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Easter and Eggs, Naughty and Nice

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Разговляться: to break the Lenten fast after the midnight Easter service

For most secular Westerners, Easter is a religious holiday connected, mysteriously, with a rabbit that brings pastel-colored eggs and dim memories of light-weight suits and fresh white shirts, or white cotton gloves, a straw hat, and brand new Mary Janes (stiff patent leather shoes with a single strap that invariably left a mean blister on each heel). Not so for Orthodox Christian Russians, who celebrate Easter with the most joyful and colorful religious service of the year, feasting and celebrating with family and friends.

The season actually begins with the last pre-Lenten splurge of Масленица, which was first a pagan holiday to celebrate the rebirth of the warming sun and then morphed into a Mardi Gras of блины (blinis) served with the next 40 days' worth of butter and sour cream.

Then comes Lent, called in Russian Великий Пост ("the great fast"), since it is the strictest of all the many fasts in the Orthodox calendar: no alcohol, milk, eggs, or meat, and fish only on a few special occasions. Постное масло (literally fasting oil) is vegetable oil — that is, not butter; some people even used постный сахар, unrefined sugar, since bone ash (an animal by-product) is used in the refining process. Russian conveniently groups all forbidden foods in the phrase скоромная пища, that is, food not to be eaten during a fast. In pre-revolutionary times, Russian cookbooks had entire chapters of Lenten foods, "чтобы можно принимать гостей достойно" (so that one could entertain guests properly); today vegetarians revel in these 40 days, since Moscow restaurants now offer Постное меню (a Lenten menu) for the observant.

In Russia's northern climes, Palm Sunday is Вербное Воскресенье – Pussy Willow Sunday. It is considered "good luck" to beat someone with a branch of pussy willows: Это не я бью тебя! Верба тебя бьёт! (It's not me beating you! It's the pussy willow!). This is the start of Страстная неделя (Passion Week) in which each day is called Великий (Great), such as Великая Пятница (Good Friday).

In observant Orthodox homes, it is a torturous week: even stricter fasting combined with the temptations of shopping for and cooking the delicacies for the Easter feast. The main delights are пасха (usually transliterated as paskha, or sweet potted cheese) и куличи (round yeast sweet breads), but also the full array of food and drink proscribed by the Lenten fast.

In Russian both Passover and Easter are Пасха. This can create some confusion when someone tells you his neighbor is celebrating Еврейская Пасха (Jewish Easter, Pesach), but in fact, the two words are related through complicated linguistic threads. The English word Easter is a bit of an outlier among European languages, but there is still a remnant of Pesach and Пасха in English: paschal refers to both holidays — and to the paschal lamb served on both tables.

Late Saturday night, families attend the long midnight Easter service, which culminates in the Крестный ход (procession of the cross): the congregation circles the church three times (symbolizing the disciples' search for Christ's body, which was not in the tomb). When Easter day is finally here, you greet your neighbor with Христос воскресе! (Christ is risen!), to which he replies Воистину воскресе! (Truly He is risen!). This exchange is accompanied by three kisses and is called христосоваться.

Usually families gather to break the long Lenten fast immediately after the service. To partake of the midnight feast is разговляться, and was traditionally, before the revolution, one of the few meals where servants and masters shared the same table.

Russians don't have Easter bunnies (nor can I explain to them why we do), but they do have colored Easter eggs. And they have egg rolling contests, which are called катать яйца. Another game is бить яйца – egg-cracking contests, in which the opponents smash their eggs together and the "winner" is the one whose shell remains whole.

These games are played with крашенные яйца – colored eggs – but never with писанки – the elaborately decorated Ukrainian and Western Slavic Easter eggs. These are so dear they were once a synonym for "beloved" or "beautiful": Писанка ты моя!

Не стоит выеденного яйца: It's not worth a plugged nickel

Яйцо (egg) is a thing of beauty and the food of the gods. Okay, I made up the bit about the gods. But down here on Earth, people like eggs, and I think it's fair to say that Russian people especially like eggs. This used to be very clear back in the days before suburban supermarkets, when at the dacha you fed the family only on what you hauled out from the city. And so, on Friday afternoons, every second car leaving the city had a big box of eggs balanced on the back-window ledge, safe from rowdy dogs and antsy children.

