The Russian Context: The Culture Behind the Language

Editors' Preface: Eloise M. Boyle and Genevra Gerhart

These are essays on how Russian culture finds its life in the language, and how the Russian language finds its life in the culture. To know another country's culture, one has to know the language of that culture, or serious misunderstandings can arise. A famous example of this occurred in the 1950's, when the American public, already suspicious of the Soviet Union, was whipped into an anti-Soviet frenzy by a remark made by Nikita Khrushchev. Khrushchev said, "Мы вас похороним," which was translated in the United States as "We will bury you," and this led to even more dire Cold War tension. The actual translation of the sentence is something like, "We will say funeral rites over you," in other words, we Soviet Communists will be around long after you capitalists have lived out your time. One sentence, one mistranslation, years of misunderstanding.

If language is more than words, is in fact a symbolic process wherein the peaker and listener are each engaged in sharing both that which is spoken and that which is simply assumed as in evidence by both, then a non-native, in order to truly participate in conversation, must learn the basic symbols (assumptions) that are the givens of communication For these is a body of information that "everybody knows" and refers to, even if it is a little fuzzy on the edges.

In 1996 nine people agreed to take aparticular part in a major project. The aim was to write down Russian common knowledge in Arts and Letters very broadly conceived, and specifically as evidenced in the language. It must be emphasized that the knowledge of a specialist is not the information presented here. We looked for the information most educated Russians have about their world, and their attitudes toward it. What emerged is common knowledge, that is, the knowledge about the world expected of an educated Russian - a linguistic definition that applies both to the people and the culture in which they live. If the American must know "Play it again, Sam" and "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a dman," in addition to "To be, or not to be," what must the standard literate Russian know? What proverbs are regularly used? Which fables are referred to? What takes the place of Jack and the Beanstalk? We in the United States have definite mental (and sound) pictures of the Middle West, the Southwest, the Northeast, the South. How does the Russian divide Russia, and how are the divisions characterized? The intent is not to show the full range of possible information on a topic, but rather the limits of expected knowledge, what one must know to understand the culture. This project was too large to be accomplished by one or two human beings, and so this group was formed to try a major attempt at the impossible. The authors included in this volume used research, personal insight, conversation, cajoling, argument, in short all the tools at their disposal to come up with the impressive amount of information you now hold in your hands. The editors of this work are eternally indebted to all our fine writers for their efforts on your behalf.

The method of research varied from author to author, but one approach was supposed to be common to all: numerous Russians of various generations were interviewed, and the authors solicited Russian opinion about what is generally familiar to most people. Sasha Prokhorov (Science) took his efforts to (among other places) both a beach in Russia and a train station in Moscow, where he asked people from all walks of life about their knowledge of scientific facts
and myths. But to discover what is obvious, or accepted, or understood by another group of people is not so easy as it might seem, therefore this book is an approximation: sometimes more information than is necessary is presented, sometimes less. All but four of the authors are not native speakers of Russian, and there exists an obvious gap in our knowledge. We need not apologize. This is a first attempt. There will be omissions of truth and commissions of error.