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## Preface

“What mean?” The problems faced by English-speaking Russians have been part of my life as long as I can remember. Though both my Russian émigré parents spoke English very well, their pet errors were ingrained in their speech for life. Born in St. Petersburg, my mother spoke four languages fluently, and her English was remarkably free from most of the common grammatical errors made by Russians. Yet to the end of her 97 years she would come out with “What mean?” as a rendering of «Что значит?» followed by the word or expression she needed: “What mean, ‘expatiate’?” My equally quadrilingual and highly educated father was from Kiev, and his excellent English was also frequently studded with such “Russianisms” as “the soul hurts” or “not possible.”

“Russian English” remained in my life well after I had left my parents’ home. For 35 years I spoke Russian at home with my Muscovite husband, Boris Rabbot, whose literary, flawless Russian never failed to astound our émigré friends. Although after he emigrated in 1976 he never went back to his native country, Boris preserved the purity of his native language until his death in 2011. His great sensitivity, his refined politeness and courtesy, however, were frequently not in evidence when he had to express himself in English. “No, it is not allowed” or “It is not necessary to do this” sounded jarring to his American counterparts. And he was no exception. Over and over I heard highly educated and sensitive Russian émigrés sound abrasive or rude, affected or snobbish, when they were in fact anything but that. The reverse was also true, for due to their linguistic and cultural gaps many of my American academic colleagues and students, to their dismay, unwittingly but deeply offended the feelings of Soviet acquaintances with utterances that savaged the Russian language.

That is what inspired me to write this book. During my ten years of teaching Russian in American universities, decades of working with Russians in the US and with Americans in Russia, and twenty-five years as a simultaneous interpreter at the United Nations, I became increasingly concerned by such linguistic-cultural misunderstandings. Speakers tended to assume that many expressions and idioms in their native language would work in literal translation, occasionally with disastrous results. Americans speaking Russian in the USSR during both the Soviet and the post-perestroika period frequently wound up in

awkward situations, and the same held true for Russian visitors, delegates, tourists or émigrés speaking English in the US.

It is my hope that this book will help students of Russian and English, teachers, translators and interpreters, business people and tourists, émigrés, and all those who daily find themselves obliged to use both Russian and English to avoid such errors. These kinds of linguistic-cultural flubs are also highly disruptive to the spouses in Russian-American marriages, as I often saw while interviewing couples for *Wedded Strangers: The Challenges of Russian-American Marriages* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 2001). This book is a revised and updated version of *Русские проблемы в английской речи: Слова и фразы в контексте двух культур*, published in several editions by R.Valent.

I consulted with Boris on almost every example in this book, checking with him on the original forms of the expressions distorted by Russian native speakers when speaking English. Like so many of my other books, this is a joint one. It is to his memory that this book is dedicated.