

*How can one gain his vision through the blindness?  
The story that would never take place, if not for the Author's bravery, humor and compassion.*

## The gallery that cannot be seen or Dialogue in the dark

Written by MARINA OBOLONKOVA, 2013.



*«Oh, those webs the fate lays out in the dark».*  
A.S. Pushkin

*«Don't touch what is unknown to you in the dark».*  
F. Sologub

It so happened, that part of the point of my travels for a long time, ever since its name was spelled with just one letter «n», became Tallinn. I immediately fell in love with this city. Old European cities with medieval architectural landscapes are very congenial.

Tallinn's «Old Town» is clearly divided into two parts: Hightown, located on the hill of Toompea, where the barons lived centuries ago, offers pleasing eye view of the red-tiled roofs; and the lower town with houses of artisans and merchants, with the town hall on the main square and a fifteenth century pharmacy, and those narrow cobblestone streets.

In any season Tallinn has its own charm : in spring it is decorated with flowering chestnuts ; during summer it revitalized by the fresh sea breeze brought by the wind, fall brings out the extraordinarily beauty of city parks, painted with all the colors, perfect for rustling leaves underfoot, of course, if there is no rain; and for the past few years the winter brought an unusual amount of snow coating the city in a beautiful fluff, out of which you can see almost translucent Christmas illumination on the roofs of the watch-towers of the fortress wall , and its whimsical pastry shops display brightly colored figurines made of marzipan, the aromas of freshly made coffee and mouthwatering cinnamon cookies are soaring through the air.

The tiny capital of a small country of Estonia in 2011 received the status of «The Cultural Capital of Europe». There is a well-known initiative of the European Union. While in Tallinn I have learned that some 7,000 cultural events will be held throughout the year. Just by simple arithmetic calculations I came to realized that over 20 different activities await the viewer-listener-participator every day. In a series of events, which was able to attend one in particular had the lasting impression on me. It was a show mysteriously named «Dialogue in the Dark».

Back in the bright lobby, near the reception area, we saw two Labrador dogs; each of them was wearing a leash embroidered with a small red cross. «Guide dogs» – we guessed. Before the show we were informed that our guides are blind people who will accompany us in the dark. That it would be better to

close your eyes all together since due to strain it might even become painful, and that that we were welcome to ask the guides any questions.

At the entrance each one of us was given a white cane, a walking stick that blind people usually use. Later I found out that there is even the An International White Cane Day to honor blind people which is held on October 15. And so lifting a heavy black curtain, we entered the gallery and became absolutely startled by our inability to see ANYTHING.

I suddenly found a true meaning of sayings such as «pitch black», «Egyptian darkness», «as dark as night» or «dark abyss.» Slightly ahead we could hear the voice of the Estonian girl who introduced herself as our guide and asked us to follow her. Our journey has begun. Never in my life did I feel such strong sense of insecurity even though I am often uncertain under different circumstances and for different reasons. The feeling of uncertainty was incredibly sharp.

We were walking the floor, feeling it with the can, our free hands stretched forward and to the side, slowly we walked ahead. Under our feet, judging by the sound and physical sensations even through the soles of our shoes was grass, the small stone chippings and some other debris.

The downward stairs turned out to be a surprise in which major role played the fact that we could not tell just how many of them there were. It was only three ... I was lucky the kind hearted guide offered me her hand. The path had bizarre twists which are felt while using the cane and suddenly ahead we could clearly hear the birds singing. Were we in the forest or were? It sounded like it. The hand grazed something aside, yes; it was a tree trunk with a rough porous crust.

Our guide told us to pay attention to something on the right. I shifted the cane to my left hand and «feel» what's on my right – rectangular slab of stone like marble, up goes smooth geometric shape like pyramid. Exactly like pyramid. Suddenly we knew, it was a sundial of Kadriorg Park. So that's where we were. The sun dial is located on the banks of the Swan Pond. «Yes», the guide noticed, «*now we're going on a boat*». Just a reminder: *everything is pitch black..*

We had to go on a suspension bridge that treacherously swings and the rope fence along its sides did not add confidence. The descent into the boat was too tricky and complicated; we must somehow step into a swinging boat and find a bench before taking a seat. The engine started and the boat swaying slightly as by waves, moved forward, the wind blew in our faces, and the changing speed was felt by its strength.

After returning from this boat trip, we have not rejected the offered cup of coffee. In order to do this, we had to go to the bar and find the table. The cheerful bartender named Ulle kindly wanted to know *what would we like tea or coffee?* «*Just Coffee, please. Black*».

