

# Breathing and Living Cambridge

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7.11.2024

My Cambridge memories start with the hypothesis from the theory of chaos and randomness, which says that a distant butterfly flapping its wings may be the initial cause of a tornado. Or as Alan Turing noted in 1950: "The displacement of a single electron by a billionth of a centimetre at one moment might make the difference between a man being killed by an avalanche a year later, or escaping." So, the random circumstances of how the door of a train wagon was opened in Peterborough in 1967 brought me to study in Cambridge a year later, which changed my life forever.

Thus, I must start with a long story of my 1967 summer trip to Scotland. Having saved some 12 pounds while picking raspberries at Arbroath for 1£/8s a day for four weeks, I decided to enjoy London until my daily budget of 18 shillings a day would dissipate. But my Spanish friend eroded my idea by information that in Norwich, East Anglia, there was a farm where one could earn double that as in Arbroath. I had to decide on the night train from Edinburgh to London, which offered a change at Peterborough.

So, being greedy to earn more for the mammon in London, I decided indeed at Peterborough to change for a train to Norwich. But first I had to open the wagon door. As the only passenger leaving the train I had to master that. But how? The door had no knob. I was trying to push it and foraged at some nipple or hollow, but there were none. After beseeching Heaven for help with "Oh God!", a gentleman from far behind ran to me, cursing the curiously observing gentleman sitting closest to the door with words, "bloody Englishman!"<sup>1</sup>. He pulled the sash window down and opened the door from outside. I could never figure out that trick and would wind up in London with a different life story. The train was already moving and I had to fight for my life by jumping out with my 25 kg suitcase. Such was my first step to Cambridge. Great thanks to that anonymous Scottish Ivanhoe!

On the way to a Norwich farm by a little train, I could admire the cathedrals of Peterborough, Ely and Norwich. I promised myself that I would return to these places soon. That happened in a week. In a mere five days, I could earn at the Catfield Farm not £3 a day but £5 by extending the picking of French beans from 8 to 12 hours. The farmer was most delighted by admitting: "The East Europeans are the hardest workers I have ever seen". But he did not know the secret that £5 was 10 to 15 times more than what we could earn per day in our communist Czechoslovakia, Poland, or Hungary, the only three commie countries that allowed penniless people to travel "abroad." A hobo turned a tycoon when my cash of £12 increased to £34!

Now, I could manage to take a Sunday train for a trip to Peterborough and admire its unique Norman cathedral. Then I pulled back by train to Ely where I discovered another architectonic marvel. I could enjoy my first lunch in a good restaurant, with a view of the Romanesque Ely Cathedral. The lunch included cream tea, a sort of a *carte blanche* to the authentic British Empire. Once in Ely, taking a hitchhiking detour of 15 miles to Cambridge was obvious. In one hour, I cropped up in another world – in the Cantabrigian World: gown academia, collegiate education, history, traditions, punts, and cows grazing in front of the King's Chapel. I did not realize that

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<sup>1</sup> I have been wandering until today how that avowed Scotsman could guess that that oblivious gentleman was an Englishman. Obviously, the United Kingdom was not united in all details even in those harmonious times.

admiring Clare Bridge would become later my daily bread. Cambridge was my love at first sight, and hitchhiking back to the beans in Norwich was with a sigh.

It took me exactly a year to my next encounter with Cambridge. It was in the spring of 1968 in Prague. After my mandatory 8-weeks training at a mechanised regiment at Krumlov,<sup>2</sup> I darted to my superb trip to Vienna – Zermatt – Paris – Eastern Anglia on the 12 August. On 21 August, I made a 6:00 ascent of the Monte Rosa glacier. It was some 10 o'clock when I talked with an American guy who could afford to take the Gornergrat cogwheel train and could read the news. To my absolute shock, he informed me about the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. I walked down, packed my things, and took a train to Geneva, where I had deposited my main luggage at the house of my uncle-in-law, the ambassador. He completely disagreed with my inner determination to go back home and fight with the Russians. "Pack for Britain and fight there, politically". A wise realist!

So, at the dawn of 23 August, I stepped down at Dover and soon received information from the CS consular department at Kensington that ISH (International Students House) at Regent Park is bound to be the centre of the CS student refugees. In a couple of days, we organised a meeting where I was elected the vice-chair of the established CS Student Union in the UK. As such, I had the privilege to meet the representatives of the National Union of Students, for example, Trevor Fisk and Jack Straw, financial supporters such as Robert Maxwell, or politicians supporting Czechoslovakia such as Anthony Crossland, Paul Foot or even Tariq Ali (!). I cared about the university admission of hundreds of student refugees but forgot about myself. I communicated that to Miss Ware, the career advisor at ISH, close to the end of September, when the academic year was to start. I complained that I would prefer Cambridge but UCCA (Universities Central Council on Admissions) excluded Oxbridge. I admitted that I did not like to study economics but preferred Spanish.

