

“God will forgive you,” marks the end of a truly Russian holiday, Maslenitsa. Sunday, February 18th is Forgiveness day and the last day of Maslenitsa (or Pancake) week. Yesterday, I had the wonderful opportunity to attend a celebration at IKS (the school where we teach our English lessons). I have posted a page in the photo section of my website with photos from this event and some links to information and history about this holiday. Here is a short summary I found at the University of North Carolina website. It gives a brief overview of the holiday:

Maslenitsa

"The mummers - house serfs dressed up as bears, Turks, taverners, and fine ladies - formidable and comic figures, bringing with them a feeling of gaiety and the cold from outside, at first huddled bashfully in the anteroom. . . . Half an hour later there appeared among the other mummers in the ballroom an old lady in a farthingale - this was Nikolai; Petya was a Turkish girl, Dimmler a clown, Natasha a hussar, and Sanya a Circassian with burnt cork eyebrows and mustache."

--- Lev Tolstoy, War and Peace

In the early springtime, during the week we call Mardi Gras or Carnival (the week before Lent), mummers would again go out into their villages. This time was called maslenitsa, which comes from the Russian word for butter (maslo) because dairy and animal products are not eaten for seven weeks afterward, and it was by far the most exciting holiday time in the entire Russian year. In addition to mummary, those celebrating would build enormous bonfires, often on top of a hill, so that the fire could be seen from all parts of the village; everyone was especially excited to see it eventually come flying down the hillside in a blazing spectacle. Building fires may seem a strange way to celebrate a holiday, but fires were an essential part of maslenitsa, as they were believed to welcome the warm spring sun, which the celebrants expected to drive away the winter darkness and bring a rich growing season. Other favorite activities included overeating and game-playing. Special buckwheat pancakes, called bliny, were the most popular food for this holiday (probably because their round shape could remind people of the sun), and they were devoured in huge quantities. Sometimes the people would build a big scarecrow stuffed with straw that they called maslenitsa and would burn it the night before the beginning of Lent in a final festive celebration before the start of the seven-week fast. Maslenitsa was a very lively and colorful time: people would decorate their horse-drawn sleighs with colorful ribbons and bells and go for rides in the snow, which still covers the ground in Russia in early spring. Both sviatki and maslenitsa seem to have nothing to do with Christian holidays, and this is because they were ancient folk rituals that the Russian peasants had celebrated long before they became a Christian people. After the Russians adopted Christianity in 988, they incorporated their old pre-Christian holidays into their observance of Christian rituals.

For more information and specifics, you can visit the links on the photo page:

<http://kshold.home.insightbb.com/photos/maslen.htm>

The students at IKS had a wonderful performance where they dressed in costume and performed a skit to represent the festivities and traditions of maslenitsa week. Then, they paraded the maslenitsa (the straw scarecrow) through the snow behind the school building and burned it. Then they played games in the snow before returning to the cafeteria to partake in eating blinies.

(Russian pancakes). Our teacher even gave me a large stack of blinies to take home. We took them with us to our Friday club meeting and shared them with the group.

Our club meeting went well. The two younger boys who have been coming regularly since I arrived were there again. Kyle and Irina did several games and discussions on love and what it means to love one another in honor of Valentine's Day. It went well. Ani was there as well as three of the college age helpers – Uri, Sam & Katuyah.

While our club meeting went well, our class at IKS did not go very well this week. The kids were rambunctious. Since we are guests in their class, they don't see us as having authority over them and the teacher leaves the room when we arrive. Last week, they thought the lesson was too easy. This week, I think the lesson was too hard so they didn't want to focus. Maybe next week we can find the happy medium.

Sunday we had guests after church. Igor Malenkov (or something like that), his wife and their little girl came over and had lunch with us. I made lasagna. It turned out very well. I met Igor the first year I came to Russia for English camp. He was helping that year. They now live 2.5 hours from here by plane and were in town for a couple of weeks for his job. They left to go back home today. It was fun to see him again and spend time with the family. He sends his greetings to those who will remember him. (That would be Bill, Darby and Stephanie.)

Tuesday's staff meeting was productive as was our brainstorming and planning time on Thursday. We have a meeting tonight for those interested in being helpers at the spring English Camp. We have been praying that the helpers will have a spirit of servant hood for the camp, not just a fun time to get away and skip their classes for the week. We will probably have more at this meeting than our meeting last week for the summer camp.

A fun thing I did this week was attend a birthday party for Rina on Wednesday. I'll try to get some of those photos posted as well. It was a surprise for her. Her mom fixed lots of food. Much of it was salads and fruit. Russian salads are plentiful here – everything from potato salad to cabbage salad. A large group came from our church and a few others I didn't know. It was a fun time with games and visiting.

We had a couple of big snowfalls this week. It warmed up to just below freezing and then the temperature dropped dramatically yesterday. Since the maslentsi celebration was mostly outside, my fingers, toes and face got very cold in the hour we spent outside.

I need to run off to our meeting tonight. Thank you for your continued prayers and financial support. I wouldn't be here without you!

In Christ,
Kerri

“You are my witnesses,” declares the Lord, “and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe in and understand that I am He.” - Isaiah 43:10