

RUSSIAN

The Mother Tongue Between Two Slices of Rye

Gary Shteyngart

When I return to Russia, my birthplace, I cannot sleep for days. The Russian language swaddles me. The trilling *r*'s tickle the underside of my feet. Every old woman cooing to her grandson is my dead grandmother. Every glum and purposeful man picking up his wife from work in a dusty Volga sedan is my father. Every young man cursing the West with his friends over a late morning beer in the Summer Garden is me. I have fallen off the edges of the known universe, with its Palm Pilots, obnoxious vintage shops, and sleek French-Caribbean Brooklyn bistros, and have returned into a kind of elemental Shteyngart-land, a nightmare where every consonant resonates like a punch against the liver, every rare vowel makes my flanks quiver as if I'm in love.

Lying in bed in my hotel room I am hurt to the quick by the words from an idiotic pop song: "Please don't bother me," a cheerful young girl is singing on a Russian music channel, "I'm going back to my mama's house."

If I'm in some cheap Soviet hell-hole of a hotel, I can hear the housekeepers screaming at each other. "Lera, bitch, give me back my twenty."

"You, Vera, are the bitch," says her colleague. These words *Ti, Vera, suka* replay themselves as an endless mantra as I sink my

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face into a skimpy, dandruff-smelling pillow from Brezhnev times. For the time being, Lera and Vera are my relatives, my loved ones, my everything. I want to walk out of my room and say, in my native tongue, "Lera, Vera, here is twenty rubles for each of you. Ladies, dear ones, let's have some tea and cognac in the bar downstairs."

If I'm in a Western hotel, one of Moscow's Marriotts, say, I try to tune into the airplane-like hum of the central AC and banish Russian from my mind. I am surrounded by burnished mahogany, heated towel racks, and all sorts of business class accoutrements ("Dear Guest," little cards address me in English, "your overall satisfaction is our ultimate goal"), but when I open the window I face a stark Soviet-era building, where the Veras and Leras carry on at full pitch, grandmas coo to children, young men while away the morning hours in the courtyard with beer and invective.

In order to fall asleep, I try speaking to myself in English. "Hi there! Was' up? What are you doing Thursday? I have to see my analyst from 4:00 to 4:45. I can be downtown by 5:30. When do you get off work?" I repeat the last words to my phantom New York friend over and over, trying to regain my American balance, the sense that rationalism, psychiatry and a few sour apple martinis can take care of the past, because, as the Marriott people say, overall satisfaction is our ultimate goal. "When do you get off work? When do you get off work? When do you get off work? Hi there!" But it's no use.

Please don't bother me, I'm going back to my mama's house.

Lera, you bitch, give me my twenty rubles.

And in a final insult, an old Soviet anthem from my youth, hummed through the back channels of memory, the little chutes

and trap doors that connect the right brain and the left ventricle through which pieces of primordial identity keep falling out.

*The seagull is flapping its wings
Calling us to our duty
Pioneers and friends and all our comrades
Let us set out for the journey ahead*

Sliced down the middle, splayed like a red snapper in a Chinatown restaurant, stuffed with *kh* and *sh* sounds instead of garlic and ginger, I lie in a Moscow or St. Petersburg hotel bed, tearful and jet-lagged, whispering to the ceiling in a brisk, staccato tone, maniacally naming all the things for which the Russian language is useful—ordering mushroom and barley soup, directing the cab driver to some forgotten grave, planning the putsch that will for once install an enlightened government. *Khh . . . Shh . . . Rrrrr.*

Home at last.

Veliky moguchi russki yazik. The Great and Mighty Russian Tongue is how my first language bills itself. Throughout its seventy-year tenure, bureaucratic Soviet-speak had inadvertently stripped it of much of its greatness and might (try casually saying the acronym OSOAVIAKHIM, which denotes the Association for Assistance of Defense, Aircraft and Chemical Development). But in 1977 the beleaguered Russian tongue can still put on quite a show for a five-year-old boy in a Leningrad metro station. The trick is to use giant copper block letters nailed to a granite wall, signifying both pomp and posterity, an upper-case paean to

an increasingly lower-case Soviet state. The words, gracing the walls of the Technological Institute station, read as follows:

1959—SOVIET SPACE ROCKET
REACHES THE SURFACE OF THE MOON

Take that, Neil Armstrong.

1934—SOVIET SCIENTISTS CREATE
THE FIRST CHAIN REACTION THEORY

So that's where it all began.

