Russian Cuisine in Exile

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PYOTR VAIL and ALEXANDER GENIS

Authorized translation by
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Angela Brintlinger
Yellow Springs, Ohio
June 2017

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Thomas Feerick
Columbus, Ohio
June 2017

Preface

In today's gastronomically obsessed landscape, with chefs competing on television, cuisine blogs proliferating on the internet, food selfies on Facebook, and Julia Child's entire kitchen firmly ensconced at the Smithsonian, this fact seems obvious: Food is culture.

But the 1970s in the United States were not a time of great cuisine. (I know—I still have my great aunt's recipe box from 1975. Canned soup, corn flakes, and marshmallows feature in an alarming percentage of recipes.) When Pyotr Vail (the "yo" in **Pyo**tr is pronounced much as you might hear "YO!" on the streets of New York) and Alexander Genis emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1977, they were surprised at how much they missed the cuisine they had known since childhood, and they were horrified by much of what they found here. The whitest of white breads, priorities of convenience over taste, food whose primary virtue was the speed with which it arrived. They did not really understand American culture, but what they perceived made them long for the habits of their homeland.

After arriving in the United States, Vail and Genis began to work in both newspaper and radio in New York City (among other things writing and presenting stories on the Russian Service of Radio Liberty). They were part of a larger community of writers and artists, including Vagrich Bakhchinyan, Lev Loseff, Joseph Brodsky, and Sergei Dovlatov, with whom they founded the short-lived weekly newspaper *Novyi Amerikanets* (*New American*). What made these émigrés into a true community was their shared level of sophistication and their encoded language of humor and satire, and Vail and Genis wrote with them and for them. A cross-section of Soviet dissident society, brought together primarily from the capitals of Moscow and Leningrad, but repeating the multiethnic nature of their country of origin, these émigrés were Jews, Armenians, Georgians, Russians, often in combination, and their food culture drew on that history.

Vail and Genis were actually from Latvia, but they quickly embraced the New York area as their home. Until 1990 they wrote together, as a team, and their output included such books as *The Sixties: The Soviet People's World* and *Native Tongue*, both of which remain in print today.[1] The authors "separated" after 1990 and continued their own careers. Genis remained in the U.S. while Vail decamped for Europe, where he reported on events including the first war in Chechnya. When the headquarters of Radio Liberty's Russia service moved to Prague in 1995, Vail became managing editor there. He died in that city in 2009 after a long illness.

By leaving the Soviet Union, Vail and Genis joined a larger Russian diaspora, what has been called Russia Abroad or the "Russian emigration" (as though that were a place, not a description), participating in the so-called "third wave" of Russian emigration after 1917.[2] After the Revolution over a million Russians—the "white émigrés" or first wave of emigration—fled the Bolsheviks. Most went to Europe, though some ended up in Harbin and Shanghai, China, and a few even landed in New York. The "second wave" included secondary émigrés, as refugees in Europe moved on to the UK or United States, as well as those who fled the Soviet Union during and after World War II.

Gleb Struve was one of those itinerant émigrés who left Russia after the Revolution. From Paris to London to Berkeley, he spent several decades moving house, only to establish himself eventually at the University of California. From there he wrote his *Russian Literature in Exile* (1956).[3] His choice of vocabulary—not émigré literature, not diaspora literature, but literature that has been driven out of its homeland, cast out, banished, ostracized—reflected the spirit of his enterprise. None of the literary figures he wrote about, or so Struve implied, left their homeland of their own free will. Instead they had been expelled, and their mission in exile was to maintain, protect, and nurture their national literature, in order to be ready at any moment to return home and take up pride of place in Russia again. That didn't happen, of course, until the 1990s.

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1 *60-e: Mir sovetskogo cheloveka* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1988) and *Rodnaia rech'* (Tenafly, NJ: Hermitage, 1990).

2 For an encyclopedia of the emigration, see John Glad, *Russia Abroad*.

3 For V&G's joke on this account, see note on *Russian Sex in Exile* in chapter 12. *Russkaia literatura v izgnanii* was published by the Chekhov publishing house in New York and YMCA Press in Paris.

