

MY OXFORD DIARY

(fragment)

How did the idea of writing these notes of journey come to me? The idea occurred to me quite unexpectedly and was gradually implemented. I arrived in England to study English for three weeks. My teacher Elai How did the idea of writing these notes of journey come to me? The idea occurred to me quite unexpectedly and was gradually implemented. I arrived in England to study English for three weeks. My teacher Elaine offered to do homework every day after lessons and describe everything interesting that happened during the day. After a week of work I saw first outlines of overall picture. And in the end of the third week it really turned into the diary of my Oxford experiences. Having seen the results of our joint work, Elaine suggested that we publish my diary, as in England such epistolary style enjoys popularity. She was sure that the readers would be interested in seeing their country through the eyes of a creative foreigner. Later, back in Kiev, I finished the Epilogue and added my sketches. And now this little book is in front of you.

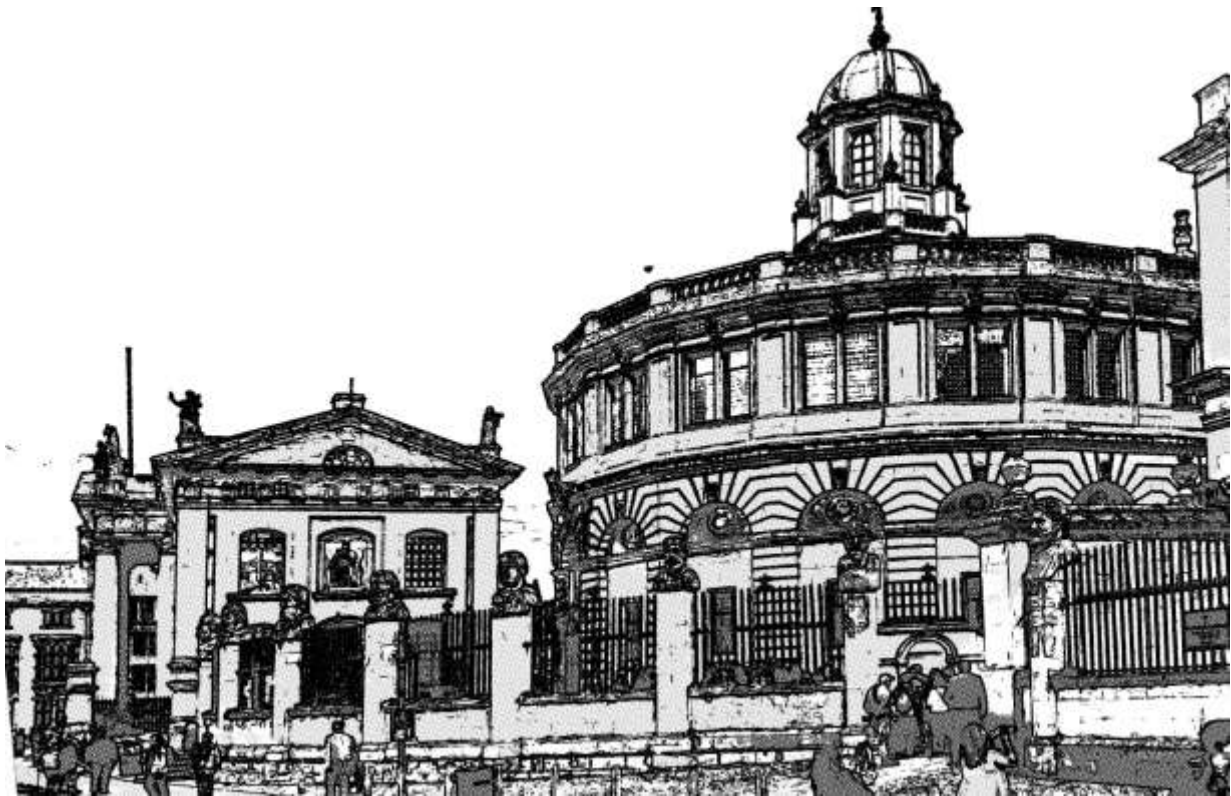
Winston Churchill, the famous English aristocrat, writer and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, was right saying that writing a book is a whole adventure. At the beginning it is nothing more than fun, but then the book turned into lover, wife, master and, eventually, tyrant. Therefore, there were no such powers that would stop me from writing this book.