1974—THE BUILDING OF THE BAIKAL-AMUR
MAIN RAILROAD TRUNK HAS BEEN INITIATED

Now what the hell does that mean? Ah, but Baikal-Amur sounds so beautiful—Baikal the famous (and now famously polluted) Siberian lake, a centerpiece of Russian myth; Amur (amour?) could almost be another word Russian has gleefully appropriated from the French (it is, in fact, the name of a region in the Russian Far East).

I'm five years old, felt boots tight around my feet and ankles, what might be half of a bear or several Soviet beavers draped around my shoulders, my mouth open so wide that, as my father keeps warning me, "a crow will fly in there." I am in awe. The metro, with its wall-length murals of the broad-chested revolutionary working class that never was, with its hectares of granite and marble vestibules, is a mouth-opener to be sure. And the words! Those words whose power seems not only persuasive,

but, to this five-year-old kid already obsessed with science fiction, extra-terrestrial. The wise aliens have landed and WE ARE THEM. And this is the language we use. The great and mighty Russian tongue.

Meanwhile, a metro train full of sweaty comrades pulls into the station, ready to take us north to the Hermitage or the Dostoyevsky museum. But what use is there for the glum truth of Rembrandt's returning prodigal son or a display of the great novelist's piss pots, when the future of the human race, denuded of its mystery, is right here for all to see. SOVIET SCIENTISTS CREATE THE FIRST CHAIN REACTION THEORY. Forget the shabby polyester-clad human element around you, the unique Soviet metro smell of a million barely washed proletarians being sucked through an enormous marble tube. There it is, kid, in copper capital letters. What more do you want?

Some two years later, in Queens, New York, I am being inducted into a different kind of truth. I am standing amidst a gaggle of boys in white shirts and skullcaps, and girls in long dresses wailing a prayer in an ancient language. Adults are on hand to make sure we are all singing in unison; that is to say, refusing to wail is not an option. "*Sh'ima Yisrael*," I wail, obediently, "*Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai echad*."

Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.

I'm not sure what the Hebrew words mean (there is an English translation in the prayer book, only I don't know any English either), but I know the tone. There is something plaintive in the way we boys and girls are beseeching the Almighty. What we're doing, I think, is supplicating. And the members of my family

are no strangers to supplication. We are Soviet Jewish refugees in America ("refu-Jews," the joke would go). We are poor. We are at the mercy of others: Food Stamps from the American government, financial aid from refugee organizations, second-hand Batman and Green Lantern t-shirts and scuffed furniture gathered by kind American Jews. I am sitting in the cafeteria of the Hebrew school, surrounded first by the walls of this frightening institution—a gray piece of modern architecture liberally inlaid with panes of tinted glass—with its large, sweaty rabbi, its young, underpaid teachers, and its noisy, undisciplined American Jewish kids, and, in a larger sense, surrounded by America: a complex, media-driven, gadget-happy society, whose images and language are the lingua franca of the world and whose flowery odors and easy smiles are completely beyond me. I'm sitting there, alone at a lunch table, a small boy in over-sized glasses and a tight checkered Russian shirt, perhaps the product of some Checkered Shirt Factory #12 in Sverdlovsk, and what I'm doing is, I'm talking to myself.

I'm talking to myself in Russian.

Am I saying "1959—SOVIET SPACE ROCKET REACHES THE SURFACE OF THE MOON"? It's very possible. Am I recounting the contents of the Vorontsovski Palace in Yalta, where, just a year ago, I proved myself smarter than the rest of the tour group (and won my mother's undying love) by pointing out that the palace resembled the contours of a neighboring mountain? It could be. Am I nervously whispering an old Russian childhood ditty (one that would later find its way into one of my stories written as an adult): "Let it always be sunny, let there always be Mommy, let there always be blue skies, let there always be me"? Very possible. Because what I need now, in this unhappy, alien

place, is Mommy, the woman who sews my mittens to my great overcoat, for otherwise I will lose them, as I have already lost the bottle of glue, lined notebook and crayons that accompany me to first grade.

One thing is certain—along with Mommy, and Papa, and one sweet kid, the son of liberal American parents who have induced him to play with me—the Russian language is my friend. It's comfortable around me. It knows things the noisy brats around me, who laugh and point as I intone my Slavic sibilants, will never understand. The way the Vorontsovski Palace resembles the mountain next to it. The way you get frisked at the Leningrad Airport, the customs guard taking off your hat and feeling it up for contraband diamonds. The way SOVIET SCIENTISTS CREATE[D] THE FIRST CHAIN REACTION THEORY in 1934. All this the great and mighty Russian language knows. All this it whispers to me at night, as I lie haunted by childhood insomnia.

