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Annoying Russian Questions

When they ask you how you are, tell them honestly!

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Как дела?: How's it going?

Years ago whenever I would ask an acquaintance "Как дела?" (How are things?), he'd answer: "В Кремле дела, у нас делишки". Since дела can mean matters, affairs, or work and делишки can mean minor tasks or errands, I understood it as a joke that meant something like "The Kremlin is doing serious business, we're pushing paper." And since he was, in fact, a paper pusher in the Russian parliament, I thought he'd made up the self-deprecating joke himself.

Hey, it was a long time ago. What did I know?

The phrase, I later learned, is a well-known joking response to that omnipresent question как дела? And there is yet another funny answer, this time a pun on дела, which can also refer to

legal cases: В Прокуратуре дела, у нас делишки (The Prosecutor's Office handles cases, we just do the paperwork).

Most of the time you give a standard response to the standard question как дела? If things are going pretty good: хорошо (fine); ничего (not bad); нормально (like usual); более-менее (so-so); терпимо (bearable). If things are going really well: отлично (great); великолепно (splendid); классно (super); здорово (fabulous); замечательно (terrific); превосходно (excellent). And if things are going badly, you can either make a joke about it or downplay the downer: бывает лучше (could be better); не очень (meh, "not very [good]"); хуже всех (worse than everyone else).

I highly recommend ничего as the all-purpose answer. If you say it with a smile, upbeat, it means: pretty damn good, thanks! If you say it in a tone of resignation, it means: terrible but I'm muddling through. Change your intonation, change the meaning. Brilliant.

But these standard answers are just the tip of the reply iceberg. There are dozens of ways to answer that question, from the very polite to the extremely improper. And since it's August and hot as hades, here's a how's-it-going primer. We can come back to the hard bits in a week or two. As they say: Работа не волк, в лес не убежит (work isn't going anywhere, literally, "work isn't a wolf that will disappear into the forest...")

So how can you answer как дела? First option: go retro. The nicest, quaint response is: Вашими молитвами (literally, with your prayers). Today people understand it to mean "спасибо, ничего" (not bad, thanks) or не плохо, не хорошо (so-so, literally not bad, not good). But the idea behind it, as one person was told by her grandmother, is: благодарность за то, что вы обо мне думаете, переживаете, только благодаря этому я жива и здорова (gratitude for thinking about me and being concerned, thanks to that, I'm alive and well).

Or you might use another old, rather mysterious expression that rhymes with the question: Как дела? Как сажа бела (How are things? Terrible, literally "like white soot"). This explanation requires a leap of faith. According to multiple sources, since soot is black, "white soot" is something incompatible, chaotic and bad. Hence как сажа бела means "things are all messed up."

Well, the rhyme is lovely.

Or you might reply: Спасибо, всё в шоколаде (Thanks, things are great, literally, "everything is in chocolate.") You can also say: я в шоколаде! (I'm doing great!) The origins of this phrase, if I am to believe my informants, is that anything dipped in chocolate (cherries, prunes, nuts, apricots, or other delicacies) are an expensive luxury. A life dipped in chocolate sounds luxurious, no? It's a good way to let someone know business is going fine and you're rich without saying that you're rolling in dough. That's so gauche, don't you know.

Then there are also a variety of ways to say: not so good. Most of them are snarky, the sort of thing you might snap at a nosy neighbor or a relative who exhibits way too much interest in your life. "Как дела?" they ask. You answer: Дела идут хорошо, но мимо (Things are going fine, just passing me by). Не умер и не женился (I haven't died or gotten married); Лучше чем вчера, но хуже чем завтра (Better than yesterday but worse than tomorrow). That should shut them up.

If not, you can move on to the “it’s bad” answers. Of course, you can say, Ужасно! Одни проблемы! Всё кошмарно! (Terrible! Problem after problem! What a nightmare!). But there are more creative replies.

If, for example, you are having trouble making ends meet, say: Как в такси. Чем дальше, тем дороже (Like in a cab ⊠ the farther you go, the more you pay). Or if things are going badly, say: Как у жареной картошки. Сначала режут, потом жарят, а в конце сожрут (Like a fried potato. First they cut it, then fry it, and in the end, they eat it). Or if your questioner can tolerate some bad language, try: Как у зебры... белая полоска, чёрная полоска, снова белая, снова чёрная, а потом хвост и полная задница (Like a zebra... white stripe, black stripe, then white again, then black again, and then the tail and a pain in the butt).

If you are feeling very cranky — or if your nosy neighbor is driving you mad — you can answer the question with a question. A rather rude question. Как дела? Что именно вас интересует? (What specifically are you interested in?) Ты просто так спрашиваешь или тебе действительно интересно? (Are you just being polite or are you really interested?) Почему вы спрашиваете? (Why do you ask?) Зачем вы хотите это узнать? (Why do you want to know?) And the kicker: Как вы будете использовать эту информацию? (How are you going to use this information?)

Well, maybe skip that last one.

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