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Autumn Leaves Are Not Yet Falling

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Ёжик (hedgehog) busy stocking up for winter. **Pixabay**

Время года: season, time of year

Usually when there are Big Events going on in or around Russia, I like to poke around and discover how it is being discussed, what new words, phrases or slang have appeared, and perhaps clarify grammar or lexical questions that come up. But you know what? I just can't spend any more time than I have to contemplating the misery, tragedy, and danger that is our reality these days.

So instead, I'm just leaping into the fun stuff— that place where history, culture, tradition and language meet up and have a party. Повод? (The occasion?) Осень (autumn) — one of my favorite topics and times of year.

The word осень was derived a few thousand years ago from a word for harvest or reaping,

which is what people did after summer and before winter. It still means that season (время года), although it can also be used poetically to describe the time when feelings or life are coming to an end. For example, someone wrote of a late-life poet: Стихи он начал писать осенью на даче; в то же время название сборника намекает на осень жизни, когда зима, т. е. смерть, уже не за горами (He began to write verse at the dacha in the autumn; at the same time, the name of his collection of poetry hints at the autumn of life, when winter — that is, death — is not far off).

But most of the time in the non-poetic world, осень consists of the three months of September, October and November. The season doesn't have one fixed image or association in Russian. On the one hand, it's the time when it gets darker, colder, wetter, and bleaker. On the other hand, it can be a time of new beginnings, weddings, and — if you have a back-to-nature kind of life —a time of plenty, stocking up, and the great satisfaction of having a full погреб (root cellar) to last until spring.

So, on the bad days, you might talk about хмурая (gloomy); грустная (sad); дождливая (rainy); грязная (dirty); сырая (damp); угрюмая (glum); унылая (bleak); ветренная (windy); холодная (cold) осень. But on the good days, it's золотая (golden); янтарная (amber); нарядная (festive); благодатная (blessed); нежная (gentle); even плодоносная (fruitful) and радостная (joyful) осень.

When we move from the general season to the months of autumn, things get a bit complicated. Months and calendars in Russia are a long and confusing story. First of all, New Year's Day changed three times. From as far back as historians can ascertain, the year began in March. In what we call the 15th century, Russia began to start the year in September. Years were calculated from the "creation of the world," which for reasons I don't quite understand was determined to have taken place in what we'd call the year 5509 B.C.

This calendar lasted about two centuries until December in the year 7208, when Peter the Great decided the Russia would jump into European time. He decreed that the upcoming January 1 would be New Year's Day of a very new year: 1700. And so, the year of 7208 was the shortest in history — just four months, from its start in September through December.

Having the same calendar must have made it easier to trade and even communicate with foreigners. But even before that Russians seem to have been acquainted with the European system. According to some sources, Latin names for the months began to filter into the Russian and Slavic lands beginning with traders in the 12th century. This makes sense. Иван would ask Achilleas when he'd bring the next shipment of that delicious grain they called гречка (buckwheat groats) in honor of the people who introduced it (Greeks), and through a combination of sketches of moons, fingers held up, and experience, Иван began to catch on that August meant that hot month at the end of summer.

But before the Roman names for the months were universally accepted and used, Russians had their own names. In fact, each month had several names, which were probably used in different regions. September (сентябрь) was called хмурень (gloomy, overcast); дождезвон (the sound of raindrops); вересень (from вереск — heather — that blooms); and ревун (howler, from the sound of the wind and, by some accounts, the calls of moose).

Even though the weather could turn cold and rainy, September was still considered a rich

month for farmers and foragers. Сентябрь без плодов не бывает (September is never without fruit). Сентябрь – золотой месяц грибников (September is a golden month for mushroom gatherers.)

And there are, of course, lots of weather signs. For example, let's hope for some good thunderstorms because Гром в сентябре – теплая осень (Thunder in September means a warm autumn.) Another thing to look for this month are spider webs. В сентябре в лесу много паучков на паутинах – к долгой сухой осени (In September many little spiders on spider webs means a long and dry autumn.)

So off to the woods to check on those spider webs.

For most of Russia, October is the month when the leaves blaze in color and then fall to the ground. So the month was called листопад (leaf fall). In some parts of Russia October was called грязник (something like "muddy month"), as rain and snow conspired to make the dirt roads unpassable mud holes. It was also called зазимник for the зазимки (first frosts). Not to go all "Eskimos have 50 words for snow" on you (that's a language myth)...but how cool is it that there is one word in Russian for the first frosts of the season?

October was perceived as the true in-between month: Октябрь землю покроет где листом, где снежком (October covers the earth, here with leaves, there with snow.) And unfortunately: В октябре – ни на колесах, ни на санях (In October you already can't travel by cart and can't yet travel by sleigh.)

October has its weather signs, too, some of which might sound familiar to anyone who grew up in the American Northeast. Много желудей на дубе – к лютой и снежной зиме (Lots of acorns on the oak means a bitterly cold and snowy winter.) This year pay attention to when birds fly and leaves fall: Поздний отлет птиц – к теплой зиме (A late bird migration means a warm winter), but поздний листопад – к суровой и долгой зиме (If leaves fall late, winter will be harsh and long.)

November — my least favorite month of the year in Moscow — has the least attractive folk names: листогной (leaf decay); полузимник (half-winter); бездорожник (roadlessness); or грудень (from грудки земли — frozen pieces of earth). On the one hand, folk wisdom said: В ноябре зима с осенью борются (In November winter battles with autumn). On the other hand, other folk said wisely: Ноябрь осень замыкает (November closes the circle of autumn). It does have a good weather sign, although you need to wait for a long time to see if it's true: Какова погода в ноябре, таков и май (The weather in November is how it will be in May.)

That was true this year – in fact, Moscow had November for nine months, from September to May.

Note that Ukrainian, which has kept its more poetic month names, is farther south and warmer. So if October in Russian is листопад, in Ukrainian листопад is November. Chilly грудень is November up north in Russian, but it's the name of December in Ukraine. This must make for some confusion among Slavic friends.

There is one last thing to note about the autumn months: they're numbered wrong. That is,

September, October and November are based on the Latin numbers seven, eight and nine — but they are the ninth, tenth and eleventh months of the year. How come?

Blame the Romans. Their first month of the year was March.

Have fun this autumn wherever you are!

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