Teachers try to intervene. They tell me to get rid of some of my Russian furs. Trim my bushy hair a little. Stop talking to myself in Russian. Be more, you know, *normal*. I am invited to play with the liberals' son, a gentle, well-fed fellow who seems lost in the wilderness of Eastern Queens. We go to a pizza parlor, and, as I inhale a slice, a large string of gooey Parmesan cheese gets stuck in my throat. Using most of my fingers, I try to pull the cheese out. I choke. I gesture about. I panic. I moo at our chaperone, a graceful American mama. *Pomogite!* I mouth. Help! I am caught in a world of cheap endless cheese. I can see a new placard for the Leningrad metro. 1979—FIRST SOVIET CHILD CHOKES ON CAPITALIST PIZZA. When it's all over, I sit there shuddering, my hands covered with spittle and spent Parmesan. This is no way to live.

And then one day I fall in love with cereal. We are too poor to afford toys at this point, but we do have to eat. Cereal is food. It tastes grainy, easy and light, with a hint of false fruitiness. It tastes the way America feels. I'm obsessed with the fact that many cereal boxes come with prizes inside, which seems to me an unprecedented miracle. Something for nothing. My favorite comes in a box of a cereal called Honey Combs, a box featuring a healthy white kid—as a sufferer of asthma, I begin to accept him as an important role-model—on a bike flying through the sky (many years later I learn he's probably "popping a wheelie"). What you get inside each box of Honey Combs are small license plates to be tied to the rear of your bicycle. The license plates are much smaller than the real thing but they have a nice metallic heft to them. I keep getting MICHIGAN, a very simple plate, white letters on a black base. I trace the word with my finger. I speak it aloud, getting most of the sounds wrong. MEESHUGAN.

When I have a thick stack of plates, I hold them in my hand and spread them out like playing cards. I casually throw them on my dingy mattress, then scoop them up and press them to my chest for no reason. I hide them under my pillow, then ferret them out like a demented post-Soviet dog. Each plate is terribly unique. Some states present themselves as "America's Dairyland," others wish to "Live Free or Die." What I need now, in a very serious way, is to get an actual bike.

In America the distance between wanting something and having it delivered to your living room is not terribly great. I want a bike, so some rich American (they're all rich) gives me a bike. A rusted red monstrosity with the spokes coming danger-

ously undone, but what do you want? I tie the license plate to the bicycle, and I spend most of my day wondering which plate to use, citrus-sunny FLORIDA or snowy VERMONT. This is what America is about: choice.

I don't have much choice in pals, but there's a one-eyed girl in our building complex whom I have sort of befriended. She's tiny and scrappy, and poor just like us. We're suspicious of each other at first, but I'm an immigrant and she has one eye, so we're even. The girl rides around on a half-broken bike just like mine, and she keeps falling and scraping herself (rumor is that's how she lost her eye) and bawling whenever her palms get bloodied, her head raised up to the sky. One day she sees me riding my banged-up bicycle with the Honey Combs license plate clanging behind me and she screams "MICHIGAN! MICHIGAN!" And I ride ahead, smiling and tooting my bike horn, proud of the English letters that are attached somewhere below my ass. Michigan! Michigan! with its bluish-black license plate the color of my friend's remaining eye. Michigan, with its delicious American name. How lucky one must be to live there.

Vladimir Girshkin, the struggling young immigrant hero of my first novel, *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, shares a few characteristics with me, notably his penchant for counting money in Russian, which, according to the book, is "the language of longing, of homeland and Mother, his money-counting language." And also, I might add, the language of *fear*. When the ATM coughs out a bushel of cash or I am trying to perform a magic trick with my checkbook, trying to glean something from nothing, I leave English behind. American dollars, the lack of which

constitutes an immigrant's most elemental fright, are denominated entirely in the Russian language. And so with shaking hands, the fictional Vladimir Girshkin and the all-too-real Gary Shteyngart count a short stack of greenbacks, a record of our worth and accomplishment in our adopted land: "*Vosem-desyat dollarov . . . Sto dollarov . . . Sto-dvadtsat' dollarov . . .*"

Many of my dreams are also dreamt in Russian, especially those infused with terror. There's one, for instance, where I emerge into a sepia-toned Manhattan, its skyscrapers covered by the chitinous shells of massive insects with water-bug antennae waving menacingly from their roofs. "What has happened?" I ask an unmistakably American passer-by, a pretty young woman in a middle-class pullover.

