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The ‘How Are You?’ Culture Clash

By ALINA SIMONE JAN. 19, 2014

“WHEN an American asks me this question, it’s like a wall of ice crashing down between us.”

The question my Moscow-born friend Galina was referring to had nothing to do with Putin, or Pussy Riot, or the culinary ethics of adding ketchup to your pirogi. And yet, it is the back across which Russian-American relations are broken.

The question in question is, “How are you?”

The answer Americans give, of course is, “Fine.” But when Russians hear this they think one of two things: (1) you’ve been granted a heavenly reprieve from the wearisome grind that all but defines the human condition and as a result are experiencing a rare and sublime moment of fineness or (2) you are lying.

Ask a Russian, “How are you?” and you will hear, for better or worse, the truth. A blunt pronouncement of dissatisfaction punctuated by, say, the details of any recent digestive troubles. I have endured many painful minutes of elevator silence after my grandmother (who lived in the Soviet Union until moving to the United States in her 60s) delivered her stock response: “Terrible,” to which she might add, “Why? Because being old is terrible.” Beat. “And I am very old.”

Cue desperate thumbing of the “door open” button.

It feels as if I’ve spent half my life trying to smooth over the bafflement of my American friends and the hurt feelings of my Russian expat family as a result of this innocuous inquiry. “‘Fine’ makes Russians

think that Americans have no soul,” I explained recently to an American-born friend. “That they just want to go home, eat a frozen dinner in front of the TV, and wait out the hours before going to work to make money again.”

He laughed, then quickly sobered. “You know, there’s something to that.”

But if the American “fine” can come off as plastic and insincere, the speed with which Russians unload intimate details is just as disturbing. I was born in Ukraine to Russian parents, but I grew up in the United States, and I get it. It’s like, “I don’t know you, Random Russian Lady, so why are you showing me your rash?”

The thing most Russians don’t realize is that, in English, “How are you?” isn’t a question at all, but a form of “hi,” like the Russian “privyet!” The Americans weren’t responsible for its transformation; that honor goes to the British. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the phrase’s precursor, “How do you do?” as a common phrase “often used as a mere greeting or salutation.” The anodyne exchange dates at least as far back as 1604, to Shakespeare’s *Othello*, where Desdemona asks her husband, “How is’t with you, my lord?” and Othello replies “Well, my good lady.” Even though he is half-mad with jealousy and only five scenes away from murdering her.

Whereas it’s easy to read a particularly American optimism into the easy embrace of the auto-fine, Russians seem almost congenitally unable to fake fineness.

The Russian food critic and cultural historian Anya von Bremzen recently offered me an intriguing hypothesis as to why this might be the case. In Soviet days, proclamations of joy, enthusiasm and optimism were associated with state propaganda and officialese. As a citizen of a Communist utopia, you were pretty much supposed to feel fine all the time (never mind the time you spent squabbling over the communal stove or waiting in a two-hour line to buy toilet paper). So, Ms. von Bremzen explained, a moan or a complaint would be considered a more authentic,

non-state-sanctioned response to “how are you.”

I liked this theory, but my father scoffed when I suggested it was the Soviets who devalued “fine.” By way of explanation, a quote from Dostoyevsky arrived in my inbox: “The most basic, most rudimentary spiritual need of the Russian people is the need for suffering, ever-present and unquenchable, everywhere and in everything.”

Maybe that’s not such a bad thing. Psychologists at the University of Michigan have shown that, while Russians are, indeed, more prone to brooding than Americans, their open embrace of negative experiences might ultimately be healthier, resulting in fewer symptoms of depression.

Recently, when I looked through a few American guides on traveling to Russia, I was disappointed to find that they all suggested that tourists adopt the American approach to “How are you” (“kak dela” in Russian) and lob back a hearty “Khorosho!” My advice? Don’t let “How are you” be your Waterloo. Instead, take a vacation from fineness.

If you lack the Russian vocabulary to fully express your unquenchable suffering, fear not — a lot of angst and ambivalence can be packed into just a word or two. Try “tak-sebe” (so-so) or “normalno” (the usual) or “eh” (eh). Even “fine” is fine. Injecting a world-weary sigh before your “khorosho” can neatly reverse its meaning, or render it shorthand for that other, more satisfyingly nuanced, response: It’s complicated.

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