neither the anecdote's fault, nor the audience's. You are the only one to blame.

A camel gets lost in the desert. It walks in the baking heat with no water for a week. (At this point it is customary to go into detail about how camels have humps on their backs which is a backup water supply so that they can last for long periods of time in arid climates). So, of course, after a week with neither water nor vegetation, the camel was quite fatigued as the sweltering temperatures offered no respite. However, it continued its journey. The camel's tongue had swollen in the camel's mouth by the third week and the camel had indeed seen its share of mirages. But alas, those hallucinations provided neither sustenance nor the life-giving liquid the camel so urgently needed. Finally, the camel collapsed in the heat, ready to die. It then heard a curious sound and managed to open an eye to see a desert mouse scurrying to and fro under the scorching rays of the unforgiving sun. Eventually, the mouse noticed the camel laying in the blistering sand and cautiously approached the camel.

"Comrade Camel," inquired the desert mouse, "what has happened?"

The camel then began to relate the sad tale of how he had become lost in the desert for weeks with no water and was now about to die from the heat.

"No, no, Comrade Camel," replied the desert mouse. "You have it all wrong. See, you just need to do it like I do. I run around in the sun and it creates a wind, just like an air conditioner. You should really try it!".

The camel, realizing that he had nothing to lose, summoned his last iota of strength, jumped

to his feet, ran 30 yards, fell over and died. The desert mouse of course was in shock by what had happened. He walked over and checked the camel's pulse.

"Poor guy," said the desert mouse (savor the pause here), "He froze to death."

I have told you my top three Russian anecdotes. Now it's your turn. Do you know any anecdotes? Share them in the comment section below!

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