"*Nichevo*," she answers in Russian ("it's nothing"), with a bored Slavic shrug of the shoulders, just as I notice a pair of insect-like mandibles protruding from the base of her jaw. And I wake up whispering *bozhe moi, bozhe moi*. My God, my God.

And when terror informs my waking world, when an airplane's engines for some reason quit their humming mid-flight, when a big man with murder in his nostrils turns the corner and walks right into me, I think *Za shto?* What for? Why me? Why now? Why am I to die like this? Is it fair? It's a question addressed not to the Heavens, which I'm guessing are fairly empty of God, but to the Russian language itself, the repository of my sense of unfairness, a language in which awful things happen inexplicably and irrevocably.

After we come to the States, many of my more adaptable fellow immigrants quickly part ways with their birth languages and

begin singing Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean" with remarkable accuracy and hip-swinging panache. The reason I still speak, think, dream, quake in fear, and count money in Russian has to do with a series of decisions my parents make when we're still greenhorns. They insist that only Russian be spoken in the home. It's a trade-off. While I will retain my Russian, my parents will struggle with the new language, nothing being more instructive than having a child prattle on in English at the dinner table.

Our house is Russian down to the last buckwheat kernel of kasha. When English does make its appearance, it is scribbled on a series of used IBM punch cards from my father's computer classes. I handle the punch cards with the same awe as I do the Honey Combs license plates, intrigued as much by their crisp, beige, American feel as by the words and phrases my father has written upon them, English on one side, Russian on the other. I remember, for some reason, the following words—"industry" (*promishlenost*), "teapot" (*chainik*), "heart attack" (*infarkt*), "symbolism" (*simvolizm*), "mortgage" (*zaklad*), and "ranch" (*rancho*).

The second decision is mostly economic. We cannot afford a television, so instead of the Dukes of Hazzard, I turn to the collected works of Anton Chekhov, eight battered volumes of which still sit on my bookshelves. And when we find a little black-and-white Zenith in the trash can outside our building, I am only allowed to watch it for half an hour a week, not enough time to understand why Buck Rogers is trapped in the 25th century or why the Incredible Hulk is sometimes green and sometimes not. Without television there is absolutely nothing to talk about with any of the children at school. It turns out these loud little porkers have very little interest in "Gooseberries" or "Lady with Lapdog," and it is impossible in the early 1980s to hear a

sentence spoken by a child without an allusion to something shown on TV.

So I find myself doubly handicapped, living in a world where I speak neither the actual language, English, nor the second and almost just as important language—television. For most of my American childhood I have the wretched sensation that fin-de-siècle Yalta with its idle, beautiful women and conflicted, lecherous men lies somewhere between the Toys "R" Us superstore and the multiplex.

Around this time, I start writing in English with gusto. I write for the same reasons other curious children write: loneliness, boredom, the transgressive excitement of building your own world out of letters, a world not sanctioned by family and school. The latter becomes my target. While I patiently wail my "*Sh'ma Yisrael*," praying that God will indeed take mercy on me, that he will make the young Hebrew School Judeans stop teasing me for my cardboard sweater and my anxious, sweaty brow, for being a bankrupt Russian in a silver-tinseled American world, I also decide to act.

I write my own Torah. It's called the Gnorah, an allusion to my nickname Gary Gnu, the name of an obscure television antelope which I have never seen. The Gnorah is a very libertine version of the Old Testament, with lots of musical numbers, singing prophets, and horny eleven-year-olds takes on biblical themes. Exodus becomes Sexodus, for instance. Henry Miller would have been proud.

The Gnorah is written on an actual scroll, which I somehow manage to type up sideways so that it looks like an actual Torah. I hit the IBM Selectric keyboard with a giddy, nerdish excitement. Thousands of sacrilegious English words pour out in a

matter of days, words that aren't inflected with my still-heavy Russian accent. Impatiently, I blow on passages deleted with white-out, knowing somehow that my life is about to change. And it does. The Gnorah receives wide critical acclaim from the students of the Solomon Schechter Hebrew Day School of Queens—a relief from the rote memorization of the Talmud, from the aggressive shouting of blessings and counter-blessings before and after lunch, from the ornery rabbi who claims the Jews brought on the Holocaust by their over-consumption of delicious pork products. The Gnorah gets passed around and quoted. It doesn't quite make me acceptable or beloved. Only owning a twenty-seven-inch Sony Trinitron and a wardrobe from Stern's department store can do that. But it helps me cross the line from unclubbable fruitcake to tolerated eccentric. Tell me, is there anything writing can't do?