When Vail and Genis wrote their book there was still no going home. But by pairing "cuisine" and "exile," Vail and Genis spoofed Struve's somewhat more melancholy project. Yes, we have had to leave our homeland, they seem to be saying, but let's have a little fun in our new environment. Soviet dissident culture of the 1970s and 1980s is characterized by the tone that pervades this book: satirical and yet gentle, affirming and at the same time bitter, hilariously deadpan and vividly poignant. And, I might add, quite difficult to translate.

We have striven mightily to capture that sensibility in this translation. When Alexander Genis looked over our work he wrote, "I rejoiced every time I saw that you were translating not word for word but smile for smile, as Dovlatov used to beg his translators to do." We were delighted too with that response. And while it would be possible to simply present an English version of *Russian Cuisine in Exile* with no explanations at all, that seemed irresponsible. Instead we have supplied an extensive set of commentaries. At first Genis was put off. "I was horrified to see over two hundred notes," Genis said, "but then I realized that this was in itself a kind of game, a serious one that will allow Slavists and other crazy people to immerse themselves in culturological research."[4] That is exactly our goal.

Vail and Genis's book demonstrates a yearning for the time of their youth, when loose tea had not yet been sacrificed to the rapid convenience of teabags and processed cheese was a favorite chaser for a bout of drinking. Yet even as it functions in an *à la recherche de la cuisine perdue* way, with its self-deprecating humor, self-mockery, and all the plays on words, it refuses to take nostalgia too seriously. It is a cultural artifact of a time, and a place, and most importantly an attitude.

Like *Russian Literature in Exile*, with which *Russian Cuisine in Exile* surely resonates, this book documents and organizes historical material, in particular habits, preferences, and memories of the Soviet kitchen. (In fact, the title in English could easily be *The Russian Kitchen in Exile*—we think about Dovlatov's book of short stories, *The Suitcase*, in which each item he brought with him receives its history and backstory. Here the entire kitchen is unfolded in a New York apartment.) And like the peripatetic Struve, Vail, Genis, and other third wave émigrés made stops in Europe on the way to North America, which is why the Spanish paella and other recipes and ingredients unknown in the Soviet Union make it into the book.[5]

Importantly, this book is not a cookbook, not merely a reference book to check how to make borscht or *ukha* (fish soup), but a repository of a vanishing culture, a means of protecting and sharing that culture. It is also a record of a particular attitude, perhaps unique to dissidents or to émigrés—we loved our country, and we hated it, and the best way to explore and process those feelings is through humor. And finally, it *is* a recipe book. Pull a copy down off the shelf of any émigré and it will open magically to favorite dishes. *Russian Cuisine in Exile* was read, and it was used, by Russian émigrés across the world.

Ethnic restaurants have always sprung up in immigrant communities in the United States—consider Philadelphia's Italian South Philly or the Chinatowns of New York and San Francisco, or Greektown in Chicago. When we think of Russian cuisine in the United States today we usually imagine Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. Some in that wave of Soviet émigrés to which Vail and Genis belong were among the founders of those very restaurants and shops.

At the same time, Soviet cooking was home cooking, not restaurant fare—and émigrés needed help to remember the dishes they were used to and to figure out how to prepare them in their new consumer landscape. Russian-language newspapers were one of the ways that the far-flung Russian diaspora communicated with each other—the literary version of Little Odessa. Each place had its own paper, or even competing papers, and writers published wherever they could. When a fellow émigré suggested the column title "Russian Cuisine in Exile" for the Los Angeles newspaper *Panorama*, Vail and Genis were in business.

As they thought about food and culture, Vail and Genis quickly came to understand that their own mutual palate was formed from a completely unusual menu. One part nostalgia for Soviet canned goods and public catering options, one part Jewish tradition, one part cosmopolitanism that extended to the

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[4] Genis compared our effort to the "Literary Monuments" series published by the Soviet and then Russian Academy of Sciences beginning in 1948 that presents the world's "great books" with academic commentaries. He personally believes that there is no such thing as too much commentary. We hope you will agree!

