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Listen to a Moscow Street Near You

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Sergei Porter / Vedomosti

Сивцев Вражек: Little Ravine by Sivka Creek

In honor of Moscow's City Day, here's a little primer on place▣names. With just a few rules, you'll be able to tell what national▣or professional group lived in a neighborhood, which church stood▣there, who owned it, and even what the land looked like — just by▣reading the street names.

Let's start easy. If a street in Moscow bears the name of▣another Russian city, then that was the road that led to it, like▣Тверская (Tverskaya, the road to Tver) or Калужская▣площадь (Kaluzhskaya Ploshchad, the starting point to Kaluga).

If the name of a street sounds like a surname, it's either the▣name of the first owner or the name of an important person. So▣Гагаринский переулок (Gagarinsky Pereulok) was▣once part of the princely Gagarin family holdings, but Улица▣Гагарина (Ulitsa Gagarina) was

named after the first man in space, Yury Gagarin.

If a street name sounds religious, there was probably a church or monastery there. For example, Георгиевский переулок (Georgievsky Pereulok) means there must have been a St. George church or monastery. An odd one is Якиманка (Yakimanka), a conflation of Иоаким и Анна (Joaquim and Anna, parents of Mary). There was a chapel dedicated to them in a church on the street.

Next up: professions. In Moscow people who shared the same profession were given land to form a small community, called a слобода. Some district names tell the story of who worked there. In Таганка (Taganka) lived makers of таганы (iron pot stands). Хамовники (Khamovniki) was a neighborhood of weavers of хамовное полотно (rough canvas).

Streets can tell the same story, like Бронная (armor makers) and Гончарная (potters). Those who manned the tsar's kitchens had their own neighborhood: the cooks lived on Поварская, the waitstaff on Столовый, tablecloth weavers on Скатертный, bakers on Хлебный, knife makers on Ножовый, and pipe makers on Трубниковский.

Near Red Square you'll find streets that were originally Ряды (Rows) where stalls sold a particular product, like Хрустальный (Crystal Lane) and Рыбный (Fish Lane). On Ветошный переулок people sold ветошь — a kind of cloth used as lining.

Sometimes a street tells you the nationality of the people who lived there. The various streets named Грузинский (Georgian) indicate that the Georgian prince was given land here. Армянский переулок (Armenian Lane) is self-explanatory, but Маросейка needs a bit of deciphering. It was the place where people from Ukraine lived, which was then called Малороссия. That got shortened to Малоросейка, which eventually morphed down to Маросейка.

Большая Ордынка was the road to the Орда (the Golden Horde, the "great state"). In that part of Замоскворечье (land beyond the Moscow River), you can find streets where their representatives lived, like Малый Татарский переулок (Little Tatar Lane), and where their translators settled, like Малый Толмачёвский переулок (Little Translator's Lane). Толмач is the old word for a translator.

You can even tell what the land looked like: Крутицкая улица (Steep Street) tells you that the riverbank was high in that spot. Пресня had fresh water (пресная вода). And that little street with too many consonants, Сивцев Вражек, was once a little ravine (from the word оврага) down to the creek Сивка.

In Moscow, the street names speak. You just need to listen.

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