

Soviet Children's Lore

by Landon Pearson

Almost every week during my years in Moscow I sat down at a desk in the Residence to write home to my children. The window I faced looked out over the street and every so often I would stop and stare at school no. 59 across the way.



Soviets lavish great affection on their children, and bundle them up against the cold.

One morning, before school started, my attention was caught by two small boys standing near the curb looking mischievous. As soon as a girl appeared one of the boys swung around abruptly and thrust a jointed wooden snake into her face. She jumped back in alarm and then ran giggling into the school. Small boys teasing small girls. What a classic theme! I thought of all the variations that I had witnessed during our postings, the Canada of my youth, and my children's childhoods and drew comfort from the universality of children's lore. Such lore consists of riddles and rhymes, jokes and teasing, charms and magic games. As soon as children start to school they discover that their status among other children will be determined by their actions and their personalities rather than by their position in the family. The vast amount of lore that each generation of children passes on to the next is a resource that children need, to feel in control of social situations.

Children's lore is abundant in the Soviet Union. As I travelled about I recognized certain familiar elements as in the scene of the boys teasing the girls I described earlier. However, as an adult and as a foreigner, I could not penetrate very far into the children's behaviour. Luckily, there are some Soviet scholars who have been interested in the topic of children's lore. I met one of them, a young woman named Maria Osorina, during a visit to Leningrad. She told me that because her mother was a folklorist she had become conscious of the existence of what she calls the "children's tradition" while she was still young enough to be part of it herself.

The following scenario she told me about seemed very familiar. Children frequently recount horror stories at Pioneer camps or in other residential environments. A well-told horror story is able to produce a delicious (and ultimately consoling) shudder in a group of young children adjusting to a communal setting away from home. The children draw emotional support from one another as they huddle around the story-teller and collectively overcome the fears that the story symbolizes. And where had the story-teller learned the story? Probably from an older child at camp the previous year.

There are two other common expressions of children's lore in the Soviet Union that I have come to know about, both of which have to do, as Osorina writes, with "demonstrating opposition to the 'proper' and frequently overpowering adult world." The first is the popularity of that wide-spread topsy-turvy day known in the West as April Fool's Day and in the Soviet Union as "the Don't Believe Anything Day." On the first of April Soviet children are allowed to play pranks on adults that would be unthinkable at any other time - and they do. The other form is the joke told at the expense of the heroic adult to bring him or her down to size. Somewhat to my surprise I learned of the existence of a whole body of scatological jokes about Pushkin common among ten-year-olds. Of course he is known to have been a man of considerable sexual prowess but who tells that to them?

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