[5] As Masha Gessen explains, by the time in the early 1970s that the Soviet Union finally granted Soviet Jews the right to leave—hard-fought and won by Soviet Zionists—"the Soviet Union had long severed diplomatic ties with Israel. This meant, among other things, that a plane could not go directly from the Soviet Union to Israel, and neither could the Jews." While in Vienna or Rome, non-Zionist Jews "broke ranks" and "declared their intention to seek asylum in the U.S.—or Canada, or Australia" (*Where the Jews Aren't*, 141). David Bezmozgis, another Latvian Jewish refugee from the Soviet Union, chronicled his family's decision to choose Canada in the novel *The Free World*. I myself, after giving a scholarly lecture at Middlebury College, was treated to a Spanish paella concocted from Vail and Genis's recipe—a dish prepared for me by Sergei Davydov, a Russian émigré born in Czechoslovakia [AKB].

spicy foods of the Caucasus, plus a generous serving of the adventurous spirit that had made them dissidents in the first place, that palate led them to brave the unknowns of emigration and prompted them to experiment in the kitchen. Food, they discovered, was a major part of who they were: the comfort of family recipes, the habitual products of Soviet everyday life, the Russian and Ukrainian and Jewish and Georgian and Siberian specialties that they had tasted throughout their childhoods and young adulthoods.

The audience for these newspaper columns, and eventually the book *Russian Cuisine in Exile*, was as cosmopolitan as the authors. These Russian readers in exile were political and cultural dissidents, often Jews, and their personal histories involved poverty and deprivation, making do, and creating what we now call work-arounds to the obstacles in their paths. They were cultured, literate, politically sophisticated, steeped in the Russian classics from literature to history to ballet. They were also in desperate need of laughter, and Vail and Genis were just the men to deliver it. Being savvy and smart creators as well as consumers of public taste, Vail and Genis recognized a literary niche when they saw one.

It was thirty years ago, in 1987, that thirty-eight-year-old Pyotr Vail and thirty-four-year-old Alexander Genis penned this book, and it has gone on to be reprinted many times in the post-Soviet era. Now a beloved cultural artifact in post-Soviet Russia and across the world, *Russian Cuisine in Exile* is being translated into English for the very first time.

In the notes to the chapters of this book, the reader will find that the translators begin to refer to Vail and Genis as V&G. We do this for several reasons. First, the style of this book is very personal. It will draw you in as it drew us, and you will begin to feel a relationship developing with the authors. We certainly did, and as with any friends, we groaned at some puns, found jokes or descriptions that had us chuckling for days, and others that left us flat. Vail and Genis came to feel like relatives, like our co-conspirators, as we worked on rendering their clever phrasing, their literary allusions, or their typically Russian aphorisms into comprehensible English. Thus we dubbed them V&G (and when we asked Alexander Genis if this offended him, he assured us that it did not).

(Here we might imagine a scene in which we sit down to a favorite Russian beverage, probably vodka, with accompanying *zakuski* [snacks]. We talk, we laugh, we tell stories, we become inebriated. At some juncture one of us—Thomas, or Alexander, or Pyotr, or even me [though I'm a woman, which carries different connotations in drinking culture]—says, seriously or in jest: "Do you respect me?" In some happy afterlife we may all still get together to have that drink.)

Another reason why Vail and Genis became V&G to us was that we could not tell them apart as we translated—they write as one. Sometimes it seemed as if we could discern a personal voice through the prose, but we could never be sure. Were they conversing? arguing? sparring? speaking with one accent? playing off each other? America has a tradition of pairs of comedians: Abbott and Costello, Laurel and Hardy, Burns and Allen, Cheech and Chong, Key and Peele, and their routines involve physical slapstick as well as linguistic humor. But in Russia it has been literature that teems with partnerships. Kozma Prutkov, Ilf and Petrov, the Strugatsky brothers—this satirical tradition of writing as partners was another thing V&G brought with them into exile.

For the translators of *Russian Cuisine in Exile*, who have ourselves worked as a team, correcting each other, making suggestions, arguing over what we called our "points of contention," the term of affection V&G reminds us of P&V, the husband and wife translation team of Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. Though neither Thomas nor I is a native speaker of Russian, we brought to the project extensive experience in Russian language and culture (AKB), a strong background in British humor (TF), deep knowledge of intertextual references (AKB), fresh eyes and a poetic touch (TF). So while we are not yet ready to dub ourselves B&F, we have had immense fun working together to transfer this comedic duo's philosophical, insightful, and often highly amusing view of the intersection of Russian/Soviet life and the American cultural landscape. We hope you will enjoy the result.