Thus, with a letter of reference to Queens College and its don in charge of Spanish, I hitchhiked to Cambridge. At Queens', I was forwarded to St. John's, the new venue. There I was standing at the locked door and thought it was the end. But, somehow, my Angel Guardian operated anew when an elderly pop-eyed gentleman appeared. I asked him for advice, describing all my strife. He responded, "Once you studied economics, why don't you want to continue?" I explained that communist economics completely disgusted my interest in that subject. With a hint, "Just come with me, lad!" I followed him to the doors "Mr. Sraffa" at Trinity. We talked and soon, I admitted I was a supporter of the theory of comparative advantage, which the Marxists considered a political fraud. "Sit down at my table and write an essay about the international division of labour. You will have two hours for that". With these words, he left the office. Surprisingly, my brain was humming as never before – simply that was the air of Cambridge.

After two hours of my first essay-writing, my first supervision started. I was still not aware that in front of me, there was a world-class economist and a top specialist in Ricardian economics. After the supervision, I was told to stay at Trinity for the night and wait if there was a solution to study economics. In the evening, I was browsing through the Trinity court and along the River Granta, full of mysterious expectations. The next day, I was asked to see Dr. Timothy Smiley and consult an admission to Clare College. There, I had another supervision with my future tutor who informed me at the end that I would become a Clare undergraduate studying economics under

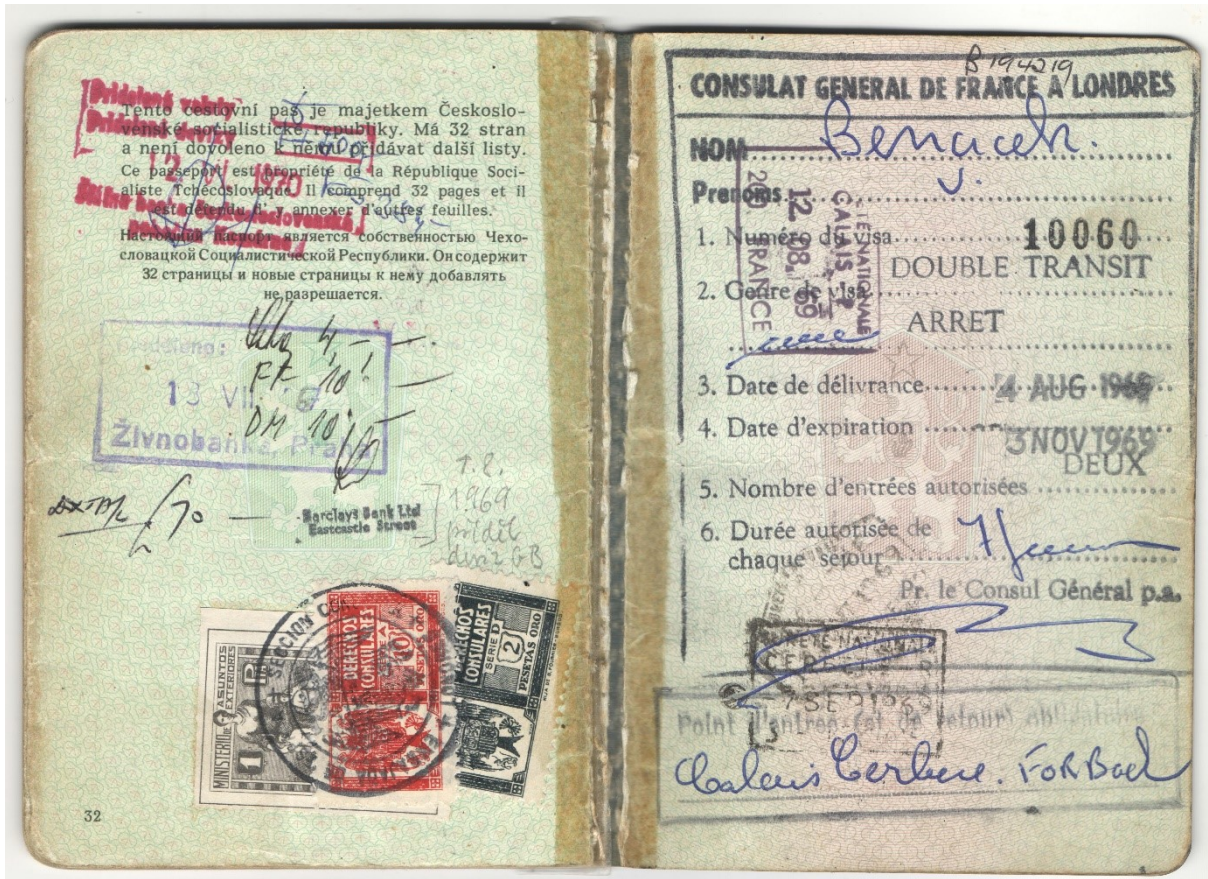
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<sup>2</sup> This regiment was supposed to be at the apex of an assault on the West in the direction Munich-Ulm-Freiburg. All thousand soldiers in tanks and armour carriers. Let me assure the readers that in 1968 the regiment was completely unable to fulfil such a task because the collective spirit of 1968 had different priorities, including pacifism and rapprochement with the West. In addition, half of the tanks were immobile.