It is very weird: I am writing my book in English.

All my life I've dreamed to learn English, but something more important would always come up. Besides, in my former country – the USSR the spheres where the English language could be applied were rather limited. Maybe that is why I didn't force myself to study it.

That is my explanation to my laziness. Now the situation has changed. Nowadays I often attend biennale, architectural symposiums, where if you are able to speak fluently the language understandable for everyone, you can be communicative and make friends with interesting people.

English language for me today is a means of learning and widening the range of my interests, including professional ones.



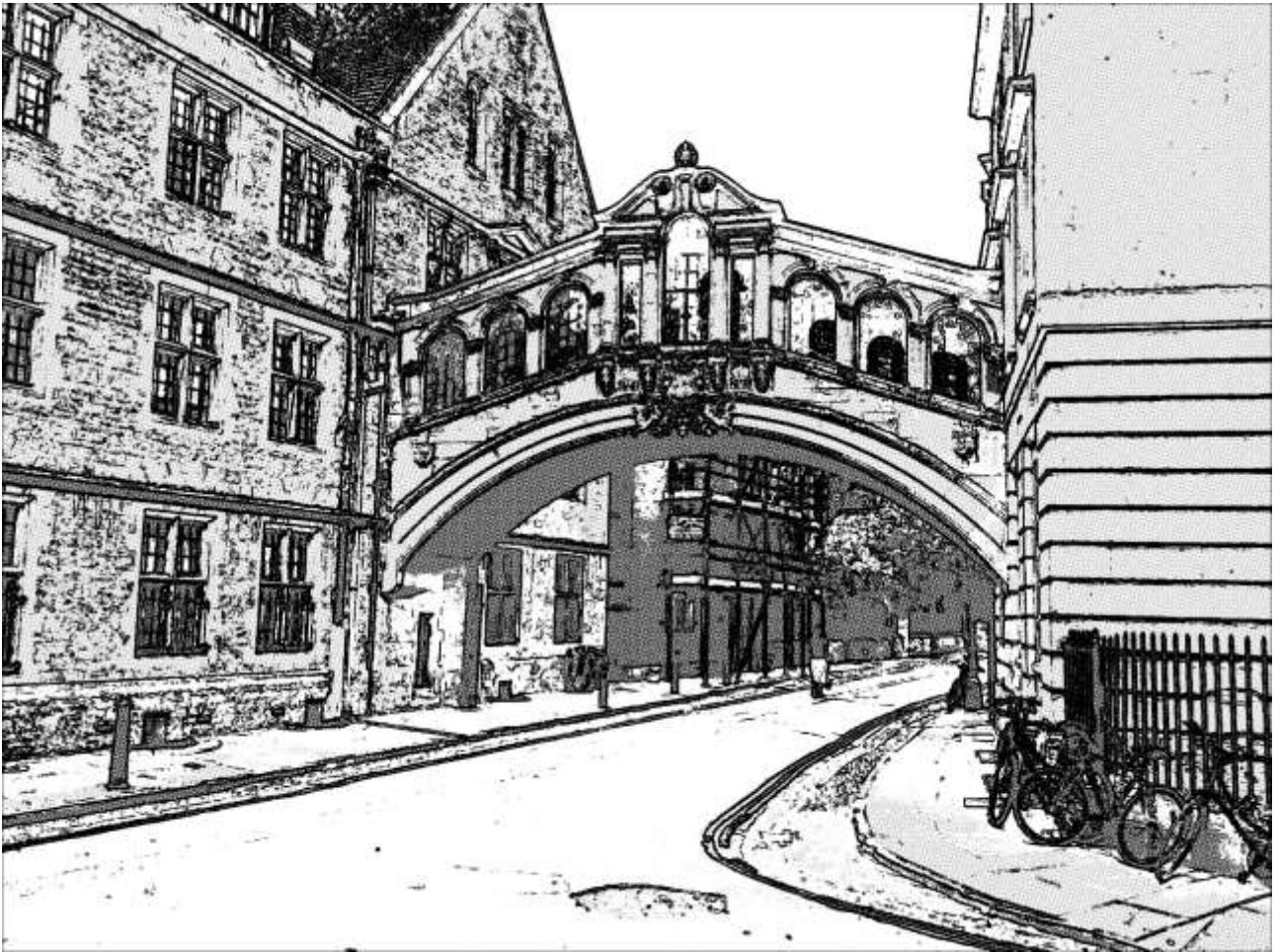
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Apart from that I have another additional stimulus in learning English - that is a new opportunity to give lectures and share my professional knowledge with wider audience, including students.

