

# AUTHOR'S PREFACE

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This book is an attempt at the impossible: to describe for non-Russians what Russian common knowledge might be. It is the Russian obvious—that is *ob+via*, in the road, in the way: what you might trip over if you ignore it or don't see it. It is the information one Russian assumes another has when they are talking together. It is the background against which words take on meaning. If one knew all of common knowledge, then all humor would be comprehensible. The book was written because the Russian equivalent for Thomas, **Фомá** might share origin in language but certainly doesn't share place in society. It was written because in translation the obvious often isn't; and sometimes it's hard to answer when you don't know what your friend has in mind.

The book was written for the traveler who might be happier or even healthier knowing what to expect; it was written for those in business who want to avoid pratfalls as much as they want to see possibilities; and it was written for those studying the language who are blessed with curiosity and (temporarily) tired of verb forms. The assumption is not that the readers know Russian, but that they do want to know about Russians and their language. (There are also a few hints on what to expect for Russians new to America.)

This fourth edition is more than a revision: we are adding material on computer language and are returning Abbreviations to the fold; we are adding a brief section on where to go for more details. In many small and large ways we have brought the information up to date. This book is Geneva Gerhart's, and when the reader bumps up against "I" in the text, he can be sure he has stumbled across the author. Occasionally the pronoun "we" is used, and this refers to Geneva and Eloise, in that order.

Most Russians will agree with most of what is written here. None will agree with everything—the borders of common knowledge are not easily drawn. Nor is this all there is. We hope that the companion volume, *The Russian Context* (Slavica Publishers, 2002), will supply some common knowledge on a higher plane (art, music, literature, history, and the like).

There are so many words arranged in lists because this is the way I believe people think about them: knives are allied with forks and spoons, names with other names, pansies with petunias, all to form a pattern that gives the individual a background of relationships. Heaven knows the lists are not for memorizing (though with time you will find familiarity comforting). Most of the book is a description of the Russian's world from the Russian point of view. The chapter on conduct is also partly from my point of view: you perhaps will find the generalizations regrettable, while I find them unavoidable.

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We have gone to considerable trouble to make sure that the reader knowing no Russian can read the book. Individual words or expressions in English are followed by their translation into Russian. Almost all passages in Russian are preceded by their translation. Exceptions occur mostly in the Numbers chapter where the numbers themselves made things obvious. Accent marks appear as a great convenience to you and a great pain in the neck to me; note that if a word with no stress mark starts with a capital letter, that is the stressed vowel. Capitalizations are those used in the sources, some of which go back to Soviet times. The US Board on Geographic Names transliteration system is the chosen system for this book; on occasion, the common English spelling of a Russian word or name is substituted for the precise transliterated form. Headings in Russian are not always translations of the English, though they are meant to be appropriate headings.

*Genevra Gerhart*