

# A Russian Banquet<sup>1</sup>

*Peter Bowbrick*

We were looking round a dirty wholesale market in Rostov, our little group of three World Bank consultants, our interpreter, Tanya, and the group of businessmen who were trying to borrow \$20 million from the bank. I was noting everything, talking to the traders, the customers, and the market staff, while the businessmen looked bored. At about 2 p.m. the market master led us through a little door to the side, and up narrow stairs which cannot have been painted in the fifty years since the market was built. We went into the market master's office, the very basic office of an administrator with almost no paperwork. Then he flung open the door of what seemed to be the boardroom, and ushered us in.

The boardroom table had been covered with a green tablecloth, and was set with a banquet. Piles of caviare, glistening black balls, topped with slices of lemon; olives, black and green; smoked fish; sliced salami; bowls of grapes and fruit. And of course, alcohol, the green, half litre vodka bottles with their crown corks, cans of beer, wine and champagne.

'It's always like this when they are trying to borrow money,' muttered Jim. 'Banquets every evening and often all afternoon.'

We sat down, scattered round the table, one Russian, one person from the World Bank mission. Someone, one of the businessmen's minders not a waiter, came round the table, opening the vodka bottles and filling our little shot glasses.

At the head of the table was the Regional Governor we had met for our courtesy visit this morning. He rose, rang the glass for silence, and spoke.

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‘This afternoon I am the Tamadar. I am here to enforce the rules for the banquet. The first rule is that the Tamadar is always right.’

Tanya translated this. She was no longer the translator conscientiously translating the market woman’s complaints about the facilities for selling cheese; she was communicating the Tamadar’s excitement, and infusing her own excitement; the party was beginning.

‘Now,’ continued the Tamadar, ‘we will start by drinking a toast to our guests and our enterprise.’ He raised his glass, motioned to us all to stand up and reached out his glass to clink it with Helmut’s. We all clinked glasses with our neighbours, and drank.

‘Zah vahsheh zdahrovey’ - ‘Cheers’ the one bit of Russian we all knew.

They threw back the vodka, and turned their glasses upside down. I sipped my vodka, and put it down. Everybody looked at me astounded, then with fake shock said ‘Kontrol, Kontrol’.

I looked at Tanya for enlightenment. ‘The first toast is a Kontrol. You must drink it all. It is the rule,’ she said, and watched with a wicked smile, as I threw it back. It hit my stomach and seemed to go straight to my head.

I sat down and started to eat. The caviare was excellent, of course, but I loved the smoked sturgeon, which was full of flavours, and far, far better, than any smoked salmon. I was a bit taken aback when Jim, announced that sturgeon was a class II endangered species, and stopped eating it. Then he said that so was cod, so I thought ‘What the hell’ and went back to my food. There were little plates of fish liver, and I tried it - I had had a tiny bit of white salmon liver at the Mafiosi restaurant last night, and was blown over by it: it filled my head with a wonderful aroma. I was hoping that this was the same delicacy, far more expensive than caviare, but it turned out to be cod liver, which is ok, as long as you do not mind the taste of cod liver oil.

Then they came round filling our water glasses with sparkling mineral water, from green, half litre bottles looking just like the vodka bottles beside

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them. I quickly filled my vodka glass with water, then, just to cover myself, poured myself a glass of beer. Jim had warned me against the wine.

‘Yes, they do produce good wine, though most of the best areas of the USSR are in places like Moldova and Ukraine which are now independent from Russia. It is difficult to tell whether what they give you will be very bad. And the imported wine, the same.’

Yes, when I was working in Lithuania, their biggest industry was printing labels for wine and spirits, which they imported from anywhere, labelled and shipped to Russia.

‘The champanski,’ he continued, ‘has nice bottles, nice corks and nice labels. They tell me that it was good in the old days. But now it is the very cheap, sharp white wine, with CO<sub>2</sub> bubbles put in by machine. Avoid it.’

Helmut tapped his spoon on the table for silence, then stood up.

‘I should like to propose a toast to our hosts’, he said portentously, raising his glass.

‘Kriminal!’ shouted the Tamadar, ‘You have made a criminal offence. You cannot propose a toast without asking the Tamadar. For that you shall be punished. Kontrol.’

So poor Helmut had to throw down a glassful of vodka.

‘That is good,’ said the Tamadar. ‘Now we shall be pleased if you would propose a toast.’ He gestured to his minder to fill Helmut’s glass. Poor Helmut had to make his little speech after three vodkas in five minutes.

