

Something from Home

- by Eric Schempp

There are a few types of food that I couldn't get while living in the rural Russian town of Uglich. I couldn't get things such as peanuts, peanut butter, salted pretzels, taco shells, many seasonings, various flavors of coffee and many other things. Such delicacies could only be obtained in bigger cities such as Moscow and whenever I was there, I was sure to load up on the things I couldn't get elsewhere.

But one day, something very special and out of the ordinary happened. As I meandered through one of Uglich's more modern (but still not Western) grocery stores, I came across what looked like a bottle of something that reminded me of home. I didn't have a clue what the label said, but the little speckles sporadically distributed throughout the white sauce had me in shock. The bottle was safely stored behind a glass case, as was every food in every store in Uglich, regardless of the price. The only way to get your hands on a sausage, tomato, dumpling, or bean sprout was to ask a clerk for assistance. As was the norm for all the foods in the store that I wanted, the bottle containing the speckled white sauce was situated on the lowest shelf of the glass display case. I had to kneel, bend, twist, and contort my body in various ways in order to get a good look at it. Once I was able to get my body in a suitable position to look at the mysterious little bottle, I plastered my face against the glass casing and quizzically stared at it for what seemed like an eternity trying to determine what the contents were and reassure myself that I was, in fact, not dreaming.

I wasn't quite convinced that what I was gawking at was indeed a treasured delicacy from home. I needed help and I needed it fast. One of the first things I noticed, aside from the fact that the white sauce had desirable qualities, was that there was only one bottle left. I had to immediately find Leah and Gina, two fellow Peace Corps Volunteers that I went shopping with, in order to verify my find.

I ran over to the sausage counter where Leah was bent over in a strange and twisted manner trying to pick out which particular type of sausage she was going to take that day. I told Leah of my find and she quickly left the sausage department to check it out. We passed Gina on the way to confirm my find. She was in the cheese department

and was standing in a long line. Naturally, she was a little reluctant to leave the cheese line, since that would mean that she would have to start over at the end and she didn't know how many cheese crazy babushkas would get ahead of her. But I insisted that she see what I had found and she reluctantly came with us.

I took Leah and Gina to the glass case with the mysterious spackled white sauce. Leah's jaw dropped and Gina's eyes widened.

"You have got to be kidding me," Leah said.

"Do you think that it could be it?" I asked.

"It does have similar qualities," Gina said.

"Yes, it does," Leah said, "but it could be some other concoction."

We all twisted our bodies and bent over to get a better look. Leah, who was fluent in Russian, looked for some clue on the vague label to see if it was, indeed, what we thought it might be, but she couldn't recognize anything. The only option we had left was to solicit the help of a clerk. After a few minutes a clerk came over and was surprisingly friendly.

"What is that?" Leah asked pointing.

"Do you want to try it?" the clerk asked in return.

"Sure," I blurted out not knowing how exactly we would go about trying the mysterious speckled white sauce.

The clerk ripped off the top of the bottle and while holding it, reached her arm across the counter and said, "Here, try it."

"What do you mean," Leah asked unsure of what she was supposed to do.

"Stick your finger in it," the clerk said while looking at us like we were idiots.

We laughed nervously, hesitated, and laughed some more.

"You do it," Leah said.

"No, you do it," I said to Gina.

"No way, I am not sticking my finger in that" she said, "I don't know how many other fingers have been in it, and besides, it was your idea, Eric." While we jostled back and forth, the clerk sat there holding the bottle of speckled white sauce across the glass case. Eventually, she became annoyed with our childish behavior and blurted out, "Just put your finger in it!"

We determined that Leah would be the best person to first stick her finger in it since she was fluent and could better follow up with questions. She mustered up the courage, extended her pinky finger, and shoved it into the bottle. We waited holding our breath.

“It is ranch dressing!” she cried. I couldn’t believe it.

“You have got to be kidding me!” I yelled ecstatically and immediately shoved my finger into the bottle. Gina followed without hesitation. We were so busy talking about the fact that Uglich now had ranch dressing that we completely forgot about the clerk.

“Well,” she said interrupting our chatter, “Do you want to buy it or not.”

It hadn’t occurred to us that the option of *not* buying it was available. It confirmed what Gina had suspected earlier. The bottle could have been opened for numerous other curious people. We immediately dove into a debate about how many other pinky fingers had eagerly scooped ranch dressing out of that same bottle.

But the fact of the matter was that it didn’t matter. It was ranch dressing and we didn’t know if we would see such a thing in Uglich again.

We turned back to the clerk and said, “Yes, we will take it.”

I took the bottle of ranch dressing home and put it in my refrigerator. But I had trouble eating it. I imagined various sizes and shapes of pinky fingers scooping out a taste of ranch dressing. Eventually, I just threw it away.