

Madeline Blaser

Major: Middle Childhood through Early Adolescence

Minor: Mathematics

Berlin, Germany; Prague, Czech Republic;
Vienna, Austria; Budapest, Hungary; Krakow, Poland

June 2nd, 2015 through June 30th, 2015

Anticipated Graduation: May 2017

Global Awareness International
Study Abroad Scholarship, Awarded \$650

A Reflection on the Central European Travel Seminar

An experience like this is not something I can truly summarize in an essay or through a series of questions, or honestly, in any words. I know that this experience has changed me profoundly, but it is difficult to put into words the emotional and soul changes I went through. The program I participated in is called the Central European Travel Seminar, a faculty-led immersion program in which we travelled to five different countries in Central Europe for 4 weeks this past June. We visited Berlin in Germany, Prague in the Czech Republic, Vienna in Austria, Budapest in Hungary, and Kraków in Poland. In the following essay, I will share how impactful this experience has been through specific examples and events that I experience while abroad.

From very early on in this seminar, I felt that my knowledge and understanding of diverse cultures was expanding. I expected these cities to be much further removed from the lifestyle of Americans. An example of this is Berlin and how surprisingly modern and diverse the city was. I expected it to have a completely different feel than cities back home, but it really reminded me of any large city in the United States. The city had modern buildings and seemed very industrialized. The more I wanted to describe Berlin as “Americanized”, I realized that maybe both large cities in America and Berlin are not “Americanized”, but actually internationalized. It is easy to view the world from my personal perspective, but being abroad allowed me to expand my worldview and understanding.

I learned about diverse cultures in Berlin and the other cities as well, specifically Prague. One day when we were waiting for the tram, we helped an elderly woman cross the busy street with 1-foot-tall cobblestone curbs. In another situation, there was a

woman on the escalator with a stroller and her daughter holding her hand. The woman was struggling to get her stroller on the escalator and help her daughter to the point that someone from our group had to hold the daughter's hand. She could barely get down to the train without assistance and these escalators specifically were very fast-paced. Based on these two situations, it was clear that Prague is not a very handicap-friendly city. Both of these women were struggling to do things that I take for granted such as crossing the street or riding an escalator. It was a learning experience to see how some people may not have as much access to the city as others.

Additionally, we visited the Jewish Museum in Berlin that not only addressed the Holocaust, but also was very informative about the Jewish culture and traditions. This was very fascinating to me because there is so much more to Judaism than the Holocaust. I am not saying that the Holocaust is not a significant event in Jewish history, but it is easy to only focus on this aspect of history and never learn about the religion and their beliefs. These are things not touched on in high school history classes, but have an impact today. Going here made me feel responsible to tell my friends and family what we learned. When returning home, I knew people would ask me how much fun I had and the sights I saw, but that was not the focus of this trip. The focus was on developing and expanding our understanding of the diverse cultures around the world.

One of the major discussion topics of this program was power systems. One of the most influential power systems of these countries' history was political power such as the Nazis and Communists. It's hard to compare the governmental systems, especially in Germany, to those in the United States. Three of our days in Germany focused on the beginning of Germany, then Jewish persecution, and then German Soviet Union one the

third day. One individual could have lived through all of these eras because there have been many drastic shifts in power within Central Europe's recent history. In America, my grandparents grew up under one government system. I think I personally took this governmental stability for granted before this trip. We don't think that such shifts in power could ever happen in America. We also learned a lot about power systems on an individual's level. Jews in Germany were born as second-class citizens, similar to minorities in America. The Central European Travel Seminar has taught me to analyze what kinds of power systems affect me personally and realizing that every interaction is a power balance, including our personal relationships.

Another aspect of power that I learned about was in Vienna. The sheer number of buildings attributed to Franz Joseph was astonishing. It made me wonder why they continue to appreciate Franz Joseph, but I realized that he is a symbol, or visual manifestation of the wealth and power they had years ago. In addition to Franz Joseph, the Habsburg's presence still looms large over Vienna today. Thousands of visitors come every day to see their power on display, from the Habsburg Palace to the Kunsthistorisches Museum, which is home to their extensive collection of art and historic pieces. Even though their power is not as influential in today's global system, their empire's wealth went towards building a beautiful city and preserving history that is still revered today. My knowledge of global systems, institutions, and relations of power has increased greatly from these experiences.

