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"It's All an Adventure"

Book Review: *Without the Banya We Would Perish* and more...

When I wrote *Sweat* 45 years ago, at the height of the Cold War, I ended my chapter on the Russian banya by writing:

Unlike the Finnish sauna, Russian steam bathing in America has been limited mostly to the Russian-Jewish immigrants and, for political reasons, never became popular here.

If the history of the early 1900s had been different, if Russian folklore hadn't been concealed behind a dense political curtain, the banya might have become a household word in America instead of the Finnish sauna.

Banya in the 21st Century World

The Cold War is long over and sure enough the banya is well on its way to becoming as popular outside of Russia as inside. Russian public baths in the US, for example, are more popular than ever, servicing both the traditional Russian immigrant community and passionate newbie's. In San Francisco, the co-ed Archimedes Banya opened in 2011 and quickly became a popular multi-generational, multi-cultural, hangout. Founded by Mikhail Brodsky, a Russian emigrant, Archimedes offers an authentic Moscow style banya, as well as a variety of other types of sweat baths, and a Russian café. There are also popular public Russian-style bathhouses found all over the US. For example in Seattle (Banya 5, Spa Odessa, and Downtown Banya), Boston (Dillon's Russian Steam Bath), New York (Russian & Turkish Baths on E. 10th Street, plus several more.) Chicago (Red Square Bath House, formerly Division Street Baths) and Dallas (Russian Banya). Canada and Europe have their share of Russian style public bath houses as well.



Mikhail Brodsky at Archimedes banya.

This summer, while shooting an episode of [Perfect Sweat](#) at Burning Man in the Nevada desert we documented three popular Russian banyas in operation, Art of Steam, Banya Camp, and 8-Bit Bunny.



Filming the banya camp, Art of Steam, at Burning Man.

