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Take a Vacation, Russian Style

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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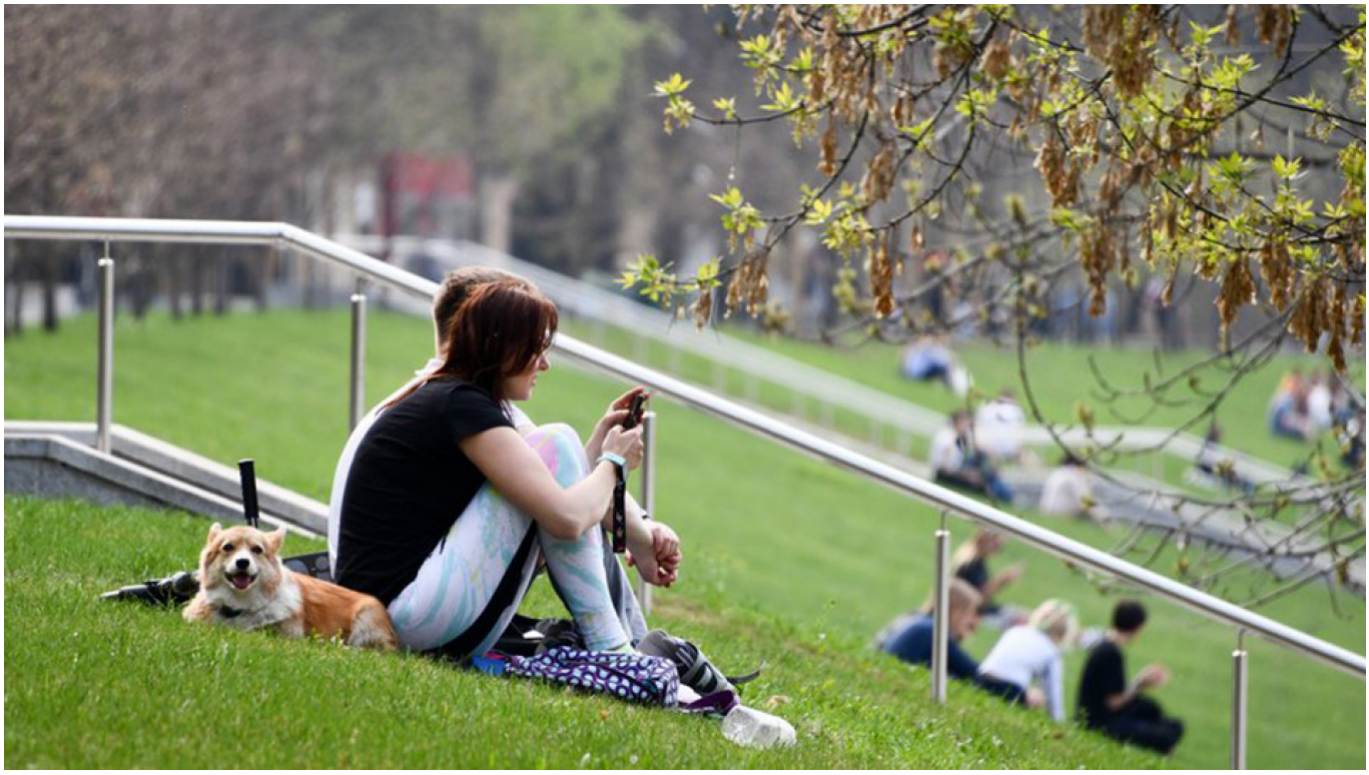

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Каникулы: summer vacation, recess, holiday

It's the start of that most wonderful time of the year: vacation time. In English, there are two main words used for a break from school, work, or everyday life: vacation (mostly American) and holiday (mostly British). At work we get ten vacation days. The kids are on vacation. We went on vacation to Florida. While there are specific words for specific kinds of breaks, basically you can party and play pretty much all you want with vacation and holiday.

In Russian — not so easy. The word you use for a vacation depends on who is giving it, who is taking it, and if it's legislated or not.

The loveliest word for a vacation is каникулы, which, in addition to just being a delight to say — try it: ка – ник- ул –ы, like the name of a folk dance or creamy pastry — it also has the most charming derivation. It comes from the Latin canīcula (little dog, puppy), which came from the Greek name of the planet Sirius, also called the Dog Star, the brightest star in the Canis Major constellation. Since Sirius is aligned with the sun during the late summer months, that period got called diēs caniculārēs, aka собачьи дни, aka the dog days of summer.

