

Moscow's Big Stink

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Смрад: stink, stench

When I noticed a bad smell in the courtyard on Monday, I thought the local food shop's refrigerators had broken down again. But no — Moscow's Big Stink was citywide. Unfortunately, the authorities had a hard time coordinating their response. They started out on the right foot: Мэр столицы потребовал тщательным образом провести расследование. (The capital's mayor demanded a careful investigation.) And the problem seemed obvious: Предполагается, что источником запаха стал нефтеперерабатывающий завод. (An oil refinery is suspected to be the source of the smell.) But it wasn't so simple: На заводе категорически отрицают факт аварии. (At the refinery they categorically deny there was an accident.)

Then there was some disagreement over what was in the air and whether it was bad for you. Установлен химический состав загрязнений — сероводород и диоксид серы. (The chemical composition of the pollution has been determined: hydrogen sulfide and sulfur

dioxide.) Yikes! Специалисты отметили повышенное содержание стирола и формальдегида. (Specialists found high concentrations of styrene and formaldehyde.) Double yikes! But: Такая разовая концентрация сероводорода не оказывает влияния на здоровье. (A single exposure to that concentration of hydrogen sulfide does not affect health.) Are you sure?

Экологическая ситуация в Москве стабилизировалась. (The ecological situation in Moscow has stabilized.) But: По мнению медиков, жителям столицы лучше оставаться во вторник дома. (Doctors advise people to stay home on Tuesday.) Time to review Антикризисное управление для чайников (Crisis Management for Dummies).

Meanwhile, for the rest of us, this is a good time to review stinkiness in Russian. Запах (smell) is a neutral word that can be modified to indicate everything from bad to fetid: плохой, отвратительный запах (bad, repulsive smell). Тяжёлый запах is a strong scent, possibly sweet, possibly not, but in any case overwhelming and unpleasant: Я нанесла духи на руку, голова от них разболелась. Слишком тяжёлый. (I dabbed the perfume on my hand, and it gave me a headache. The scent is too heavy.)

Stinkier is зловоние (stench): Мы окунулись в спёртое зловоние медвежьей клетки. (We plunged into the stifling stench of the bear's cage.) Very stinky indeed is смрад (stink, stench). Жители Москвы жалуются на сильный смрад. (Muscovites are complaining about a strong stench.) Or вонь: Вся квартира пропиталась навязчивой, отчётливой вонью ☒ запахом застарелой сырости, прогорклого табачного дыма. (The whole apartment reeked of an intrusive, very distinct bad odor — the smell of perpetual damp and rancid tobacco smoke.)

Душок is an interesting word, usually used to describe food that has started to go bad: Бутерброды с рыбой не советую. Рыбка, по-моему, с душком. (I don't recommend the open-faced fish sandwiches — I think the fish has gone off.) But it can also mean to be tainted figuratively: Большевики с националистическим душком правили бал в начале 90-х годов. (Slightly nationalistic Bolsheviks ruled the roost in the early 1990s.) If you are casting around for smelly verbs, start with пахнуть (to smell), which means "to smell bad" if not modified. The adjective вонючий (stinky, fetid) can be used literally or figuratively. Убери вонючие сапоги. (Move your smelly boots.) Не нужна мне твоя вонючая зарплата! (I don't need your stinking salary!)

In Russian, smells "stand": В городе вонь стояла весь день! (A smell hung over the city all day.) Завод — вонючка. (The factory is a stinker.) In more ways than one.

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