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History Teaching Major/English Teaching Minor

Berlin, Germany

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For the month of June 2015, I travelled to five countries in Central Europe as part of the Central European Travel Seminar (CETS). I went on this experience to gain confidence in myself, to learn about cultures different than my own and see things from different perspectives, and to gain more complete understandings of historical events from this region. Looking back at this experience, I learned more than I ever expected I would when preparing to study abroad. Going to five countries provided a look at multiple cultures that were very different, yet allowed us to find the similarities amongst them and with the United States. I also had to learn how to be in a group of twenty-three other people with different personalities than my own for an extended period of time and learn how to travel on airplanes, subways, trams, and even an overnight train. On this trip, I climbed through ancient Roman ruins in Budapest, basically hiked up a mountain in Austria, stayed in at a residence hall at the oldest university in Poland, went on the longest escalator in the European Union to get to a subway, rode amusement park swings that went almost four hundred feet in the air, went to Pope St. John Paul II's house in Krakow and went to a Polish Mass, walked through a medieval city under the city in Krakow, and walked along the actual Berlin Wall. I will never see more breathtaking sites than the view from the Citadella in Budapest or the sunset we saw on the train to Krakow. I found an appreciation of art that I did not think I would have. I learned about what too much power cause people to do but also how those that are oppressed truly have the power when they refuse to let their oppressors conquer their spirits. There is no doubt that I had once-in-a-lifetime experiences on this trip and came back a better person than when I left.

This experience did not alter my career goals, but it definitely reinforced what I already knew I needed to do with my future as a history teacher, and it gave me tools to begin to do so. We talk a lot in the education program about the need to teach history honestly and inclusively. I

already knew that I was going to strive to do that in my classrooms. However, I now see even more the need for this, and I have resources to help me do it. I learned many specifics about history that I did not know before. We went to the DDR Museum in Berlin, which was about what life was like in East Germany under communism. We also went to a museum in Budapest called the House of Terror, which showed what life under Hungarian National Socialism and communism was like. I knew that there was fear of the government and that freedoms were limited during these times, but I now know many more specifics about different parts of life and about different things the government did to people. What stands out to me the most to me is a daytrip we took to a place outside of Prague called Lidice. Expecting to find a city, I found open fields when we stepped off the bus. I quickly learned along with the rest of my classmates that we were at the site of a massacre by Nazis. In the village of Lidice, they shot all the men, sent all the women to camps, and gassed most of the children. They burned the town, bombed it, and even dug up the cemetery for good measure to make sure that nothing was left of the town. This was all done because Hitler thought one of the assassins of Nazi officer Reinhard Heydrich was from Lidice, which turned out to be false. I never knew anything



Former Lidice, Czechoslovakia

about this. I never knew that the Nazis completely wiped cities off the map. The value of having these kinds of specific examples will be incredible when trying to communicate ideas of power and the weight of these time periods to my students.

Besides learning more history, I also learned about how other places memorialize and remember it. Seeing the differences in this between countries was eye-opening. Germany completely owned up to its history in a way that I never expected. I expected them to avoid their role in the Holocaust and the Cold War, but they were very open about what happened, strove very hard to memorialize the victims, and work to make sure their citizens learn from the mistakes of the past. The fact that they did these things was inspiring. It is incredible that they are not afraid to admit what happened and that they have constant reminders of it and memorials to the victims. It was then interesting to learn about how many people in Vienna and Budapest present history very differently than Berlin does, with making them seem like victims of the Nazis and communists rather than the willing participants they were. In Budapest, there was an anti-Nazi memorial that did just this. However, there were protests all around it about how unfair



Protests against anti-Nazi memorial in Budapest

it is to the actual victims of these periods. To go into new countries and see how they present history made me see the importance of presenting American history honestly. It is easy for us to point fingers at Central Europe for what it did in World War II and the Cold

War, but on this trip, I really had to begin to come to terms with the fact that the United States did similar things to what they did. I remember very specifically the sick feeling I got when we were discussing Lidice and realized that this story was not unique to the Nazis. I felt so sad and angry the whole day and could not believe that someone would do that, but the United States did basically the same thing to Hiroshima and

Nagasaki. Even the United States said that it did not matter how many innocent people were killed as long as the enemy got the message. They also did similar things with Indian removal and slavery. America has done horrible things as well, and they are often avoided, watered-down, or presented from a Euro-centric perspective, especially in schools. Students do not gain anything from learning false history. There was a sign at the memorial protest in Budapest that was very inspiring for me. It said, "Say no to the falsification of history, the national memory poisoning, the state-level Hungarian Holocaust denial." That is exactly what I need to do in my future classrooms, especially with American history. If these countries can be honest about things like communism and the Nazis, what excuse could I have for not teaching history honestly? I wanted to go on this trip for me and my future students. Before CETS, I was thinking surface level, like how cool it would be to teach them about the Berlin Wall and show them an actual picture of it. But CETS ended up being much more impactful for my future as a teacher than I ever thought it would be.

For me, the thing that was the most disorienting about this experience was the fact there the majority of the people we interacted with spoke English. I felt uncomfortable with the amount of English that I saw and heard, and I felt bad that I was in their country, but they were speaking my language. People in food service almost always spoke English, we could get museum tours in English, most information in museums was in both the country's language and English, many signs were in English, and most of the music we heard was either American or British. I was uncomfortable with the fact that in Europe, people speak English, but in America, there are movements to make English the only language. What also made me uncomfortable was the fact that by the end, I expected people to speak English. I remember the lady at the front desk of the residence hall in which we stayed in Krakow did not speak English. The first day we were

there, I had a question about our keys, but I could not ask her because she only spoke Polish. But when she kept talking to me after she said she did not speak English, I was confused as to why she was continuing to speak Polish at me. She knew I did not understand it. However, I then had to realize that when people told me they did not speak English, I continued to speak it at them. While the fact that we went to one city in each country and that we stayed mostly in touristy areas means that our experience cannot be assumed to be representative of the whole of Europe, and living in small town Wisconsin does not mean that my knowledge of America is representative of everyone here, but I still was not expecting to be able to speak and read so much English.

As much English as was spoken in the cities we visited, it was still a valuable experience for me to speak a minority language, as it gave me greater appreciation for those in America that do not speak English. I remember thinking in Berlin that I now understand how it is possible for people to get by living in America and not speak English. I never understood that before. As intimidating as it was to not speak the language, it is possible to understand speakers of other languages through things like visual clues. It is not easy to learn a new language, and I now will have more understanding and patience for ELL (English Language Learner) students that I may have in the future. I do not believe that my experience compares to theirs, as I feel that America is not a very friendly country to speakers of other languages, especially not like the cities we went to were for English speakers, but it was valuable for me to have to struggle to communicate nonetheless. For this reason, I appreciated the brief interactions I had with citizens not in food service, university settings, etc. because those people were less likely to speak English, and I instead had to find other ways to communicate. This situation has also changed the type of teacher I will be.