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All in a Day's Work in Russian

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Труд! Мир! Май! **USSR poster / Wikicommons**

Рабство: slavery

One of the words of the year 2020 is surely "work." For people in professions that were stopped, curtailed or altered by the coronavirus pandemic, work is all they dream about and long to do. For people working in professions that could be continued at home, work is all they do, as the workday has no boundaries of time or place.

For the latter people, грех жаловаться (it's a sin to complain), but human nature being what it is, we do anyway. In that mood, I joked grimly that it's no wonder that the word раб (slave) is contained in the word работать (to work). But it's not a joke at all. Раб has parallels to other Indo-European languages and seems to have originally meant "deprived of something." The earliest meaning of раб was an orphan. Later there was an unfortunate, telling shift in meaning to "forced laborer." And so, раб работает (The slave works.)

But this is just one of the two main words for work in Russian. The other is труд with its verb трудиться. Труд also has an Indo-European ancestor tr-eu-d, which meant to knead, press, or squeeze. There was a common Slavic word trudъ, which seems to have turned physical pressure into emotional pain. It meant burden, disappointment or sorrow. That all led to the word трудъ in old Russian that was a meaning container for every misery humans experienced: work, difficulty, worry, care, suffering, mourning, illness and sorrow. But this is interesting: In the 10th and 11th centuries when работать was what a slave did, трудиться was what a monk did: "put in efforts," "suffered" and "led an acetic life."

Is it any wonder that the Soviet Union grabbed up this word to deify the worker, work, and worker state? Every May 1 Red Square was awash with posters Труд! Мир! Май! (Work! Peace! May!) and Слава трудовому народу! (Glory to the worker nation!) There was a plethora of other lofty phrases like герой социалистического труда (hero of socialist labor) and трудовые подвиги (remarkable feats of labor).

Today sometimes the verbs работать and трудиться are just about synonyms, like here where they are virtually interchangeable: К началу года на заводе трудились 450 человек, притом, что в лучшие времена здесь работали 6, 5 тысяч (At the start of the year, 450 people worked at the factory, although in better times 6,500 people worked here).

But работать is generally more neutral and can refer to things, not just people, working — or not. Вызвала мастера – телевизор не работает (I've called a repairman — the television doesn't work). Трудиться generally has the sense, however dim, of putting in great effort. На кафедре трудятся над диссертациями, обучаясь в аспирантуре, талантливые выпускники (Some very talented graduates of our department are working hard on their dissertations and doing post-graduate coursework.) Of course, sometimes it's as loud as a tin drum, if slightly hard to believe: Аппарат правительства усердно трудится над административной реформой (The state administration is tenaciously working on administrative reform).

But beware. The older distinctions are still there. Трудиться is always done well, but работать can be done well or badly. So, you can say работать хорошо, добросовестно (to work well, conscientiously) and работать плохо, недобросовестно (to work badly, carelessly), but it sounds so odd to say плохо трудиться (to labor badly) that you virtually never read or hear it. You do, however, read and hear трудиться честно, усердно, самоотверженно (to labor honestly, assiduously, selflessly).

And while we're here, there is the worker труженик – different from the рабочий worker — who is usually diligent and hard-working. Какой он труженик! What a hard worker he is! It was also used during the Soviet era, and even today, to describe people whose hard work is tinted with sanctity: Уважаемые ветераны Великой Отечественной войны, труженики тыла! (My dear veterans of the Great Patriotic War and workers on the home front!)

Note, too that с трудом (literally "with work") means "with difficulty" and трудность is difficulty or hardship. Учеба давалась мне с трудом (For me, studying was a real grind). Мы сталкиваемся с рядом трудностей (We are hitting up against a whole slew of difficulties).

There are, of course, a few dozen other ways to express hard work. Everyone should keep a collection of these phrases in their linguistic pocket, because you never know when your

supervisor is going to discuss your performance or when your significant other is going to complain about the inequitable division of household labor. Hold firm. Ни шагу назад (not one step back)!

When accused, you raise your eyebrows as high as they can go in a Disney-like expression of horrified amazement. Как?! (What do you mean?!) Я работаю как Папа Карло! (I work like Geppetto!) Well, this loses a bit in translation, and is perhaps too much cartoon. But in the Russian version of the fairy tale Pinocchio by Alexei Tolstoy, the puppet-boy is Буратино and the carver-father is Папа Карло, who worked long and hard. It definitely packs a punch. You can also say: Я работаю как каторжник or лощадь (I work like a galley slave or horse).

Another excellent verb for proclaiming and complaining about how much you work is пахать (to plow, furrow, cultivate, work very hard). Indeed, sometimes plowing is hard work, especially when it's still freezing outside: Хотя 18 марта еще и зима, начинай пахать огород (Although March 18 is still winter, start tilling your garden). But in cities, it's what folks do in the office: Я и так пашу с утра до ночи! (As it is, I work my butt off day and night!)

Response: Если не хочешь пахать на дядю день и ночь, то тебя предупредят за месяц (If you don't want to work your fingers to the bone day and night for The Man, you'll be given a month's notice).

And for even more color, try using the word горб (hump, the hump of your back). Горб is often used to stand in for hard work: Я же своим горбом всего добилась (I worked for everything I've got, literally "I achieved everything with my back"!)

You can also say гнуть or ломать горб (bend or break one's back) to describe, well, back-breaking labor. Я всю дорогу всё сам делал, горб ломал, семью имел, детей воспитывал (I always did everything myself, I broke my back working, I had a family and raised my kids).

Now then, when you earn your living by keeping your nose to the grindstone and working your fingers to the bone, you want your boss to know it, and you really, really don't want someone else to take credit for that great sales presentation or ground-breaking analysis. But if someone else does try to grab your thunder, you can sneer: На чужом горбу хочешь въехать в рай (You want the gain without the pain/You want to reap but not to sow, literally "you want to ride someone else's back into heaven").

And that will... well... it will probably have no effect at all on a creep like that. But at least your Russian will be beautiful.

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