On the other hand, decisions made in America have impacted all of the countries we visited on the Central European Travel Seminar. America has a very different attitude towards second language acquisition in comparison to Central Europe. Some Americans

would even like the country to declare English as the official language or require people to only speak in English. In Central Europe, we would have had extreme struggles if they felt the same way about second language acquisition as parts of America does. In the countries we visited, most people we met spoke English or at least knew some Basic English phrases and were willing to help me in my experience. I met a woman in Kraków who worked at the front desk of our dorm. She could not speak English, but clearly wanted to help me and therefore began to speak to me in Polish. I didn't know how to tell her I didn't speak Polish, so most of our conversation was through facial expressions and hand gestures. Eventually a woman walked past us and was able to translate for us. It's quite essential to be able to converse and understand people when traveling to an unknown place. We often expected them to cater to us and help with our lack of understanding of their native languages. I believe that our decisions influence these countries on a global scale and this could be the reason why most Central Europeans have adopted English as their second language.

My participation in the Central European Travel Seminar hasn't exactly altered my professional and career goals, but instead, it has solidified my goals. I always dreamed of working abroad, but after this program, it is a real possibility and I feel far more prepared. This trip helped me conquer fears that I never knew I had. An example of this is a fear of getting lost in a big city and having to navigate with subway systems and street maps. In this class, my group and I were required to lead the group around Budapest for the day. I didn't think it would be that easy, but we were able to locate the places we wanted to visit and just navigate ourselves using maps. Once I realized that I could do this in the large cities we visited, I have far more confidence to try traveling on

my own and doing an extended stay abroad. One of the programs that we learned about while in Hungary is called Fulbright. This is a program that allows chosen students to live abroad for a year, working on projects such as conducting research or teaching English. This seems like an amazing opportunity to me, especially as an education major. Hopefully someday I will do a program like this or reach a similar career goal.

One of the greatest skills I gained from this program was the ability to analyze my surroundings and reflect on my own actions and values. We learned a lot about what motivated historical Europeans to do what they did and by analyzing their actions, we can reveal more about our own. One example of this was learning about the Battle of White Mountain in the Czech Republic. The radical political change that occurred because of this battle still influences Prague today. The Czech Republic was taken over by Catholics who forced civilians to convert to Catholicism or leave the country. Today, 90 percent of people in the Czech Republic do not affiliate with a religion after a difficult past in which they were forced into the religion. There was prejudice against non-Catholics by the invaders, which led to terrible things just like how white Americans treated Native Americans. These countries have struggled with prejudice in the past and it still persists today in America. Seeing similarities in European countries helped me to reflect on our country and bring this reflective attitude home with me.

Another skill I developed was an ability to work with many different people and we all surely learned how to do that here. I personally have never spent thirty days with the same people, living together and doing activities together all day every day. It definitely tested our patience and helped me learn to effectively work together with others. This is an extremely important skill in any field of work because most careers require

cooperative efforts. In my education career, I will need to cooperate with parents and other school faculty, which can be difficult, but this program helped me improve my skills in this area.

Furthermore, one of the most disorienting dilemmas of the trip was when we were leaving the subway in Budapest. There were two men fighting and yelling in Hungarian. One man was being punched in the head and he started to bleed. We all stood there frozen, not knowing what to do. I felt so disoriented because I didn't know how to react to this situation and was completely blind-sighted when it started to happen. At the time, we were getting a tour of Budapest by a professor and he stepped in and broke up the fight. We were later told that street fights are a problem in Budapest and this professor steps in and breaks these fights apart whenever he sees one, even if it means getting hurt himself or being hospitalized. Most bystanders at the subway just passed by without little thought, which made me think differently about the culture. I wondered if this is so common that people no longer are surprised by fights or even notice them anymore. It was something so foreign to me, but the reactions of passerby's said otherwise. This dilemma helped me understand how my decisions, as well as the decisions of others, have local implications. Your response to someone getting beat up is a value you have to have set before you get into the situation so that when the moment comes, you know what you will do. I kept making excuses in my mind to justify my actions (or lack of action). I thought things such as, *I couldn't speak the language anyways* and *they're too big to confront, I'm just a small girl*. Doing nothing is still an action. This also has global implications because I can see that just as easily as I became a bystander in this situation, masses of people can be bystanders, and were bystanders, in the Holocaust and World

War II. One quote said by Pastor Martin Niemoller was brought up in our group discussion and it really stuck with me: “First they came for the Communists and I did not speak out because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me”. Although this disorienting dilemma wasn’t as serious as events we’ve learned about in history, it was an eye-opening experience to see myself in a similar situation.

Overall, this experience is one that I will treasure for an eternity and this essay is just the beginning. It seems hard to believe that the 2015 Central European Travel Seminar has come to a conclusion, but I am taking away from this so many memories, skills, and knowledge that will last much longer. I am so thankful that I was able to be a part of an incredible journey to Central Europe and experience this amazing program.



Sitting at the top of a cliff in the Wachau Valley in Vienna, overlooking the city.



Barbed wire fences encompassed Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland.