

Doors Russia has Opened for Me

The familiar proverb **хлеб – всему голова** ('it all begins with bread') should hang symbolically above most of the doors that Russia has opened for me. The association was neither planned nor predictable, but bread has always been there, sometimes like an eerily portentous off-stage sound in a Chekhov play, sometimes as a very practical means of subsistence. The 'doors' that come to mind open into seemingly disparate experiences, each with some connection to bread and to my growing understanding of the importance of what it is made from, how it is made and how equitably it is shared and enjoyed.

The first close encounter was not propitious. In 1967 I was one of six students of Russian at Sussex University eagerly seeking conversational practice and contact with 'real Russians'. We drove a minibus to Moscow, Kiev and Odessa and camped for a month in the country. Misunderstanding the currency exchange rate, we had barely enough money to eat and survived on rye bread and cucumbers. The unfamiliar sour bread was, at first, off-putting. But dependence duly blossomed, in my case at least, into a kind of affection. On return to a well-provided Western life, I never quite forgot how bread could keep body and soul together.

That duality was a prominent feature of my exposure to Russian literature, whose often agonised response to modernity seemed the perfect starting point for a young person's search for meaning in the late 1960s. During a year at Moscow University (MGU), the previous summer's bread dalliance became a nourishing love-affair and my dissertation reflected an oscillating attraction to two literary heroes: the spiritual searcher, Christian pacifist and wishful admirer of peasant communitarian authenticity Lev Tolstoy and the humane but unsentimental observer of human frailty, practical scientist driven by secular moral purpose, and proto-ecologist Anton Chekhov. When later I broadcast wheat and rye on Cumbrian fields, scythed grass and planted trees, the Russian inspiration was palpable (even if my implementation veered between the amateurish and the delusional).

MGU in the late '60s opened my eyes to Cold War politics, of course, but more significantly introduced me to creative responses to censorship and repression whose intellectual provenance was at least partly pre-Revolutionary. My knowledge of Russian language was enriched by the satirical 'underground' songs of Vladimir Vysotsky and Aleksandr Galich, as was my appreciation of personal and civic courage in the face of timeless Russian demons. In **Ну вот исчезла дрожь в руках** ('Now the tremor in my hands has gone...') Vysotsky scales snowy peaks to find himself and his true path, as well as freedom from fear of the abyss, which in his case included an all-too-typical struggle with alcoholism. The beauty of the pristine natural world can be unforgiving, but, like language, it must be preserved from corruption: **я свято верю в чистоту снегов и слов** ('I passionately believe in the integrity of snows and words').

The BBC Russian Service, where I spent three years in the early 1970s, gave me the opportunity to broadcast, I hope with due respect for the integrity of language, to a Soviet audience starved of independent information. My first attempts at making rye bread elicited quite unjustified appreciation from colleagues at occasional office celebrations; but, of course, those humble loaves bore meanings that transcended the nutritional. The sweet-sour aroma of black bread transported exiles at the speed of radio waves to a homeland where truth – and especially the testimony of the millions suppressed in the great terror – struggled to be heard. We broadcast

Solzhenitsyn's *Arkhipelag Gulag* and interviews with Andrei Sakharov, Valery Chalidze and other activists. And we tried to demonstrate our integrity by airing truths inconvenient to the West, in my case concerning pollution, resource depletion and the corruption within monopoly capitalism.

Perhaps I took the message too seriously, but, in the spirit of those 19th-century writers who wrestled with the dilemma of how a (privileged) man might live a good life, I left London to grow food and...become a baker. Russia, professionally at least, was history. And then, fourteen years, four children, five acres and many loaves later, I went back. In the Kostroma OVIR (visa office) my papers were stamped by a smiling official who... handed me a recipe for bread. I'd been following *perestroika* with interest, but such customer service was so individual as to be seriously worrying – until it transpired that my host's response to quite hostile questioning at OVIR about the purpose of my visit, i.e. that I was a baker interested in Russian bread, had turned suspicion to friendly interest. The instinctive Russian hospitality that the Soviet system could never completely smother, was unleashed, in this case, by talk of bread. The Russian for 'hospitality' is, of course, **хлеб-соль** ('bread-salt').

The doors were open again. I learned how to make sourdough bread from a 100-ton-a day industrial bakery and an old countrywoman with a **печка**, fulfilling a student dream by sleeping atop the massive stove (much to her amusement and the displeasure of her cats). Later in the 1990s I helped a Moscow business establish something akin to my own (former) Village Bakery in historic Mstyora. That particular door should have been labelled 'enter at your own risk' as I was cheated by erstwhile trusted friends who seemed suddenly to be hardened and corrupted by – as we used to say – their 'relationship to the means of production'.

But doors keep opening, even in these difficult times. Thanks to the Vavilov Institute of Plant Husbandry (VIR) in St. Petersburg, I have growing in my small farm in the Borders two varieties of wheat, bred originally by Patrick Shirreff in East Lothian in the 1860s. The [Scotland The Bread](#) project wants to see this country feed itself with nutritious home-grown grain and is testing historic varieties for resilience and nutrient density. The Shirreff wheats would have been lost forever had they not been preserved through the Leningrad blockade by scientists, some of whom died of starvation rather than eat the seeds in their charge. I hope we can honour their courage and humanity by leaving to our children soils, seeds and words that are fertile, uncontaminated and accessible to everyone, as of right.