We would have to wait a little coffee since she just served a last cup and now had to open a new can. Of course I knew that one organ failed to sense all your other organs perceiving the reality very acutely, but as coffee aroma spread through the air when can was opened, I felt as I probably never smelt anything close to such rich flavor . Ulle brewed the coffee and insisted we take some sugar cubes. Just to rub one against the other.

With complete surprise we discovered that rubbing sugar cubes together produced a slight bluish light. «*Just as your eyes adjust to the darkness, you are able to see even the slightest signs of light*» was explained to us. Somewhere on the edge of consciousness the recollection of my childhood flashed; it seemed we were doing these experiments, climbing into a dark closet, I just completely forgot about it.

We took out 1 euro bills out of our pockets to pay for the coffee. We prepared it ahead of time, in the foyer, as advised, while buying the tickets for the show. «*Do you know how we, the blind, are able to tell apart the coins?*» – asked Ulle. «*Here, on the edge of the rim, there is a stripe and a checkmark, can you feel it? It's easy*». It was simple for them meanwhile it was so hard to the rest of us to be able to tell the difference between newly introduced to Estonia euros, in exchange for good ole krone, and 50 cents just by looking at it.

Typically, the participants of the show went to their tables with their coffee in hand. (Again, I remind you, you can see absolutely nothing). Ulle offered us to simply sit down at a table while she would bring us coffee. According to her she did not want us to «*go to such extremes*». We still had to find the table; we could hear the chiming of other people voices... «*Better not to sit on anyone*» we joked among ourselves.

Finally we were able to locate an empty table-wooden and warm. We felt the bench and sat down. The coffee arrived, thank you!

While talking with the girls, who seemed to be very open and friendly, we touched on a variety of topics. «Were there your dogs at the entrance? How do you train a dog to become one?» Oh, how affectionate they sounded speaking of their companions! It turned out there was a Tartur school specializing in training guide dogs. In general, the first systematic dog trainings – guides to those who have lost their sight, began after the First World War. Germany has set up a special school for training dogs to help the rehabilitation of thousands of people, blinded in the war.

From the large number of puppies dog handlers strictly selected few: non-aggressive and smart. Trained dog should not react to cats, other dogs, passers-by; he should only focus on the host. The trained dog accompanying a blind person has to stay in front of each obstacle on the road, thus preventing an owner of dangers, whether wall, curb or brick.

However, the ordinary world thinks little of the blind people. Trouble for the blind are related, for example, with street payphones, which are fixed at the level of a person's head. When there is no obstacle on the road, the dog goes right by it, but the phone remains on the level of a head and it can be a source of injury to the blind owner.

Although the breed of dog is believed to be irrelevant, often the Labrador breed is preferred. The drawback of this breed however is that she will love you too... One of the girls told me that she once went to the theater, leaving the dog at home, and when leaving, forgot to close the window.

The Dog, seeing that the owner leaves without him, nearly jumped out of her window. She had to go back to «explain» to the dog the situation and of course, close the window. Very much alive was the story of another girl about how difficult it is sometimes to get away from home to attend university without a guide dog: leaving the apartment, she at times discovers that the dog is very quietly, as if on tiptoe, trying to sneak unnoticed into a doorway to avoid leaving his owner unattended.

The girls talked about themselves, about what classes they were taking, about completing their bachelor's degrees and working on their masters. They were excited about becoming social workers in the future. As the hour trickled by, an hour of our journey ended, the «Dialogue in the Dark» was completed. We thanked our guides, asked for permission to hug them and said our goodbyes.

I have to be honest, walking out into sunlight, I burst into tears. Meeting with the people, so limited by their disability and living their life so fully and brightly, the entire encounter with the world in which nothing can be seen but can be felt so acutely, was the meeting with myself. How is it possible? We have hands, feet, ears, eyes, and we still fall into despondency, sadness and even despair? That we suffer because we don't have good enough roads or too many fools around ...Where in fact, the world is beautiful and diverse and thank you for reminding me of this.

*From Outskirts to the Center  
And then: no partitions.  
Only a massive meeting,  
as if someone from the darkness  
is suddenly embracing us  
and, full of darkness,  
full of darkness and peace,  
we all stand at the cold,  
gleaming river.*

**J. A. Brodsky**

Translated by Kate Walsh-Lorain

Author of the «Dialogue in the dark» exhibition idea, that was held in many different countries, is a journalist from Germany



Andreas Heinecke