Amusingly, almost all my life I was using the knowledge of English that I got from first to fifth grades. Frankly, it was a Kiev secondary school #57 with advanced learning of English. At that time the wife of the First Secretary of the Communist party of Ukraine used to teach there and many important events of the Republic and its capital were held within the walls of this school. I remember how on the Cosmonautics Day, April 12, 1965, at the festive all school assembly, being a 1-st grade pupil, I gave a bunch of flowers to the second cosmonaut in the world Gherman Titov

Students of our school were always invited to participate in different TV and radio features for children. The building of the Republican Television and Radio was located nearby. I remember myself in the role as a TV presenter of a children's programme devoted to school hobbies.

However, this cultural and intellectual feast of life was a bit realigned when my parents got a new apartment in the district on the outskirts of the city and it took me an hour to commute to school. For this reason I was transferred to another school for «workers' and peasants'» children. If at my previous class I used to study with children of diplomats and officials of different class, then my new classmates were the children of military men and workers.



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It so happened that later in my life I managed to do with the minimum knowledge of the English language that I got until the fifth grade and I have never learned the language since that time up to now even though I finished school, graduated from institute, underwent postgraduate programme.

The incident which occurred 15 years ago proves that pretty well. When I arrived in Toronto it turned out that my luggage had been lost somewhere. And in an hour I had to depart from another terminal to Edmonton. In the stressful situation I managed to recall what I had been taught 45 years ago and I succeeded in finding my luggage, find the bus that took me to my terminal and I even drank a sedative tumbler of whisky.

When I finally made up my mind to make an effort and try to learn English, I, naturally, had no doubts that I needed to go to England, the land of Shakespeare and Beatles, and to choose between Cambridge and Oxford – two historical, cultural and scientific centres of native speakers, rich medieval architecture. And, of course, I wished to stay in the family of a qualified teacher for personal training.

My friends helped me find the Albion Education school in Ukraine, which found me Living Learning English in UK, which met all my organizational requirements and

to whose staff I feel deep gratitude.

Of course, I was lucky. According to Conan Doyle who put his words to the lips of Sherlock Holmes, « I say luck, but I wouldn't have met it on my way, if I haven't been looking for it».

I spent three weeks of studies in Oxford in the company of great people – Elaine, my teacher and her husband Patrick. They are intelligent, delicate people, teacher of English and French and German languages respectively by profession. I was pleased to find at their home a library, in the collection of world classical literature the books in the English language belonging to prominent Russian writers: Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Mikhail Bulgakov, Konstantin Paustovsky. I was proud to note that the two last authors are my countrymen – Kievites.

Elaine and Patrick are a beautiful couple with 46 year term or joint conjugal life that gave them 4 handsome sons.

The cozy 2-storey townhouse, interior design made with love. There are book cases everywhere in the house, a lot of them of different bric-a-brac, souvenirs from different parts of the world, paintings by the son, who is designer, and, of course, pictures of children and grandchildren. From the windows of the living room one can have a view of a small patio with decorative trees, flowers and a place for rest and barbecue. Between my lessons I enjoyed a cup of Ceylon tea sunbathing in a cozy patio of Foggy Albion. Once, after a drizzle, the rainbow smiled at me and I understood that the strength from above supports me.