the supervision of Professor Charles Feinstein. In addition, I was granted “a very modest bursary.” I went to the Clare Bridge and wept. So I started to live Cambridge.

I took a train to London, packed my stuff suitable for the mountains, and kissed goodbye to my landlady, Mrs Morgan, who suddenly raked up some woollen Regent Street winter coat, model 1950s, which made me so fashionable in Cambridge. At my farewell to ISH and thanks to Miss Ware, I was informed about my admission to study Spanish at Aberystwyth University. An amazingly near miss, but *diis aliter visum!*<sup>3</sup> My next location was at The Memorial Court J12, Clare College, on the path from Clare Bridge.

**An illustration of the travel standards in 1967-70 when globalisation was on its rise:**



**Remarks:**

- 1) On the left top, the red stamp confirms the allotment of Hungarian Forints for meagre 354 CS Crowns on 12.6.1970. No more “foreign exchange” was allowed to be spent so as not to harm the balance in the Hungarian consumer market.
- 2) The scoop is the violet stamp of 13.7.1967 confirming the allocation of £4, Ffrancs 10, and DM 10 for a 45-day trip. That was the amount a decent middle-class Western tourist would spend in two days. I had to smuggle, glued in the shoe, an additional 50 FF and 10 DM, which cost me some 1000 Crowns on the black market—an amount of three weeks’ holiday work for a student.
- 3) The discreet entry of the Barclays Bank of £ 70 indicates that even Britain practised the allotment of money to be exported by a tourist. In this case, I was allowed to spend maximally £ 70 during my four-week trip to Paris and Spain. What a luxury!
- 4) The French double-entry visa allowed me to use Calais for entry, Cerbere for exiting Spain and Forbach for moving to Germany. Using any other border point was strictly forbidden. Well, democracy had its watchdogs.

<sup>3</sup> The gods had a different view (from Latin).

Tiny room J12 was my real sunshine home from 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1968 until late June 1969. Most probably, these were the best times of my life. Living Cambridge was touching from the first moment. Though J12 was the smallest room in the J staircase of the Memorial Court, it was MY room that served me amazingly comfortably. I was proud of a funny rope fire escape close to the wide sash window and was always tempted to try it as a stuntman. The electric heating was very ecological in energy-saving when the frost and snow in January made me exercise each hour. The staircase was full of friendly mates (exclusively male - at that time of break-even for coeducation). The room had a beautiful view of the tall pine trees (I was sorry to see in 1991 that in the meantime, Forbes Library shaded that view), and I admired H. Moore's sculpture of a warrior in distress, greeting sadly everyone at the entrance. Later in the summer, a competing artifact was installed in front of the Memorial: Anthony Caro's yellow-shining iron slide. Some student built a funny lampoon beside it, and I admired them both.

There were more aesthetic lessons to observe, for example, my admired Professor Joan Robinson walking around in a buoyant stroll with her colourful silk sari fluttering about. Or talk with her economic comrade-in-arms Piero Sraffa, my Guardian Angel, who was cutting his daily cycling tour from Sidgwick Site to Trinity via Memorial Court. Both were reality shows.

Also, the position of Memorial Court was remarkable, offering the most beautiful views of Cambridge twice a day when I was marching for lunch and dinner at the Old Court. One could hear the evening church bells and admire the cows on the meadow before the King's. There was a pleasant walk to the Sidgwick Site for economics and the University Library was a couple of steps behind where I spent endless evenings. My general weekly schedule was as follows: 7:00 waking up, breakfast and rushing to lectures or libraries at the Sidgwick Site. 13:00 lunch at the Old Court and catching up with the lectures or libraries. Festive 19:00 dinner in the gown initiated with a prayer. 20:30-22:00 reading at home or in the University Library. But there were exceptions: two tutorials, water polo at the Leys School once a week, and occasional jogging. Plus, having half a day free once a week for biking trips, squash, tennis, social events, and general enjoyment. Surprisingly, I could make it all and even feel comfortable with such strait jackets.

