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The Best Job in Russia

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Вахтёр: porter

We haven't had a Friday pop quiz in ages. Here's one: What is ЧОП? a) a chain of Japanese restaurants; b) the sound coins make as you deposit them in the annoying hypermarket payment machines; c) a salad of chopped greens; d) a rent-a-cop agency; e) get to the point already.

For impatient readers, it's (d). ЧОП is the acronym for частное охранное предприятие (private security agency). This is also called частная охранная организация (private security organization) but less often due to the unfortunate acronym ЧОО. If you're секьюрити (security), you want to sound tough, not like a sneeze.

Охранники (guards) are the people who "work" in these agencies. OK, OK. They work, if you can call "work" yelling at people for doing things they have a right to do, like photographing buildings or walking near a flower bed.

Because wearing a uniform and yelling at people is fun, it's a popular job. It's much better than being in the army, where you wear a uniform but people yell at you. In Moscow, it seems that most охранники come from elsewhere, which speaks very badly for life in the provinces: Народ в деревнях либо пьёт, либо ездит работать в городе охранниками. (Men in the villages either drink or go into the city to work as guards.)

While охранники can guard anything, from a park to a person, сторож usually guards some kind of property. On the territory of a factory or dacha community, the сторож might have his own будка (booth, hut). In smaller buildings, the сторож is supposed to keep his eye on things. Or not: Он устроился сторожем в кинотеатр. Ночная работа, хочешь — спи, хочешь — читай, хочешь — думай. (He got a job as a guard in a movie theater. Night work — sleep if you want, read if you want, daydream if you want.)

Four-footed сторожа usually take their job more seriously: У овчарки был инстинкт сторожевого пса: охраняй хозяйское, пока не сдохнешь. (The shepherd had the instincts of a guard dog: protect the owner's property to his last breath.) If you really want a good guard dog, get one that's called that — московская сторожевая (Moscow Watchdog). Developed in the 1940s, this dog looks like a sweet St. Bernard, but has the personality of a howitzer.

Another kind of guard who must be approached with extreme caution is телохранитель, easily deciphered as bodyguard (тело — body, хранить — to guard). One job advertisement describes the role of the телохранитель this way: находиться рядом с клиентом ... в офисе телохранитель должен встать столбом около двери ... а в случае опасности закрыть его своим телом (stay near the client ... in an office the bodyguard stands like pillar by the door ... and in case of danger he covers his client with his body). Standing like a pillar might be okay in a noble sort of way; covering the client with your body sounds less fun, unless you are Whitney Houston and the bodyguard is Kevin Costner. Or the other way around.

The best kind of guard is, in my view, the вахтёр (porter) — the guy (usually old) who stands by the door of a business checking passes and chatting. This job has a great side benefit: gossip collection. Швейцары, вахтёры, лифтёры, шофёры — самая осведомлённая публика. (Doormen, porters, elevator operators and drivers are always the best informed).

Nice work if you can get it.

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