Shto eta? – learning Russian, teaching English

BOB BLAISDELL

A further tale of language and education in New York City

I WALKED with Tatyana from the main gate of our college to the *El Greco Diner*, across Sheepshead Bay, where she had to wait for her bus at the 'stantsya': well, she called it that, although my Russian dictionary says *avtobusa ostanovka*. She hadn't been in class that afternoon, so (as I was exiting the campus, baseball cap on to keep off the sun, ear-buds connected to my iPod, as I listened to and was repeating Russian adjectives), I turned and saw a young woman with dark hair who looked like Tatyana beside me. And she it was.

'Hi,' I said, and took out the ear-buds.

'Oh, hi. I wasn't in class just now.'

'I know!'

'I had to do something – something during the time of the class. I'm sorry.'

'It's okay. I forgive you.'

I don't know if my running into her changed her route, made her decide to forego the bus near the college at the far reaches of Brooklyn, but she said, 'You're walking that way?'

'Yes.'

So we walked down Oxford Street, the sun bright on the leaves. She explained that there had been a leak in her apartment this morning, into her room (it had rained a lot last night) and that her whole day had gone on like that.

'That's what you were taking care of?'

'For your class? No, my mom took care of everything at home. I had other things.' She shrugged. 'So, how's your Russian?'

This is her customary question. I usually answer, in Russian, *bad* or *terrible*.

I broke into a sweat. This is the same breaking into a sweat any time I plunge into speaking Russian. I took a breath and said, *Ya vizhu dver*.

I had gone over my journalism students' observation notes that morning, and I insisted, as usual, that they stick to purely sensory observations. No thinking, no evaluations. Just observe as if they're artists or video-cameras. So that's why, I think, I started with 'I see'… But Tatyana scrunched up her eyes and nose and questioned me in Russian. She didn't understand.

We were walking under the light-green leaves, past the white trunks of the trees, and I repeated, *Dver? – Dvera?* It didn't seem likely that a plural form of *dver* would ring a bell better than the singular – when, after all, I reflected, weren't the plural and singular forms of *tree* the same? Or was that *forest*? Is *forest* the same as *tree*?

I stopped and used the tree on our left as a prompt. I patted it. She said something in Russian, perhaps 'bark?' (*kora*), but I said *nyet*,

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and indicated the whole thing by patting it and pointing upward. *Ne dver?* I asked.

Surprised, she said, *Deryeva?*

Dereyva! I repeated. *Deryeva!* (I still do not have this straight! I am looking at the dictionary, and am blocking out the spelling. I have to fight myself to get the spelling right. If I don't know *tree*, how can I take part in a Russian conversation? How can I think I know *anything*? We continued down Oxford to Shore Boulevard, and I was happy when she crossed to the Sheepshead Bay embankment with me. *Naberezjnaya*. 'Embankment.' It comes in the first or second paragraph of Chekhov's *Dama s sabatchkoi* ('The Lady with the Dog'). I don't know if Tatyana has a dog. She has a fair, long face – not wide and round like many Russians. She has dark hair, dark eyes. I don't know if she usually wears lipstick, but she does sometimes, but I don't remember if she was now. She is fine-featured, thin.

I told her I had 'found' – had searched and sweated looking for – the word in the brain, trying to slip down the cracks to my mouth the word 'found': *nashla*. I said *nashla*, but she corrected me, perhaps to *nakhodil*. *Ya nashla Dvatsat Stalya*.

Last week Tatyana, in our five-minute Russian lesson in the classroom, had told me about a book, a *komedia*, which I had thought would be a *play* – a Soviet-era comic play – *Dvatsat Stalya*. Instead, it's a novel, a comic novel. I found it in the library, and in one of its editions it is the text for a book of intermediate-level Russian. There are grammar and vocabulary lessons for each page or so. I don't think the novel's complete. I read the introduction, so I learned who the authors were. The names Tatyana gave me are, I think, the pen-names. So I told her I had found *Dvatsat Stalya*, and she shrugged!

Kniga! I said. ('Book!') And by that word I meant to suggest the *book*! The book! – The book you recommended I read! I had told her I was only reading the authors I already knew – Tolstoy and Chekhov – and she had asked if I liked *komedia*. 'Sure,' I said. And she said this was her favourite. And now she had forgotten the name of her favourite book that she herself had recommended!

I said, *Dvatsat Stalya! Dvatsat Stalya!*

Maybe my tongue tripped, maybe I said something like *divenatsat* one of those times. *Divenatsat?* she said. She still didn't know it. Then it dawned on her: *Divenatsat Stulyev? – STUlyev?*

Da!

What was that mistake like? In sports, it was like throwing the ball in the perfectly opposite direction it's supposed to go or kicking it when it is supposed to be thrown. In speech it's like saying 'All Fight Eleven' for *World War II*. I'm exaggerating word-wise, but not with my feelings. I was mortified. But when I was writing it down on the train a half-hour later, 'Twenty Tables' for 'Twelve Chairs', I laughed out loud. After I had understood, Tatyana made as if she were going to sit. *STUL-ya*. Then she waved along an imaginary waist-high plane *STAL-ya*.

I said *Ponimayu!* ('I understand!') I was amazed at myself. I was in a test and everything was a blank, and it was not that I knew the words, but that the test was revealing that I didn't know or couldn't retain anything I knew. I said, in Russian, something like 'Not know number.' She corrected my grammar and changed the case of number to fit its relationship to *know*. I repeated what she said, or tried to, and then she started in on counting: *adin, dva, tri, cheteriye…*

I felt indignant. I mean, I know numbers! I know how to count! I mean … I mean, I'm not that stupid! But by 'five' I was saying the numbers aloud, nodding as if this was oh, so simple, and then at nine I got stuck. I couldn't remember *nine*. Tatyana, as if sneaking an answer to a slow classmate, whispered it to me, *dyevit*! And I said *Dyevit!* and then paused a long moment or two for the number ten before I choked out *Dyesit!* And I went up through nineteen and twenty and thirty and forty and fifty and then she had to help me at ninety, *Divenosta*, which I complained was 'different', and she said no, it wasn't. I finished with a hundred, and she said, complimenting a three-year-old, *Kharasho!*

And I was, at least partially, a three-year-old – proud *gordei* – and, partially, a humiliated forty-six-year-old.

Shto eta? she asked, pointing past me toward the bay.

Vada! I said, as if in a joke. Yes, I know what 'water' is! But I recovered and asked what, in Russian, is 'bay'?

She told me, and I repeated it twice, but by the time I was writing down my notes about this walk I had forgotten it.

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I pointed to our left, over the houses of Manhattan Beach, where the Atlantic is. *Morye*.

Morye? Nyet. *Okean*.

Okean?

Da. – Morye molodaye. (The 'sea' is smaller; the ocean is *okean*.)

She pointed now at the boats. There were many boats tied up in the bay that afternoon. Or at the birds – I couldn't tell. But I answered with 'boat': *lotka*. And she seemed surprised – *Da!* – and therefore delighted that I knew. Before she could compliment me I said *yakta*, for another boat: 'yacht'. And she said, *Da! Yakta! Ochen kharasho!* Maybe some three-year-olds wouldn't know that word, but it's a cognate, and I think she realized that.

And then as we walked, she pointed at the seagulls in the *bukhta* – or *zaliv*.

Shto eti?

I thought and thought, and after I discarded the word for 'song' (*pyet*), which was blocking my view of the word *bird*, I remembered: *ptetsa*.

She granted me that, I think, but (she wanted to know) what are they, more specifically than 'birds'? I didn't know. She told me, and I've remembered this one (it's now Sunday, all of three days later), *chaika*.

What I didn't realize until now, even though the context should have told me, is that *chaika* is singular.

