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On being translated into Russian

by [John Derbyshire](#)

On the pleasures of fellowship at the margins of literary life.

This all began some weeks ago with an email out of the blue. “Russian translation of PRIME OBSESSION,” declared the subject line. The sender was identified as Alexei Semikhatov. *Prime Obsession* is a book I published five years ago, an attempt to give a popular account of a great unsolved problem in higher mathematics. The book was more successful than a book of that kind has any right to be, and there had already been translations into several languages.

I was pleased to know of this Russian translation. A sentimental Russophile by inclination, in my college days I had an all-too-short exposure to the Russian language, of which I have retained very little more than an ability to sound out words in the Cyrillic alphabet. In the spirit of the late Bernard Levin, who had great fun with the names of Soviet dignitaries (“Trapeznikov—what a daring young man *he* must be!” ...

John Derbyshire is a freelance writer living on Long Island.

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