Listening to emotional stories of Patrick I could easily imagine how all the big family gathers at parental house at the great holiday Merry Christmas: parents, son #1 with wife and kids, sons #2, 3, 4 with girlfriends. They all seat at big table in the living room, savoring very delicious and well-cooked dishes by Elaine¹.

Between proposing the toasts of the feast the whole family goes to the patio covered with snow to make a snowman together with children. It is a real holiday!

Everyday life of Elaine and Patrick was devoted and focused on the cultural and educational programme of a Ukrainian professor. Being an educator, I highly evaluated the methodological models of their pedagogical work. For me not to feel tired and overloaded with learning materials, my experienced professionals passed me from one to the other, feeding me on oppositely directed information.

Five days a week were dedicated to «sedentary» lessons at desk with textbooks

¹ Patrick calls his sons by numbers. It might be easier for him to remember and differentiate between them.

and a computer, according to Elaines' and the school programme. In the afternoon and at weekends my education turned into cultural and entertaining experience.

Either with Elaine or with Patrick, or both of them went on a tour around the city, sometimes by bike and also went to museums, theatres, restaurants, pubs and shops. They made me communicate not only with them, but with local residents as well.

It's not laughing matter, Patrick and I visited the pubs dating back to 1242. (At that time our territories were under the yoke^{**}). Perhaps these excursions became a positive element of my educational programme.

The day when we first met with Elaine, she asked me about my interests in terms of the cultural programme. It reminded me of the famous novel by Ilf and Petrov «Golden Calf»^{***}. Its main character Ostap Bender asks a vagrant Shura Balaganov how much money he needs to be absolutely happy. Shura replies giving a ridiculously small number.

In my case I decided to order to the maximum.

See the rock opera Jesus Christ Superstar, whose music was composed by Andrew Lloyd Webber, as it's my favourite modern musical;

See the play Hamlet performed by English actors;

Visit Cambridge and Oxford Universities to see and understand the secret of longevity and success of one of the world main scientific schools;

And, last but not least, to take a walk around London, Cambridge and Oxford.

Incredible as it may seem but almost everything in this fairytale came true.

In London we visited Her Majesty's Theatre and enjoyed the Phantom of the Opera. I was enchanted with everything: incredible actors' performance, impressive scenery with the wide use of visual effects, tuneful and catchy music of Lloyd Webber, highly professional performance of symphonic orchestra and architectural and functional multitier space of the audience hall. Especially the overture that

Before the opera we took a great stroll around the city centre of sunny London. Even though it was my 4th visit to the city, it felt nice strolling in familiar places in the company of hospitable family of the Tilleys guided by the son #3 – Greg, who is a designer by his vocation. Besides such historical places as the Tower of London, the

^{**} From 1237 to 1480 Kievan Rus' (foremother of Ukraine) was looted in the evasion of the Tatar and Mongol hordes.

^{***} One of the most popular satiric novels in post-Soviet space.

Big Ben, St. Paul's Cathedral we saw some modern buildings of the famous architects Norman Foster, Richard Rodger and others.

Walking around London with my new friends, who excitedly discussed the appearance of modern buildings in the historical centre, I remembered the saying of the famous English actor, director and writer Peter Ustinov that only murderers and architects always come back to the crime scene.

I noticed that English people know their leading architects and are curious about their work and actively debate with them about it. And architects, being public figures, are open for communication with wide public and are ready to explain their creative views and thoughts. I was very much interested to watch and listen to the lecture of one of the most outstanding architects in England Richard Rodger in which he philosophised about the role and place of modern architecture in the urbanised environment based on the examples from his creative activity.

We were lucky to have seen three plays by William Shakespeare. In to plays casts of actors acted at the background of which, as it was intended according to the script, became stage setting of ancient castles. Spectators were half-sitting and lying on green lawns in front of building facades and were watching the actors' performance. We watched like this «As You Like It» and «Macbeth». The third play «King Henry IV part I» we watched in Stratford in Shakespeare's Theatre. A modern building, modern play and minimalism in decorations. Main accent was made on acting.