After I repeated *chaika*, I asked, *Drama Chekhov chaika?* That's exactly what I said. Three unconjugated words and she had to put them together in a sentence. *Da*, and said Chekhov's name correctly: something like *KheiHOV*.

It was a beautiful afternoon. It had been a beautiful cloudy morning: *krasivii oblitchni utra*. Now the wind was down and the sky was blue. The temperature was in the low 60s. Tatyana was wearing a turtleneck and jeans.

The little birds – ones we couldn't see right now, she explained – they are *varobei*.

'Sparrows?' I asked in English.

Da.

I asked then, as we were approaching the Ocean Avenue footbridge, in Russian, 'Where do you live?' I thought she might live in the swanky Manhattan Beach neighbourhood on our left. She corrected my grammar (I don't remember what I said or needed to correct), and answered *Starrett City*. That's a middle-income developed community near Canarsie and Marine Park, I think. Not very far as the *chaika* flies, but complicated to get to by foot or bus. I pointed across Sheepshead Bay.

Tam, she said. ('There'). And added, *Nedalefko*.

I took that to mean 'far', but when I wrote it down just now I remembered it meant 'not far'. I remember having Spanish conversation classes with a friend, and when I was clever I would talk and direct the conversation myself rather than wait for questions. I did that now.

I told Tatyana there were vocabulary words in the textbook of *Divenatsat Stulyev*, and I repeated the three I remembered – had deliberately set out to remember, leaving the other seventeen for the next day (that hasn't yet come). *Vyek*, I said ('century'), then tried *us'vi*. I nodded to her that she understood. I stroked the moustache of my beard, and she said *us'i*. I realized right away that I had turned the *bi* vowel into the *v* consonant, which it resembles. I repeated that a couple of times, and then went on to the third word, *vprochem*, which I said, now in English, '"But" or "however".'

'However,' she ruled.

To our left, in the bay towards Coney Island, there were white swans in the water. She told me, *LEEbel*.

As we walked over this wooden bridge, my favourite part of this school-day walk, I asked, in something like this form, 'Man-swan and woman-swan different name?'

No, the same name for both, she said.

And ducks, she said, pointing ahead, to the right, in the water towards the far end. *Utka*.

I nodded. Oh, yes. As if I remembered that word. I had certainly heard it several times, but I couldn't have come up with it if she'd asked me.

I asked her about *Pyotr i volk*.

Again, she shook her head. I was awfully sure I had 'Peter and the Wolf' correct. I said, *Compositor Prokofiev*.

Now she knew – at least Prokofiev. I was trying to make an association to the duck – the duck in *Peter and the Wolf* – but I don't think we connected there.

She pointed out that with ducks there was a name for male and female. She told me the male name of the one with the coloured head

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(which I of course knew was male, but she told me so, anyway) and the other one (I didn't understand what she was saying except that the other was the female), and I can't find in my dictionary the names for male and female ducks. *Utka*.

We stood for a few seconds leaning on the railing at the end of the bridge looking down at the water, at the birds, in the sun. Some pigeons landed on the bridge. *GOLub*, she said.

Golub, I repeated.

GOLub.

GOLub.

We started again, and as we approached the crosswalk, Tatyana said, Perihod.

I questioned and she explained, pointing, and saying it as we looked at it. *Perihod*, she said.

Perihod, I repeated.

She pointed at the street. *Ulitsa*.

Da, da. Perihod. Ponimayu, I said.

We crossed at the far side of Sheepshead Bay Road instead of where I usually cross, toward El Greco Diner.

She was trying to explain something, pointing, but I said, pointing at the barbershop, *Prikmaher*.

Da, she said.

Now she stopped. Her bus, she explained. Her bus-stop was across the street.

'Oh!' I said. I thanked her and then, hands together to my chest as if I were blessing her, I said, *Bolshoi spisiba*.

I was so happy. There was also the sudden relief. It was over! The pressure of speaking and listening and the panic of confusion were gone. And I was happy. Maybe the way *she* felt – some of the time at least – at the end of an English lesson. ■

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