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Blowing Your Top the Russian Way

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Angry Driver/ Joseph Mietus/ Flickr

С лёгким сердцем: with a light heart

In Russian I think of the heart — сердце — as the source of all those warm, gooey emotions like love and kindness and compassion. You certainly use the word when you are speaking of someone's emotions or behavior, such as someone acting с открытым сердцем (with an open heart, openly); с лёгким сердцем (light-heartedly); с чистым сердцем (with a pure heart, selflessly); с добрым сердцем (good-heartedly).

But the emotions of the heart can be darker. Someone might speak с тяжёлым сердцем (with a heavy heart); or go about trying to live с разбитым сердцем (with a broken heart); or respond to the heart-breaker's apologies с каменным сердцем (with a heart of stone).

Still, the first time I noticed the phrase говорить в сердцах (literally, to speak in hearts), I assumed it meant to speak from the heart — openly or warmly. Get the hook! Wrong again.

В сердцах means angrily, with annoyance, irately. I puzzled over that until it slowly dawned on me that сердце (heart) is related to сердиться (to get angry); сердитый (angry); and сердито (angrily). Etymologists don't have a certain explanation for this, except that the heart seems to be have been perceived as the source of emotions, both positive and negative. Or maybe when someone is furious, it's also straight from the heart?

In any case, usually you speak to someone в сердцах: В сердцах я наговорила ему Бог знает что (God only knows what I said to him in my anger.) Or you can blurt things out (выпалить): Наш учитель, который тревожился за свою ученицу, в сердцах даже выпалил: "Скажите этой дуре, что ей нужно петь в кабаре, а не в оперном театре!" (Our teacher who was concerned about his student more than the others, even blurted out angrily, "Tell that little fool that she should sing in a cabaret, not the opera theater!")

And very occasionally you can do things в сердцах: Одну перчатку он потерял и в сердцах выбросил вторую (He lost one glove and so threw out the other in a fit of pique.) Even more occasionally you can say — or probably read — the unadorned phrase с сердцем, which means the same thing as в сердцах: "Ты не мог сделать худший выбор?" ◙ наконец, с сердцем спросила меня мама ("Could you have made a worse choice?" my mother finally

asked, furious with me.)

Of course, you can say or do things сердито (angrily) or гневно (furiously), or you can just give in and be consumed by anger: сердиться (to get angry) or гневаться (to become infuriated). But that's not very interesting, language-wise. How about serving up your fury with a good dose of imagery?

If you like to use a verb, try горячиться (literally, to heat up), which is used when someone gets hot under the collar or starts huffing and puffing. This is sometimes an over-reaction. So when one parent goes ballistic over his daughter's very large, very prominent tattoo, the other parent says: Не стоит так горячиться (Don't get so worked up over it.)

Another heating up verb is закипеть (to come to a boil). All kinds of things boil over in the kitchen: Снимай с огня, как только соус закипит! (Take if off the heat as the sauce comes to a boil). Or in the office, where it can be a good thing: Не прошло и полгода, как работа закипела (In just six months, work was jumping, literally "started boiling.")

In English, when people are angry they fly off the handle. In Russian, they do or say something "under a hot hand": под горячую руку. Под горячую руку чиновников попали даже городская информационная служба и газетные киоски (Even the city information service and newspaper kiosks got in trouble with the bureaucrats.) This is what you avoid at home after you get that cool, large, prominent tattoo: Жди момент папе показывать. Не приведи господь, попасть ему под горячую руку (Wait for the right moment to show your Dad. God forbid you catch him when he's loaded for bear.)

Another version of this, now mostly found in literature, is под сердитую руку (literally, under an angry hand). В молодости, под сердитую руку, ему случалось побить крепостного человека. (In his youth he lost his temper a few times and gave serfs a beating.)

Finally, to really show your rage, lift up that arm and swing it around — with a sword attached. Шашкой махать literally means "to wave around a sabre," preferably on a mighty steed while galloping at full speed toward your enemy. Figuratively, it's what some people do when they are angry or someone criticizes them. They act out or act up. They go berserk. They blow a gasket. This is almost never useful. Шашкой махать на работе все же не рекомендуется (Going on a rampage at work is not recommended.)

Закипеть можно — только тихо (You can blow your top, but do it quietly.)

Sound advice.

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