In Stratford everything is connected with the name of Shakespeare. There's a theatre which repertoire consists completely of his plays. From all over the country admirers of cult figure's talent gather to see plays and the audience hall is always full. Souvenirs devoted solely to Shakespeare are sold in the city. I have never seen such variety of the same thing. Even beer in pubs is called Shakesbeer. English gentlemen deserve admiration – they have promoted Shakespeare brand to such extend that if the playwright really lived, he must be watching these activities from above with great interest and irony.

Unfortunately, I didn't manage to see «Hamlet». It wasn't on at any of the theatres in the distance of 100 miles from Oxford while I was staying there. Apparently, I'll have to come back.

We had a «car rally» to Cambridge.

I was impressed with town building idea of the city – beading all the colleges on the river Cam and bond them with a waterway. In addition college grounds with their lawns, parks and gardens spread all over to the river. Delicate arched stone bridges cross the river and beneath them vacationers sail by. Picturesque view! The picture

from the French Gobelin tapestry of XVI century.

I guess I saw the most beautiful church in Great Britain – the Chapel in King’s College. John Wastell, the architect, who headed the construction of the Chapel at its final stage, designed and built breath-taking fan vault – the largest of its kind in the world.

I really liked the unusual and narrow medieval street where the chimneys complete the pediments. It looked like a very long street with chimneys pointing into sky which reminded me of the soldiers lined according to the rank. Amazing!

I wasn’t prepared to see the rotunda church of XII century (St. Andrew’s). Sacral buildings of such form are very common in Orthodox countries. I myself have many projects of the temples of round form.

And, of course, I had enough time to enjoy the beauty of Oxford with its architecture brought close to humans, which seems austere from outside while having impeccable silhouette with a great variety of details carved in stone.

Admiring the architecture of an old Oxford I unexpectedly discovered some conformity with placement and interconnection of structures of various functional purpose. Colleges are placed along with churches, libraries, theatres and pubs. You could say they stand wall by wall****. This fixed order let me make an unexpected discovery: Education – Religion – Culture – Acting – Gluttony and Hard drinking – are the links of the same chain! Besides, like benzene ring, this chain makes a loop with various pattern of succession of its elements. What does it say? I’m honestly not sure if I should answer this question. Especially taking into account that the graduates of these colleges are people who are known world-wide – the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, presidents of different countries, CEOs of big corporations, writers, poets and Nobel prize winners! Goodness, it is scary even to think about it! But alas. If I had spent my students’ years in Oxford, I wouldn’t mind suffering living by this rule.

Britain has 100 universities, but Oxford and Cambridge are the best and the most old amongst them in English speaking world. There have been more that 800 years of permanent investments in the consciousness of intellectuals. And it didn’t require any heroic deeds. It has become a blessed site for intellectuals for its stability, reliability, prestige and eternity...

**** For example Trinity College is next to the Bodleian Library, the Sheldonian Theatre, The White Horse Pub, Blackwell’s book store, The New Bodleian Library and further along the street with the «Education in Intoxication» Turf Tavern and Hertford College, etc.



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It would be prevarication on my part to say that I flew to England only to brush up my English. Of course it was main purpose of my visit, but not the only one. In life of every person, who is responsible for the wellbeing of his loved ones, his professional environment or, as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry said in *The Little Prince*,

«You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed...». There comes the moment when you need to reload, take a break and make up your intellectual energy.

I managed to have planned all my day-to-day affairs so my distance involvement and control was «enough». I haven't had so much time for myself for a very long time, so I began to treat myself with theatre life of England, museums and exhibits, communication with people. I drove myself to fatigue acquainting with medieval and modern architecture of Oxford, Cambridge, Stratford and London. And, of course, I rediscovered the English language for myself. It is not similar to Russian or Ukrainian language, sentences are structured by different rules. And precisely these rules I'd like to not only know, understand, but also feel. Perhaps, it will require time and hard work. But we hardly notice the first one yet and are not afraid of the other...