Introduction: Expressions of the Soul[1]

When the Japanese make declarations of love, they place their hand not on their heart but on their belly. They are sure that the soul resides in the stomach. This is why they perform hara-kiri, to set the soul free—which is a rather torturous way to reassure yourself of your own metaphysical being.

A Westerner, when talking about spiritual matters, might thump himself on the chest. If he does, he might feel, in the breast pocket of his coat, a Parker pen, a handkerchief, or even a billfold.[2] He won't find his soul, though, which lies three buttons below. You can grow accustomed to any geographic distance: longitude, latitude, altitude. But the umbilical cord, which ties a man to his home, naturally connects to the stomach, not the heart. Hearts may differ across the world. But no one can dictate to the stomach. Try to explain to the stomach, for example, that avocados are for eating and not just for decoration.[3]

The threads that tie a man to his homeland are many and varied: a rich culture, a mighty people, a glorious history. But the strongest threads stretch from the homeland to the soul. That is to say, to the stomach. These are not mere threads but more like ropes, Manila ropes. You can argue about culture, ethnicity, and history until morning, but can there really be any controversy about dried fish?[4]

They say you can't bring your country with you on the soles of your boots,[5] but you can bring crabs from the Far East, spicy Tallinn anchovies, store-bought layered

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[1] The original Russian, *Dushi prekrasnye poryvy*, is quoted from Pushkin's ode "To Chaadaev" (1818): "My friend, let us dedicate to our country the beautiful outpourings of the soul!" Pyotr Chaadaev was a member of the Tsar's bodyguard in the Napoleonic Wars. After his resignation, he wrote a number of "Philosophical Letters," which criticized Russian culture. Nicholas I declared him insane in 1836. This is thought to be the first use of a diagnosis of mental illness to discredit a critic of the government in Russia.

[2] This translation modifies the "white man"/Japanese contrast of the original; the importance lies in the exoticism of Japanese cultural markers such as hara-kiri. Russians are perhaps closer to the "East"; at any rate, they value the "soul" in a way that Westerners do not. The everyday details here are striking, and the Parker pen is important. In the authors' childhoods a ballpoint pen—especially one that wrote smoothly—would have been a luxury. However, does anyone actually carry a billfold in his breast pocket?

[3] An avocado was quite an exotic food in the Soviet Union, one that must have seemed utterly improbable to new émigrés to America.

[4] Dried fish, *vobla*, here evokes Russian drinking parties where beer is the preferred accompaniment to this appetizer. Russians are tied together by their eating and drinking habits, and differing opinions about other matters pale in comparison to solidarity on this front.

[5] This expression, attributed to French revolutionary Georges Danton (1759–94), dates to the late eighteenth century, considerably before today's border control concerns about whether visitors have been on a farm or in a pasture while abroad.

wafer cakes, "Bears of the North" chocolates, and bottles of Essentuki artesian mineral water (the best is No. 17). A shopping list like this (plus hearty Russian mustard) makes living in an alien land (ooh, and unrefined sunflower oil) better (don't forget those tangy little tomatoes) and more joyful (and round it out with some six-star Ararat cognac).[6]

Of course, even with a spread like this there will still be room at the table for nostalgic memories. Suddenly, with a puff of pink smoke, out swims an aspic costing 36 kopeks, then piroshki with "jam," then "borscht b/m" (b/m means *bez miasa*, without meat, nothing indecent).[7] Also—hot greasy meat patties, bloody roast beef, Strasbourg pie. However, pardon, we've moved from nostalgia straight to the classics.[8] As the prophet of our own scandalous generation, Venichka Erofeev, said, "We are given only one life, and it's necessary to live it so as not to make mistakes in recipes."[9]

Our recipes, naturally, are not taken from the *Larousse Gastronomique* culinary encyclopedia,[10] but they do have one undeniable advantage: they are ours, assembled by the collective mind of the masses and imbued with the spirit of the nation. Can we really leave all that behind?[11] There will always be vegetarians and atheists who assert that the soul does not exist.[12] But, then, why should we bother with people for whom nothing is sacred?