It is interesting to consider what kind of forces drove me to such a backbreaking performance. First, there was a fear that I would disappoint all those who approved my admission. But the main incentive was the "air" of Cambridge reflected in the social empathy of the dons and all people in general. They gave one the space to act freely and with self-confidence. Compared to my past, I felt like I lived in a different world. Cambridge was a mind opener that helped bring one's potential to light and uncover one's authentic identity. That sharply contrasted to communism, whose education targetted the production of living robots, not critical thinkers. The third driving force was the nature of economics. It had a clear logic! That was so different from the Marxian political economy packed with cabalistic statements that were superordinated to the functioning of reality. In Cambridge, I had to redefine my relationship with the world: from the defensive-offensive positions to the cooperative ones. I do not know how it was with the others but Cambridge transformed me into a different positive personality.

1968 was the jewel of the revolutionary 1960s, at least in the West and Prague. It was full of spiritual turmoil and freedom movements, including the flower power of the flower children and the Beatlemania. Cambridge had the world's best economics at that time. Just look at some names in the Lecture List of Economics for 1968-69: Joan Robinson, Piero Sraffa, Nicolas Kaldor, James Meade, Luigi Pasinetti, Michael Farrell, David Champernowne, Anthony Atkinson, Charles Feinstein, Ajit Singh, Lord Kahn, Robin Marris, Brian Reddaway, Christopher Bliss, David Newbery, plus visitors such as Simon Kuznets, Robert Solow, Kenneth Galbraith or Michal Kalecki. Those were the days!

Except for that, Cambridge was full of ferment and meetings aiming at a better social order. The dominant leftists were fighting with the less numerous but unyielding rightists. I was a rightist, of course, preaching personal liberty, human heterogeneity, and personal accountability – all so different from the communist reality. My defence of the achievements of capitalism was challenged by prophecies of the activists for providing an even better future offered self-confidently (but without a credible empirical underpinning) by proposed socialist re-arrangements. All these thought experiments and encounters were very stimulating, and I found the ongoing strife, hatched in the academic cloisters, even full of fun. The division by hatred was not in fashion at that time, and the rationality of arguments and facts dominated. Thus, I took part in the North America Club, discussion meetings on history (with great Harry Hinsley), business, philosophy (Paul Roubiczek - my Czech compatriot), economics (Charles Feinstein - my supervisor), and religion (Clare chaplain Julian Barker). All that was somehow manageable! Cambridge was a challenge – an incentive that made one discover energy and inner capacities you didn't even know you had. They emerged suddenly, even automatically, modifying one's flow of life forever. I think, for me, only to the good.

What bad habits did we practice? There was just one: climbing the locked high back gate of the Memorial Court when coming late at midnight. Fortunately, we did not endanger anybody else but ourselves. But there was a notably better attraction: a refreshing jogging trail Memorial-Newnham-Grantchester and back, which makes some 4+4 km = 5 miles. Of course, I do not keep my old timing records, but I think I always fought with a limit of 60 minutes to get back. But I do not know if it included (or not) a short contemplation in front of the house of Bertrand Russell and honour paid to punters (rowers?), such as Byron or Brooke, who had to make it against the stream. The Tea Orchard was not operating commercially at that time. Following the steps of Gwen Raverat, according to her book *Period Piece*, is a good choice for strolls.

But all good has its end. When I overcame all the challenges at Cambridge studies, received honours for my three first-year BA exams, and discovered my strengths, which were so much constrained in communism, I started to think about new challenges, like Adam and Eve in Paradise. There is freedom to enjoy pleasant things, but in the background, there is lurking freedom to take a risky course. I opted for the challenge of returning back home and using my Cambridge skills to help Czechoslovakia fend off the taints of progressing communism. What a naïve idea it was ! It was similar to the decision of the land surveyor K, from Kafka's novel *The Castle*, to make an order in the little empire of the count Westwest entirely entangled in bureaucracy and irrationality. Surveyor K had no chance to win the struggle but could learn much from the rich knowledge of good and evil he could uncover through his mission.

For me, Cambridge was a mission to disclose human creativity and grace, which was absolutely exceptional. Shrugging it and living for 20 years in communism by one's own will seems to be perverse. However, it is also a part of the mission to know good and evil and experience the prosaic reality of human life. The memories of Cambridge became my eternal romantic nostalgia. However, I seldom deplored my decision not to live longer in the world of hard work aiming at perfection but to experience, instead, also what it means to live in a world of imperfection and slack. This is the ideology of the alpine climbers or, maybe, the lonely long-distance runners, which is still quite a good company.