

Book 4. The Russia Years

(1)



Ask any child in America and they'll tell you: the English alphabet is so well-organized it rhymes. In fact they will probably sing it:

A B C D E F G,
H I J K L M N O P,
Q R S T U V,
W X Y and Z.

But Russian words look oppressive when written with English letters and so an entirely separate alphabet was created. Like its English counterpart, this other alphabet starts out simply enough:

А Б В Г Д Е Ё ...

Then along the way it gets flustered:

... Ж З И Й ...

Gathers its composure:

... К Л М Н О П Р С Т У Ф ...

Only to lose it completely in the end:

... Х Ц Ч Ш Щ Ъ Ы Ь Э Ю Я.

The result of this is that even Russians are hard-pressed to remember the correct order of their own alphabet. In frustration some letters have been cast away; others remain, though they are seemingly irrelevant.

Fortunately, an alphabet is not about its parts, but about how it works as a whole. The important thing is that all the letters are there — in some order — and that if you start with *A* and progress slowly and patiently, letter by letter, and if you don't let the disorder discourage you, then you will eventually end up at *A*.



(2)

A lot of important things can happen in six and a half years. For example:

#1. I find an old Russian coin which I tuck into my wallet. I decide that it will be my link to this new land and vow that as long as I am here the coin will stay with me. In less than a week I have lost my wallet, and with it, the coin.

#17. Although I do not smile or gesticulate, men in black leather jackets accost me with offers to buy rubles, fur hats and, sometimes, black leather jackets; instead, I buy a Russian-language edition of *Anna Karenina* which I carry conspicuously in public and which I conspicuously do not read.

#53. A man shows up at my apartment with my lost wallet. All the money is gone, but the coin is still there as are my passport and the yellow piece of paper. It is the last time I will part with the coin. I offer the man a reward, but he refuses. His nose is red, his breath smells of swallowed vodka. He is about my age and he is unmarried. His name is Vadim.

#78. Turning down a side street not far from the Kremlin I am surprised to meet a black bear lumbering along the sidewalk. Traffic has stopped; a policeman with a whistle is trying to maintain order by yelling and pointing. Suddenly, the bear rears up on his hind legs and roars angrily; bystanders on the sidewalk, in a fright, scurry to get out of its way. But I do not panic. Instead, I walk right up to the bear. I smile at him and toss him a jar of peanut butter which he paws clumsily before smashing open. Gratefully, he eats the contents, his jaws chomping loudly, his lips smacking. I pat his head. He licks my hand. I stroke his tongue. This continues for some