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[6] This sounds like a conversation between the two authors—one, trying to stay on topic, while the other keeps adding more items to the imagined shopping list. "Better and more joyful" evokes the Stalinist maxim: "Life has become better, comrades, life has become more joyful." The juxtaposition of this Stalinist phrase associated with multiethnic bounty (as advertised and promoted, for example, in the 1939 *Book of Healthy and Tasty Food*) onto the émigré's life "in an alien land" makes a good introduction to this book of recipes and essays—nostalgic, but always playful. The shopping list features the flavors of a pan-Soviet diet: Essentuki is in Southern Russia, near the Caucasus mountains, but Ararat cognac comes from Armenia. "Northern" chocolates, far Eastern crabs, and Estonian anchovies mean this list contains every point of the compass across the vast Soviet empire.

[7] As part of medical testing during the resettlement process, Russians—like all immigrants to the United States—were subjected to conversations with doctors and interpreters about b.m. (bowel movements). My own experience explaining about taking samples "*cherez stul*" (or every other b.m.) led to embarrassment and hilarity in sparsely furnished refugee apartments in the late 1980s. Among other things the Russian translation, *cherez stul*, sounded like I was asking the refugees to jump over kitchen chairs [AKB].

[8] These first items are all "proletarian" or everyday items one might find in a Soviet factory or school cafeteria, whereas the last two, "bloody roast beef" and "Strasbourg pie," are upper-class food items from Alexander Pushkin's 1820s novel-in-verse *Eugene Onegin*. Russians of the late Soviet period would know these lines, both because of the culturally conditioned habit of learning vast stretches of Pushkin's novel by heart, and because these dishes were so exotic as to be unattainable and even unimaginable in the Soviet era. We can see the logic as the "hot, greasy meat patties" lead directly into the "bloody roast beef"—but for a Russian reader, the other (also unattainable in the Soviet era) items on Pushkin's dinner menu would also be hovering in his mental background as he read: truffles, pineapple, Limburger cheese. See *Eugene Onegin*, chapter 1, verse XVI.

[9] The transition directly from the "poet-prophet" of the nineteenth century into the underground "prophet" of Soviet dissident culture indicates that the reader should take Venedikt Erofeev's alcohol-infused 1969 novel *Moscow to the End of the Line* (sometimes translated as *Moscow's Stations*) seriously as a vital cultural text. This quote from Erofeev's novel is a parody of another famous line from Nikolai Ostrovskii's classic Socialist Realist novel *How the Steel Was Tempered* (1936), spoken by his protagonist Pavel Korchagin: "We are given only one life, and it's necessary to live it so as not to feel excruciating pain about aimlessly lived years, so as not to feel burning shame about a miserable and trivial past and so that, dying, we can say: All my life and all my strength were devoted to the most wonderful thing in the world—the struggle to free mankind." The Pavel Korchagin line was memorized by all Soviet schoolchildren and was supposed to serve as a moral guide to how they lived their lives; Erofeev's line gives them a different message, a suggestion that they drink heavily, concocting more and more new and cheaper cocktails, which would help to obliterate the effects of official propaganda all around them.

[10] Both an important culinary artifact and, again, something very exotic to the Russian ear. The *Larousse* might evoke *à la russe* to someone unfamiliar with the name, but the next word in French, *gastronomique*, makes it clear that the homonym is only a coincidence.

[11] The "collective mind of the masses" and the "spirit of the nation" are Soviet clichés, but the authors' reluctance to part with them underscores the degree to which Soviet culture remained essential to those who chose to emigrate. And, of course, like many of V&G's borrowed expressions, these clichés drip with irony in their new usage.

[12] The "b/m" [without meat] in the previous paragraph indicates a cheaper soup for a student budget, although its precedent would have been a "fasting" version of beet soup for those who followed Russian Orthodox dietary restrictions. In the Soviet context, diners could not admit to following a religious diet, and yet vegetarianism for V&G is, as we see here, an abomination. So where does religious feeling inhere? Clearly for V&G, it is to be found in cuisine.

CHAPTER 1

The Clay Pot— A Repository of Tradition