For the record, the egg consists of a скорлупа (shell), желток (yolk, "yellow part") and белок (white). At breakfast, your Russian hosts might ask you how you want your eggs and offer you some poetic possibilities: всмятку (soft-boiled, from the now archaic word мясти, to mix up – presumably what you can do to a mushy egg); в мешочек (a medium-boiled egg, when the soft yolk is in a "pouch" – here the pouch is the firm white); вкрутую (hard boiled); яичница-глазунья (fried eggs, from the image of an eye – глаз); or яичница-болтунья (scrambled eggs, from the verb болтать – to mix or beat something). The humble hard-boiled egg can also be called крутое яйцо and is a standard staple at picnics.

Some day, someone will explain why a boiled egg sprinkled with salt, so disdained in the kitchen, is transformed into the most delicious food on a river bank.

You should know that in most cases with eggs you use the verb pair есть/съесть (to eat), although you can also say выпить (to drink), which is what you do with a raw egg. Well, not you – but some people... usually very hungry or very hungover people.

Eating eggs has given us an expression that I found puzzling at first: не стоит выеденного яйца (literally "it's not worth an eaten egg"). The phrase выеденное яйцо (literally "eaten egg") means something worthless, trifling, or of no concern. Now why would a nourishing, consumed egg be worthless? It turns out that the выеденное яйцо refers to what is left over after you eat an egg – the cracked and useless shell. In American English the equivalent in worthlessness is a plugged nickel, i.e., a nickel with a plug in the center (after the valuable metal had been removed). Все эти секреты яйца выеденного не стоят. (All those secrets aren't worth a plugged nickel.)

Russians raise their children with a little parable about eggs and hens. When a youngin' gets too big for his britches and starts lecturing his elders, the elders say: Яйца курицу не учат! (literally "eggs don't teach the chicken"). In English this is often expressed by the odd phrase: Don't teach your grandmother to suck eggs. I guess Grandma drank down her raw breakfast egg.

And then there's a peeled egg – облупленное яйцо or яичко. This is a nice metaphor for something clearly known — the bare egg you see under the wrapping of the shell. Some etymologists believe it's the source of the phrase знать, как облупленного (to know someone inside out), another phrase uttered by elders to upstart kids: И тебя, и Андрюшку знаю как облупленных, кого вы хотите обмануть? (I can see right through you and Andryushka – who do you think you're fooling?)

And then there is the tricky bit with яйца (eggs). In Russian they are what Spanish speakers call cojones, and what English speakers call balls. If you don't know this, you can get into

some interesting conversations.

Way back in the old days, before there were dictionaries of Russian obscenities or internet sites where you could find it all out, we had to learn naughty words the hard way. In most cases, this meant using the word to the horror or hilarity of everyone around us.

So, it was with those tricky яйца. An American friend came to a Soviet-era party and began by telling us about a puzzling experience she'd had on the metro on the way. She had been standing in a crowded car; in front of her sat a man holding ten eggs wrapped in a paper cone (this was the U.S.S.R. before egg cartons). He was a bit drunk, but he politely offered her his seat. Because he was a bit tipsy, she replied, also very politely: Нет-нет. Сидите — ведь у вас яйца. (No, no, please sit. After all, you've got eggs.).

The passengers giggled, she said. We smirked. She went on to say that he insisted, and to show her gratitude, my friend said she wanted to be really polite. So she announced: Хорошо, я сяду. Но тогда позвольте мне подержать ваши яйца! (Fine, I'll sit down. But at least allow me to hold your eggs!)

The man with the cone of eggs was now winking at her, the passengers were rolling on the floor with laughter. So were we. My friend was frustrated. Что в этом смешного? (What's so funny about that?). Then she went on: Всё-таки москвичи очень милые. Подумаешь – он подарил мне шоколад просто потому, что я подержала в метро его яйца. (Muscovites are really very nice. Just think – he gave me a chocolate bar just because I held his eggs in the metro!)

Now replay the scene in the New York subway with a guy holding a bunch of tennis balls.

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