The Gnorah marks the end of Russian as my primary tongue and the beginning of my true assimilation into American English. I want to be loved so badly, it verges on mild insanity. I devote most of my school hours, time that should be spent analyzing Talmudic interpretations of how a cow becomes a steak, writing stories for my classmates, stories that poke fun at our measly lives, stories filled with references to television shows I barely know, stories shorn of any allusion to the Russia I've left behind or to the pages of Chekhov patiently yellowing on my bookshelves. A progressive young teacher sets aside time at the end of the English class for me to read these stories, and, as I read, my classmates yelp and giggle appreciatively, a great victory for the written word in this part of Queens.

But soon my pre-adolescent writing career is cut short. My

family is not so poor anymore and can afford to shell out one thousand dollars for a salmon-colored twenty-seven-inch Sony Trinitron. The delivery of this Sony Trinitron is possibly the happiest moment of my life. Finally, in a real sense, I become a naturalized citizen of this country. I turn it on, and I never turn it off. For the next ten years, I will write almost nothing.

I have begun this essay with a sleepless trip to contemporary Russia, a trip bathed in the anxious sounds of the mother tongue, and I have come to the end with a child's farewell to the language that once choreographed his entire world. But memory, which in the Russian sense is often just a flimsy cover for nostalgia, begs for a different ending.

So I will conclude elsewhere, at a place called the Ann Mason Bungalow Colony in the Catskill Mountains. Even the poorest Russian cannot live without a summer *dacha*, and so every June we, along with other Russian families, rent one of a dozen of little barrack-style bungalows (white plaster exterior with a hint of cheap wood around the windows) not far from the old Jewish Borscht Belt hotels. My mother and I sneak into the nearby Tamarack Lodge, where Eddie Fisher and Buddy Hackett once shared a stage, to witness giant, tanned American Jews lying belly-up next to an Olympic-size outdoor pool or sleep-walking to the auditorium in bedroom slippers to watch Neil Diamond in *The Jazz Singer*. This is probably the grandest sight I have come across in the ten or eleven years of my existence. I immediately vow to work hard so that one day I can afford this kind of lifestyle and pass it on to my children (the Tamarack Lodge has since closed; I have no children).

Back at the Ann Mason Bungalow Colony, we survive without

stationwagon and head for one of the nearest towns where, along with a growing Hasidic population, there is a theater that shows last summer's movies for two dollars (giant bag of popcorn with fake butter—fifty cents). On the return trip to the Ann Mason Bungalow Colony, sitting on each other's laps, we discuss the finer points of *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*. I wonder aloud why the film never ventured into outer space, never revealed to us the wrinkled fellow's planet, his birthplace and true home.

We continue our Russo-American discussion into the night, the stars lighting up the bull's-eye of the anti-Semitic hay field, our grandmothers mumbling the next day's rations of kasha and sweaters in their sleep. Tomorrow, a long stretch of non-competitive badminton. The day after that, Marvin will bring out the funny papers and we will laugh at Beetle Bailey and Garfield, not always knowing why we're laughing. It's something like happiness, the not knowing why.

Boswell and Mrs. Miller

James Campbell

When James Boswell took the low road from Scotland to London in 1762, to seek his fortune and eventually to write the *Life of Johnson*, he required no passport to cross the border; but as he went, he imagined his whole being receiving the stamp of improvement. Boswell's overwhelming purpose in life was to better himself; in order to do so, he was ready to slough off the rough Scots "Jamie," and admit the politer, anglicized James. In London, however, Boswell encountered an unexpected and unwanted reminder of home on the southern air. "Mrs. Miller's Glasgow tongue excruciated me," he wrote in his journal for March 17, 1763. "I resolved never again to dine where a Scotchwoman from the West was allowed to feed with us."

The Scotchwoman from the West must have made an awful din. Boswell suggests a genteel table upset by a barking ruffian. We notice that, while he "dines," Mrs. Miller "feeds." It comes as a surprise to learn that Mrs. Miller was the wife of Thomas Miller, Lord Advocate of Scotland, the country's highest ranking legal figure. She would have been considered, and would have thought herself, a member of the gentry. Boswell's annoyance and embarrassment tell us that it was common for respectable society figures in mid-eighteenth-century Scotland to speak a

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