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Russian Autumn Fun

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Осень: autumn

There are, I've heard, places on earth where weather is not a topic of conversation. I've heard that in some places a few degrees up or a few degrees down is pretty much the entire range of weather events.

That is not Moscow. Погода (weather) can run your life, determine when and if you go outside, raise or lower the chances of breaking a limb, change your schedule to allow for 15 minutes of dressing before leaving the house, and — let's not forget — ruin your budget as you fill your closets with five kinds of winter coats, three pairs of boots, and piles of scarves, hats, and that important hidden investment: рейтузы (heavy tights, usually woolen); колготки (tights); кальсоны (long johns); и термальное нижнее бельё (thermal underwear), aka термобельё (thermals) aka тёплое (нательное) бельё (warm undergarments).

This week, after the most delightful summer in recent memory, Moscow pulled one of its stunts: it went from a record high on Saturday (+26 C) to rain and a definite chill on Sunday (+15 C) to OMG-where-did-I-put-my-hat on Monday morning (+4 C).

And do you know the weird thing? Russians like осень (autumn) — at least historically.

The reason is actually quite simple, and all you have to do is to consult a book of folk sayings to find out: Осень - время собирать урожай (Autumn is harvest time). Or you could just consult an etymological dictionary and discover that осень is related to words for harvest, like жатва (from жать, to reap) and урожай (the harvest).

That means: food —lots of it. And lots of food means lots of happy people: Осенью скот жиреет, а человек добреет (In autumn the livestock gets fatter and people get nicer). In fact, that means lots of happy creatures: В осень и у кошки/у воробья пиры (In autumn even the cat/sparrow feasts.) So who cares if there is a bit of bad weather? Холоден сентябрь, да сыт (September is cold, but no one goes hungry). In fact, it's only in the era of imported foodstuffs

that people began to like the spring. In the old days, springtime was the worst time of the year: Весна красна, да голодна, осень дождлива, да сытна (Spring is lovely but hungry; autumn is rainy but full of food.)

Over the millennia, the folks who lived in this part of the world came up with fairly precise descriptions of the autumn months. September is all about transition: В сентябре шуба за кафтаном тянется (In September you pull on your fur coat over your summer shift). And the good summer berries are gone: В сентябре одна ягода, и та — горькая рябина (There is just one berry in September — the rowanberry, and it's bitter). Cold weather is on the way: В сентябре синица просит осень в гости (In September the bluebird invites autumn in.)

October is rainy, muddy and not much fun. Знать осень в октябре по грязи (In October you know autumn by the mud.) Октябрь плачет холодными слезами (October weeps cold tears). Октябрь ни колеса, ни полоза не любит (October doesn't like wheels nor sleigh runners). And then, the rain turns into something else: Октябрь — месяц близкой пороши (October is the month close to the first snow flurries.)

November is, without question, the worst month of autumn and possibly the entire year: bare trees, frozen mud, nights getting darker with no snow to brighten things up. Russian folk wisdom concurs, often poetically: Ноябрь — сумерки года (November is the twilight of the year). Ноябрь — ворота зимы (November is the gate to winter). Ноябрьские ночи до снега темны (November nights, before the snow, are dark.)

But there are always slight variations, and you need to pay attention to them, since they predict the winter to come. Some are obvious, even to a city slicker: У зайцев шерсть побелела - зима близко (When a hare's fur turns white, winter is nigh.) Some are not so obvious. Тёплая осень - к долгой зиме (A warm autumn means a long winter.) Keep your eyes on the willows: Ива рано инеем покрылась — к долгой зиме (If a willow is covered with frost early, winter will be long.) Появление комаров поздней осенью — к мягкой зиме (If mosquitoes appear in late autumn, the winter will be mild.) And: С березы лист не опал — снег ляжет поздно (If the leaves don't fall from birches, snow will come late.)

There are other folk traditions connected with autumn other than checking out the birch leaves and willows. For example: weddings. The peak wedding season in the old days was during the non-fasting period of winter, between Epiphany and Lent, when there was nothing to do but have a good time: Лето — для старанья, зима — для гулянья (Summer's when you work, winter's when you play). But in autumn the Feast of Intercession on October 14 was another prime wedding time. It marked the end of the harvest work and a celebration of bounty. If there was no groom in sight, on this holiday, named for the protective veil of the Mother of God, unmarried women prayed for a husband in a rather racy way: Покров-батюшка, покрой землю снежком, а меня женишком (Father Veil! Cover the earth with snow and cover me with a groom!)

Ah, for the good old days. These days, we only shout: Ура! Стали топить! (Yay! They've turned on the heat.)

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