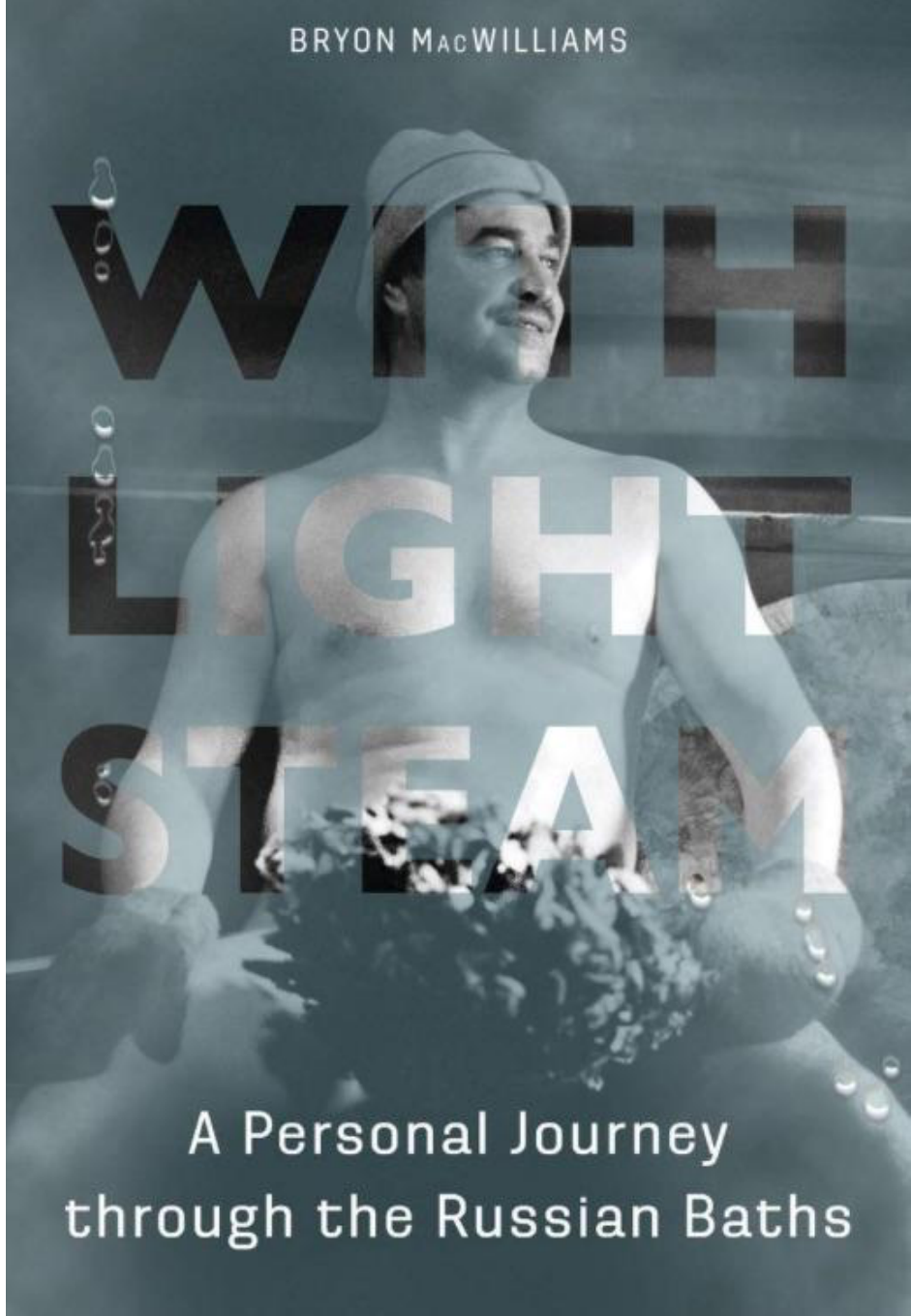
The Banya in Western Literature

My historical research into the banya relied largely on the salacious observations of European outsiders passing through Russia who marveled at the sight of men and women cavorting together naked in the banya, and Christian missionaries who despised pagan practices and portrayed the banya in their writing as a kind of devil worship. In the 70s I had little access to banya references by locals partially because of the east / west communication barrier and from my lack of comprehending the Russian language. My personal experience with the banya was limited to a long weekend in Leningrad on a tourist visa.

Serious attention in the West

In the last few years the banya is finally getting the serious attention it deserves in the English language from Westerners who have lived extensively in Russia and speak the language.

[With Light Steam](#), written by my good friend Bryon MacWilliams (Northern Illinois University Press 2014), is one of the first in-depth views of the Russian bath in English. Bryon's personal odyssey celebrates his twelve-year love affair with the Russian banya and Russian culture. As a journalist, Bryon traveled all over the former Soviet Union and quickly learned that any understanding of Russians and their culture begins-and ends-in the banya. Bryon's book is a great read and I highly recommend it.

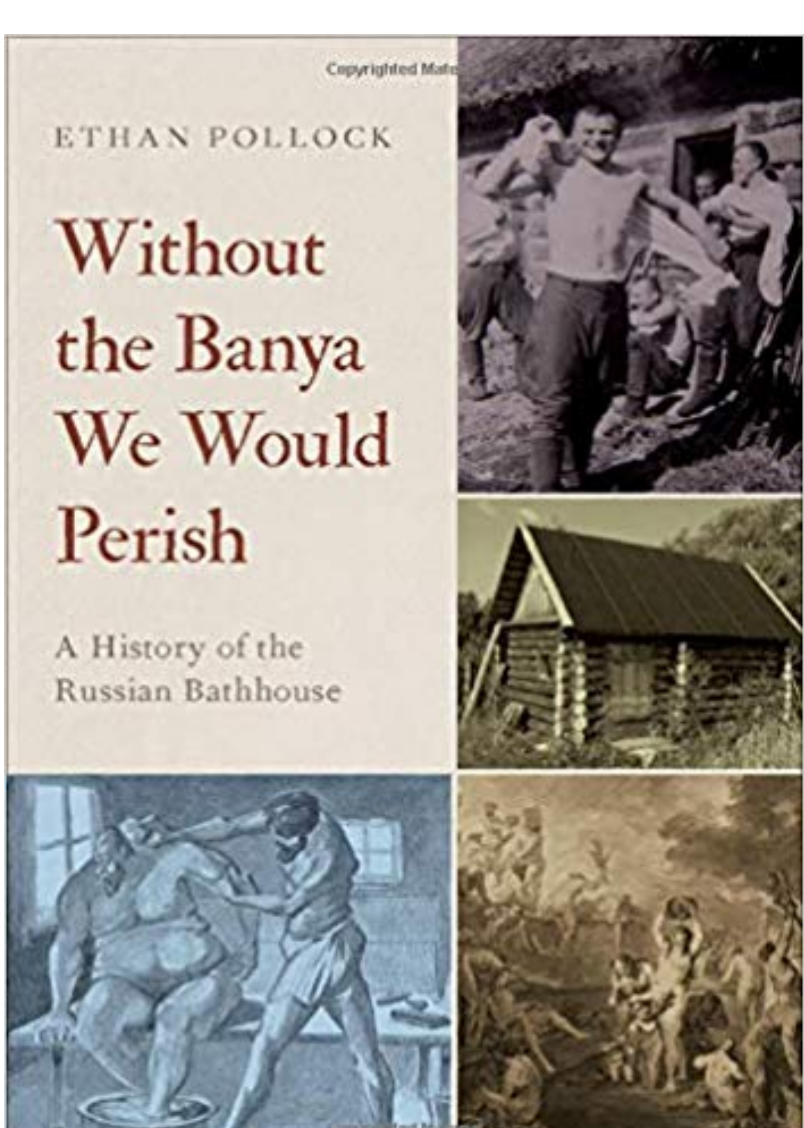


The latest book to bring the story of one of the world's most passionate bathing cultures to the West is scholar Ethan Pollock's, [Without the Banya We Would Perish. A History of the Russian Bathhouse](#) (Oxford Press 2019). Pollock's detailed study fills a huge gap in the West's historical knowledge of the Russian style of bathing. Pollock lived in Russia and speaks fluent Russian. His book cites over 1000 sources and offers over 38 pages of references. Call me a sweat nerd, but with every page I felt like a kid in a candy shop. I love this book and applaud Pollock for pouring his heart and soul into this important subject.

Pollock's book traces the beginning of banya culture from pre-history nomadic tribal use to today, a span of thousands of years of nearly uninterrupted popularity. His foundational book even reaches outside the borders of what we now call Russia and is full of deep insights into understanding the demise of bathing in Medieval Europe. I always thought the influence of the Church and fear of disease led to the declining popularity of the medieval bath, but it turns out that the introduction of linen underwear also has a lot to do with it: washing cloth was a lot less controversial than washing the body.

A Source of Inspiration

The book is also a source of inspiration. Time after time, throughout history the banya faced opposition, early on by the church and later by reform minded modernists. But the banya always persevered. Pollock cites a time in March, 1932, at the time of the outset of a catastrophic famine, when experts convened in Moscow to discuss the future of Soviet bathing. On one side were advocates of the shower, an industrialized form of bathing that had recently become popular in Europe and the US. "Some of the technical experts who had recently toured Germany's bathing facilities," Pollock writes, "concluded that showers were easier to operate, allowed more people to clean themselves in a shorter amount of time, and were more sanitary...The defense of the country [they argued] called for the building of showers, not traditional banyas."



Their argument fell on mostly deaf ears. The banya was too solidly ingrained in the popular culture. Even in the cases when the government managed to build shower installations, they were largely ignored in favor of traditional banyas.

As a side note, during the turn of the 20th century, in the United States, my hero J.J. Cosgrove argued in his book, [Design of the Turkish Bath](#), that the steam bath should be the public bath of preference and not the shower. Unfortunately, his argument suffered a different fate than what happened in Russia. (Cosgrove's 1908 book has been reproduced and is now once again available [for sale](#).)

The Banya in 21st Century Russia

The latest challenge to the banya came soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union. "Many banyas became places for wealthy New Russians and gangsters to gather," explains Pollock. "Luxury, not spiritual or physical health, was the point." Opposition to this decadence was swift. Writers and journalists decried the corruption and positioned the banya as a place not only to clean the body but to nurture the soul and create a healthy atmosphere for everyone. (The reality, of course, writes Pollock, was the banya always had its negative aspects but now it was possible to talk about it openly.)

Today in Russia, where the majority of the population enjoys indoor plumbing, the banya is no longer necessary for hygiene. But nurtured by a long history, encouraged for it health benefits, and advocated by leaders such as Putin himself as a place to "heal and to rejuvenate oneself" the banya continues to define and guide modern Russia. What a great story!

Show Your Support

For both MacWilliams and Pollack their books are obvious labors of love. Show your support by ordering their books from your favorite independent bookstore, or follow the above noted links to buy them from Amazon. And by the way, here is a [link](#) to the material I wrote on the banya for *Sweat* 45 years ago. The material on the web is free. If you prefer, an [ebook version](#) is also available.

Perfect Sweat in Russia

Last winter we filmed an episode of [Perfect Sweat](#) in Russia which will stream along with other episodes in 2020. Our co-host and guide was the charismatic Anna Artemyeva, whose extremely popular blog [nude.ru](#) promotes the banya and a healthy lifestyle. Unfortunately, at this time, it's only in Russian but we are encouraging Anna to add an English version.



Anna with our crew and curious onlookers.