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A Little Bit of Fazil Iskander

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Подворовывать:⊠to steal a little on the side

Several years ago Fazil Iskander wrote a short story⊠called Думающий о России и американец⊠(A Thinker About Russia and an American). Not only is it a brilliant treatise⊠on Russia in the early years after the fall of the Soviet Union, it is also a⊠classic example of the failure of intercultural communication.

The American badgers the Russian, with that annoying⊠combination of naivete and pragmatism that characterizes my people, about what⊠exactly Russians do other than think about Russia. Что делают в России? Какими делами занимаются? (What do they do in

Russia? What kind of work do they do?). Increasingly impatient, the Thinker About Russia tries to explain, “
Думают о России. Это главное дело в России.”
(They think
about Russia. That’s the main occupation in Russia.)
Finally the Russian admits not
everyone thinks about Russia: Все остальные воруют. (Everyone else steals.)

You can tell by the variety and sophistication of terminology and slang in Russian that воровство (theft) is something of an art form.
Украсть is the most neutral word for “to
steal,” and has given us the noun кража (theft), as in: У меня была квартирная кража. (My apartment was robbed.)
In the Criminal Code, the lowest grade of larceny is
воровство, which is theft without any force or weapon.
The next step up the scale of
felony is the verb грабить and the noun
грабёж, which is theft with the threat of use of
some kind of weapon. (In case your English lexicon of felonies is shaky, it’s robbery if it refers to stealing something from a person, burglary if it is stealing something from premises.)

Меня ограбили на улице. Я не хотел отдавать кошелёк, но когда я увидел нож в руках грабителя – я сразу всё отдал.
(I was robbed on the street.
I didn’t want to hand over
my wallet, but when I saw the knife in the robber’s hands, I handed everything over right away.) Note that грабить is used conversationally to mean any kind of theft, including figurative: Финансовые условия контракта просто грабёж. (The financial conditions of the contract are grand larceny!)

The top of the felony scale is разбой or разбойное нападение, which is robbery with use of force, an attack, or a mugging. Он стал жертвой разбойного нападения – трое напали на него, избили, забрали его деньги и часы. (He was mugged. Three guys jumped him, beat him up, and took his money and watch.)

Russian criminal slang has an elaborate lexicon of every kind of criminal and crime, but unless you spend time in Butyrka Prison, chances are you’ll never use it.
It might be useful
to know, however, that a pickpocket is карманник, and an armed hold-up or mugging is the deceptively whimsical гопстоп.

Russian conversational slang has lots of good words for “pinching, swiping, ripping off.” Of the ones that are fit to print, your starter vocabulary for the criminal life can include:

спереть,
стянуть,
стибрить,
стащить,
увести. For example:
Он стащил ручку с
моего стола. (He swiped a pen from my desk.) I'm rather fond of the expression приделать ноги чему-либо, literally "to give something legs":
Она приделала ноги моей
зажигалке. (She made off with my lighter.) From the old propensity of the communist regime to expropriate private property, we have the jocular word
скоммуниздить.
Опять
все мои карандаши пропали! Кто их скоммуниздил? (
All my pens are missing again!
Who misappropriated them?)

Russian is a language of nuance. It gives us not only воровать (to steal), but подворовывать, which means "to steal a bit on the side," with the understanding that this isn't one's main profession, but a way of obtaining some pin money.

In Iskander's story, the Thinker About Russia is forced to admit that even those who spend almost all their time thinking about Russia
тоже подворовывают (also steal a bit on the
side).
The American tries to make a pun and suggests that if "those below"
подворовывают (the prefix
под- can mean "under"), then certainly "those above" in
government надворовывают (the prefix над- means "above").

The Russian Thinker is deeply offended. Сразу видно, что вы иностранец и не чувствуете самых трепетных тонкостей нашего языка и нашей психологии.

(It's obvious that you are a foreigner and don't feel the magnificent subtleties of our language and psychology.) Подворовывать – это человечно, скромно, даже уважительно к тому, у кого подворовывают. (To steal a bit on the side – this is humane, modest, even respectful of those you are stealing from.) Подворовывать –
это значит,
воруют с оглядкой на совесть. (People who steal a bit on the side steal, but their conscience bothers them.) Воруют и плачут, воруют и плачут. (They steal and weep, steal and weep.)

So if you must steal – do it on the side, with tears.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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