Then it slowed down. The next two toasts, to friendship, and to the People of Rostov, were not Kontrol toasts, so I was able to just sip the water in my vodka glass.

Then one of the businessmen came in, one of the junior men who had been busy fixing up our programme for tomorrow. He greeted the Tamadar formally, and the Tamadar counted on his fingers. One, two, three, four. The minder brought along a glass and a bottle of vodka, and the businessman had

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to drink four glasses, Kontrol, one for each toast he had missed. Mind you, he did seem to enjoy it.

Then the Tamadar proposed a toast to our country. 'It is a Kontrol toast' said Tanya. 'A toast to your country is always a control toast.'

Five or ten minutes later Helmut proposed a toast in reply.

The second course came in, piles of it. What I really liked was the fried sturgeon. It was excellent as fried fish goes, but it is not in the same league as the smoked.

For a few minutes there was silence, as we ate. Then the Tamadar rose and proposed a toast to the ladies. Every seventh toast is a Kontrol toast to the ladies, he explained.

We carried on with our meal. Jim, down the table from me, was silent and withdrawn, not getting into the party mood at all. The Tamadar caught his eye and asked him how many children he had.

'Four,' was the answer. There was loud cheering round the table. The minder came up with the vodka bottle, and Jim had to drink a glass for each child.

Tanya explained what the Tamadar was doing. His job is to see that the party keeps just drunk enough to enjoy itself. If it slows down, he has a couple of Kontrol toasts to get things going. If it is getting too excited, he has a longer pause between toasts. This prevents alcoholism. They are shocked at the alcoholic foreigners who keep drinking between toasts. She looked at my beer.

'It is alright,' she said, kindly, 'The rules for toasts and Kontrol toasts do not apply if you are drinking beer or wine, just vodka.'

The Tamadar made a long speech about the history of Rostov, and the origin of the Cossacks. They are descended from criminals and serfs who escaped from Russia. They were allowed to keep some sort of independence as long as they provided the Cossack troops for the Russian army. He then proposed a toast to the Cossacks.

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Five minutes later, he stood up and called on me to propose a toast. I was caught unawares, and slightly drunk, and said what I had been thinking.

‘I was extremely interested in the history of the Cossacks. I think this is the first time I have heard anybody trying to borrow money from the World Bank, start with the claim that they were descended from criminals.’

There was a shocked silence, and I caught myself, then recovered marvellously, I thought. ‘As it happens I am from Nottingham, where our hero was just such a man, an outlaw and a criminal, Robin Hood. So we are brothers. And now: a toast to the outlaws.’

Tanya kept up a constant stream of talk, interpreting for half a dozen conversations at a time, keeping up the momentum, the excitement. Somehow, she managed to eat a bit between sentences, and to have some vodka.

Two young men sat opposite me and we were getting on fine, me speaking in English, them in Russian. Every time there was a toast, we would clink glasses, and throw it down if it was a Kontrol toast. If it was not, they would try to tease me into drinking down, down.

‘Kontrol! Peter! Kontrol!’ and they would empty their glasses and turn them upside down.

It was only after the toast to the ladies that they noticed me filling my glass with water. They looked shocked and started chanting, ‘Vodka, Peter, Vodka.’ Fortunately, a toast came up then. We clinked glasses and drank down, down. By then they had forgotten.

They noticed twice more, later, but they were pretty drunk by then, and could not concentrate on anything by them. About the second toast to the ladies, that is after fourteen toasts, they vanished, to be replaced by two new, relatively sober young men, who took on the task of trying to get me to drink every toast as though it was a Kontrol toast.

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I think it was about the time of the third toast to the ladies that Jim slipped quietly under the table. I think it was drinking to his four children that had got to him. He was gently eased out by two of the bodyguards, and taken to his hotel room.

‘Ah, he is a true Russian, that one,’ said the Tamadar, admiringly.

I remembered though, Jim warning me against the vodka, earlier that day, saying that it was poisonous, that 50,000 Russians a year died of vodka poisoning - mainly methyl alcohol contamination - while millions died of excess alcohol. I hoped he would be ok.

About the time of the fourth toast to the ladies, the banquet drew to a close. We had a formal speech from the Minister of Education, who seemed to be doing an impression.

I do not know how anybody else on the team felt, but I did not feel that the banquet, or the way I felt next morning, increased the chance that I would lend the hosts \$20 million.