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Nothing Worth Knowing Can Be Taught

By Michele A. Berdy

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Смека́лка: resourcefulness, smarts, ingenuity

One of my favorite pastimes — well, other than eating, drinking and talking — is to find the key words of Russian culture — those special words that capture the essence of the culture, values, or habits of the country. These are the words/concepts/behaviors that make Russians Russian, and understanding them will help bridge that yawning cultural gap between nations. Cue to flags waving together against a blue sky while children's voices rise up in song. Well, that's the idea anyway.

Here's my latest key word: смекалка. Смекалка is resourcefulness, street smarts, ingenuity, an ability to figure things out. It's not book learning, and it's not just native intelligence. It's the ability to fix a car in the woods with a stick, some chewing gum, and your daughter's hair band. Or the savvy to get on the right side of the seemingly unassuming guy who is rising up in the company and turns out to run the place after three months. Or the smarts to buy the absolute right stock at the right price at the right time to make a pile of money overnight.

OK, so the last skill may also be called "insider trading." But when it isn't — it's смекалка.

There are two reasons I know this is important and a particularly Russian thing. The first is that Russians say so. Like here: Как известно, у русского человека вместо знания ⊠ смекалка. (Everyone knows that a Russian has street smarts instead of knowledge.) Or here: Во всех случаях выручала солдатская смекалка, свойственная русскому человеку вообще. (In every case he was saved by a soldier's resourcefulness, which is characteristic of Russian people in general.)

And the other reason is that Russians say it's a man's thing, so I know it's valuable. Смекалка ⊠ мужская добродетель. (Ingenuity is a male virtue.)

Here's a terrific explanation of where it comes from: Смекалка — великое замещение "нельзя" на "можно попробовать," и растёт она из особого отношения русского мужчины к слову "нет." (Ingenuity is the magnificent replacement of "you can't do it" with "you ought to give it a try," and it comes out of the particular response of a Russian man to the word "no.")

There are subsets of смекалка: Всё почти с нуля, всё требует рук, силы, хозяйственной смекалки. (Just about everything was started from scratch, and everything required able hands, strength, and the ability to fix things around the house.) Имея смекалку и ум, он занялся бизнесом. (With his intelligence and acumen, he took up business.) It's especially — and almost mystically — associated with soldiering: Смекалка и опыт танкистов делали дело. (The tankers' experience and prowess did the trick.)

Смекалка and the adjective смекалистый (resourceful) are fairly common words, although the magic Google Ngram viewer shows that usage of the word смекалка peaked in 1944 — which makes sense, since if there was ever a time when ingenuity was needed, that was it. Usage of the related verb, смекать, peaked exactly 100 years before that, in 1844. It's not that common now. It's a handy little verb that means to figure something out: А я уж давно смекаю, что он украл мою сумку. (I caught on a while back that he stole my purse.)

The Russian phrase that embodies смекалка is: чё-то придумаю (I'll figure something out). This may be my favorite phrase in the Russian language. When said by a guy in stretched-out nylon athletic pants, standing on the roadside at midnight over your car, in which the gearstick has broken off, it is the most reassuring phrase in the universe.

As my friend says: Русские — смекалистые! (Russians are resourceful.)

Amen to that!

Michele A. Berdy, a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, is author of "The Russian Word's Worth" (Glas), a collection of her columns.

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