

Knock on Wood

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Наломать дров: to make a mess of things

An attentive reader wondered how it was possible to write about пень (stump) and колода (log) without writing about дрова (cut wood, firewood). Easy! I've assiduously avoided writing about firewood for years. I'm afraid someone will ask what a cord of wood is.

But all right — petulantly hangs head, kicks desk — there are some interesting дрова expressions, so I guess I'll have to do it.

Дрова is cut wood or firewood, related to the word дерево (tree), from which it comes. The verbs you use for cutting it are колоть (to split or chop) and пилить (to saw). Надо колоть дрова по волокну (You should split wood along the grain.) In Russia you buy it by the cubic meter: Мне нужно купить пять кубометров сухих берёзовых дров (I need to buy five cubic meters of dry birch firewood.)

Russia also has another, very homey measure of wood: охапка (armful). It might not be a consistent measure, but it's so standard, it's even in a dream book: Видеть во сне охапку дров означает ссоры с любимым человеком (Seeing an armful of firewood in a dream means you will fight with a person close to you.)

Carrying that armful of wood back into the forest is a Russian way of being redundant — bringing more of what there is already plenty of. Гости принесли десерт. В такой дом это всё равно, что дрова в лес возить. (The guests brought desert. In that house, it was like bringing coals to Newcastle, literally "bringing wood to the forest.")

Дрова and лес figure in several other expressions. I like кто в лес, кто по дрова — which literally means "some people go into the woods, some people go looking for firewood." But this expression is used to describe people going their own way and not acting in concert. This can refer to chaotic activities that are not coordinated: Нет общей системы образования — кто в лес, кто по дрова. (We don't have a universal system of education — it's all over the place.)

Another wood-and-woods expression is used to describe tough times: чем дальше в лес, тем больше дров (the further you go, the more complicated it gets; literally, the deeper into the woods you go, the more wood you find). One new mother writes: Вот я теперь понимаю, что до полугода с ребенком мы вообще жили в раю! Чем дальше в лес, тем больше дров-то! (Now I see that the first six months with my baby were like heaven. The older they get, the harder it gets!)

And then in Russian, chopping wood is something of a metaphor for life — or at least some aspects of it. Где-то в подсознании была мысль, что жестокости неизбежны при больших исторических событиях — дрова рубят, щепки летят. (Somewhere subconsciously I had the notion that cruelty was unavoidable during momentous historical events — when you cut wood, the chips will fly.)

But still, chopping wood is better than breaking it with your hands. The phrase наломать дров (literally "to break up firewood") means to make a hash of something — inadvisable in the office: Я мог наломать дров на тысячи долларов (I could screw things up and cost the company thousands of dollars.)

However you get it, you want a pile of dry firewood cut to fit your stove. You might buy a cord of it. A cord is — big smile — about 3.62 cubic meters.

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