

Vinnytsia Update #3

Libraries have always been sanctuary places for me, and what I found in Vinnytsia was one of the more beautiful libraries I have ever seen.



The library is in a large, rounded building with the staircase spiraling up the back side. The steps are so worn that their rounded edges are polished smooth. Note all the plants lining the banisters, and all the windows! This library is not dark!

The large room below was quiet but also reverberated with the buzz of all the history that had transpired here. The walls have posters from UNICEF for inspiring mental health resilience practices. The wooden chairs were heavy from the dense old trees they came from. It was comforting to study my language here for a while.

This library is on the main boulevard of Vinnytsia, called Soborna. And yes, several funeral processions came by, with loudspeakers wailing the haunting songs of so many whose lives were cut short. And it was my turn to stand at the window with my hand on my heart.



And as usual, librarians are some of the best people you can find. And Tetiana wants to show me a special room:



Do you see the flags on the wall? The US and Ukrainian flags! - side by side. Well, this room is dedicated to the long-standing friendship between our two counties. The entire room is dedicated to learning about the United States. The shelves are organized by States, or by subjects - with books about history, or travel, or even how to pass the GREs. The walls have maps of the US and posters from tourist destinations. I wish my library back

home could have a room dedicated to our friendship with Ukraine.

Twice a week students gather here to learn English. My friend Louda (that helped me on the bus, and that calls me) - she came here to practice. I was working then, but was able to come on the weekend. The group is run by Patrick - an ex-pat married to a Ukrainian, and his group has been gathering for the past 3 years to practice speaking English - (he's in the black shirt). This world of sharing language is expanding.



And, another picture of my hotel, "Zatushok" - which means "coziness". And it lives up to its name. So you can see, if you come, how nice it is here. It is really quite easy to feel at home. And the restaurant here is cozy too. This morning I met a Ukrainian pastor here. He spoke English, and asked me my "State" in the US. I answered "Colorado" and the next thing he said was that he had been to Longmont - he really had!!



This is where I work. It's hard to see, but they keep their props in the barrels made from the casings of fired missiles. You would think all the war reminders would get you down - but they don't - they keep you up. And so does the heavy metal music playing quietly in the background (tho some people change the "spotify" to delightful and corny English language love songs). I will tell you more about my work soon.

I used to think I was a pacifist. But now, after being in Ukraine, I understand very clearly that Putin has to be stopped with force. These kinds of severe mental derangements - like Hitler, or currently like Putin - just can't be reasoned with. Their illness is just too severely advanced. I have heard about so much cruelty that I would have no problem killing Putin. I actually think their 'souls' would be relieved - not having to carry on with such evil, inflicting such devastating harm. Some things are worse than death, or killing.



This trip I have been meeting a lot of people. An important part of my work here is to bring Boulder closer to Vinnytsia. I see how much it means to Ukrainians that a foreigner is here. That someone came despite the war. Ukraine is in great need of outside support, and I offer a glimmer of that possibility for them. Neither of us know what it means, but the glimmer provides something that is keeping both of us alive. I feel this with every Ukrainian I meet. I certainly know how they are keeping me alive... not dying from apathy. With every exchange I try to understand how they stayed so good, and to quietly absorb their strength of character.

So, in Boulder there is a powerful Rotary Club, with leadership in part from Michael Brady of Boulder. Mike has been to Vinnytsia, and has connected me with the Rotary Club here. So, I am invited to their meeting. I am excited to go. And I will finally meet Ivan Vekirchik, Іван Векірчик, who facilitated my placement at Pobratym, Побратим. The meeting is at my hotel, so I simply walk across the courtyard, and I can see Ivan through the crowd of people surrounding him. He sees me too, and breaks through the group and greets me with a hug. We all go into the eating area and sit at large tables. If I speak slowly and

carefully everyone there understands my English (this is not your average crowd!). Then they all ramble off in Ukrainian and Ivan finds his way back to translating for me. The Rotary Club here can pack a punch! - as well as pack vanloads of supplies to hospitals and schools, build children's playgrounds, solar energy microgrids, and etc. (I could not retain the long list of accomplishments they all so proudly told me about) - but it is a lot!



But the meeting was a short one. As both Ivan and another couple have the same wedding anniversary date! And another couple too! So, they have to scurry off to celebrate. It is a big night for them, and Ivan shares a picture from their anniversary celebration. I am including it here, with his and all the wives' permissions, because I want you to see how just beautiful everything is. It is hard to juxtapose that they are in the middle of fighting a war, not of their choosing, and protecting such refined elegance all at the same time. Aren't they a beautiful people?

I want to tell you a bit about the language. Ukrainian is an old language, and I am gathering a gradual understanding of the complexities that an old language will have developed over time. And for one - it makes it very hard to learn.

When I came to Kyiv last year, I was armed with only the most basic of phrases. People were polite, and helpful of course... but I mostly managed by not talking. The translation apps are amazing - you can speak into them, hold up the camera to signs and menus, and type messages for translation into chats. All very wonderful, and at times critically useful, but they are cumbersome and, in the end, a barrier to intimacy.

Last fall, knowing I wanted to come back, I seriously set in with my language studies. And yes, I was devoted with my efforts, and I am proud of that... but have been quite challenged and feel quite minimally accomplished. I have likened it to a puzzle. Each piece is a word. But with this Ukrainian puzzle, the edges of the pieces morph as they go to fit together - the words change as they are used. In Ukrainian there are not a lot of words that join other words in a sentence. Nouns, for example - a noun will change form in seven different ways depending on how it is used (not counting plural or gender either). This makes nouns, at first glance, unrecognizable especially if someone is talking at normal speed. These changes will also affect many other words in the sentence. And verbs, for example, they of course change endings according to who is doing the verb - but they also change prefixes according to the nuances of how the verb is used. In English we just have a separate word that parses this out. And well, the pronunciation is another thing too. The alphabet is fine - you can learn that quickly and they write accurately according to the sounds, but somehow the intuition for the order of the letters and syllables stumbles me. And yes, they will add letters, seemingly randomly because it makes the word more beautiful!

But I have continued, fascinated and determined. And landing here this time... very eager to practice. The people, of course, have been good to me - but they won't correct me. They will either understand me, or they don't. They always smile though, and they will laugh with me at the silly things that come from my mouth. So, I continue.