Каникулы is what schoolkids, students and some government offices and parliaments take. That is, the school, institute, congress or governmental office closes its doors for a certain period of time, and everyone goes off and has fun. Мы, конечно, написали на доске мелом: "Последний день ◙ учиться лень!" Учителя читают и делают вид, что сердятся. Завтра каникулы! Я обожаю каникулы. (Of course, we wrote on the chalkboard, "Today's our last day! Too lazy to study!" The teachers read it and pretend to be angry. Vacation starts tomorrow! I love vacation.)

It's also what some legislative bodies do: У депутатов каникулы (Legislators are on vacation.) And it's sometimes used to describe any kind of fun break from the daily grind: Я устала, захотела немного отдохнуть и поэтому устроила краткосрочные каникулы (I'm tired and wanted to rest up a bit, so I took a short vacation.)

But for most adults, the word you use for a vacation is отпуск, from отпускать (to let go), i.e., a legally mandated paid break. Some people aren't good at taking them, or perhaps they just can't get away from work: В августе у него отпуск, кажется, первый за три года (In August he's going on vacation, which is I think the first one in three years.) Other people want a break from more than work: Первый раз в жизни поехал в отпуск без семьи (For the first time in my life I went on vacation without my family.)

At work there is another от- word that allows you to lift your nose from the corporate grindstone: отгул. Отгул is a comp day, another day off legislated by the state. For every day that you work above norm, like on a weekend or state holiday, you get a day off – отгул. Накопил отгулов и решил на неделю съездить в родную деревню (I saved up my comp days and decided to spend a week in the village where I grew up.) The verb отгуливать can be used for taking comp days: Витя отгуливает те дни, которые он работал в декабре (Vitya is taking comp days for the time he worked in December.) Or it can mean to use up your vacation days: А Саша отгуливает накопившиеся за эти годы дни отпуска (But Sasha is using up all the vacation days that he saved up all these years.)

Эх, трудоголики... (Oh you workaholics!)

Women sometimes get a special kind of vacation, which has a curious name: декретный отпуск (decreed vacation) or simply декрет (literally a "decree"). This is maternity leave. Its curious name comes from its rather amazing history. On Nov. 14, 1917, that is, about three weeks after the so-called Bolshevik Revolution, the Council of People's Commissars of Soviet Russia signed the Декрет "О пособии по беременности и родам" (the Decree "On government subsidies for pregnancy and childbirth"). Since this was the first compensated state maternity leave in the world, folks just referred to it as декрет (decree), and the name stuck.

Employees can take отпуск за свой счёт (unpaid leave) when there is an emergency or when they just need a break and don't care if it's compensated or not. In the academic world, this is codified as академический отпуск (academic leave of absence). When students need to take a break for one or more of a list of legally acceptable reasons, they can take a leave of absence without withdrawing from school. But there are websites in Russia that help you do this even when you don't have any particular reason at all: Как взять академический отпуск в университете без причины (How to take an academic leave at the university for no reason).

Another somewhat specialized term for a vacation is побывка. It's from the verb побывать (to visit) and means a short stay. You can use it to describe a quick trip home: В летний период деревни несколько оживали: к старухам приезжали на побывку дети или внуки (During the summer the village perked up: children and grandchildren came for a short stay with the old folks.) But it is probably more common as a short leave or furlough from military service: Едут на побывку домой тысячи военнослужащих (Thousands of military personnel are going home on furlough.)

And finally, there are mini-vacations: breaks and breathers, what you need no matter what you're doing — whether it's cleaning up the yard after the winter or working like a dog at the office. A break is перерыв, and some people are good at taking them: Мы не особо торопились. Часто делали перерывы. Спускались в буфет попить кофе или во двор ◙ покурить (We weren't in any particular rush. We took breaks often. We went downstairs to the café to drink coffee or went out into the courtyard to have a cigarette.)

In offices you take обеденный перерыв (lunch break). And any time you are desperate to have a shoe repaired, or pay your utility bill, or pick up some milk, закон подлости (Murphy's Law) will guarantee that you'll see a locked door and the sign технический перерыв (service break). I hate this sign because it can mean anything from "the guy who runs the place ran out to buy some cigarettes" to "the entire electrical system short-circuited and it will take a week to fix."

Передышка is a breather, from the very useful verb отдышаться (to catch your breath). You might hear it said about business: Издатели были сродни рабам на галерах. "Книжные пираты" не давали им передышки (Publishers were like galley slaves. "Book pirates" didn't let them even catch their breath.)

But you need this word over the coming days and weeks when your family will forget how out of shape you all are and launch into huge and exhausting projects at the dacha, like painting the eaves or digging up a new garden or cleaning out the attic. Do not waver in your resolve. Every half hour say: Ребята! Вы как хотите, а я возьму передышку (Guys, you can do what you want, but I'm taking a breather.)

С майскими праздниками! (Have fun on the May holidays!)

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