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Person to Person in Austria

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Field Notes from Abroad: Person to Person in Austria

On Tuesday October 30th, I interviewed Luise Fidelsberger, a Viennese girl I met at a cafe and have made friends with here in Austria. In our interview we talked about the differences and similarities between Austrian and Americans that we both saw, as well as things we both take for granted in our home countries.

She believes that Austrians are quieter and not as willing to accept change or embrace it in their everyday lives. She describes how she thinks Americans are louder, in particular the tourists she sees around Vienna and also commented about how people in America seem to move a lot, and that is something I never really thought about. But she says it's very common in Austria to live in the same house your entire life and to move is something most Austrians never think about or wish to do. In particular we also talked about how she thinks America is more open, liberal and accepting which I found interesting because when I was in the US I always thought Austria was the more progressive, liberal and accepting.

We also compared the social programs and healthcare in our countries. It's just something Lui takes for granted, that if she has a health problem she'll go to the hospital and be taken care of. I told her about my stepdad who had a stroke this summer and how the medical bills are making it difficult for us to make ends meet every month and actually pay for my college. This led us to discuss another major difference between our countries: the huge contrast between our education systems. University is basically free in Austria, anyone can go, and most classes have 700 or more people in them. This sounds crazy to me, but it's common knowledge to everyone that they will have the opportunity to go to university here and that they will just be one student of hundreds, getting the same exact education.

Another major difference between America and Austria is patriotism. In America, patriotism is extremely important. In some neighborhoods at least every other house has an American flag,

everyone wears red white and blue on the Fourth of July, and it's important to be proud to be an American. Here in Austria, their patriotism only comes out during football (soccer games), in particular those against Germany. Even on their national holiday, people don't hang Austrian flags everywhere or wear red and white from head to foot which was something that genuinely surprised me on October 26th.

It has been interesting to live in Austria and get to know the people that live here. Europe seemed to have a very similar culture to ours before I got here. Now, I see that yes, we have many things in common but we have a totally different history, different social norms and expectations. All of the differences have caught me at one time or another off guard; when you take things for granted your entire life, you don't realize there are other cultures, beliefs, and ways of doing things out there. It's not that one is greater than the other—they're just different.

Some may believe going somewhere like Africa or Asia would be the greater culture shift, but in all honesty it's the small, every-day things that exist (or in some cases are lacking) here that stand out the most to the student studying abroad. A few small examples are the lack of polite servers and cheap to-go coffee. And then there's the phenomenal public transportation and incredibly progressive social programs. Every country, every city and every village has its own history, culture, and ways-of-life and it's been a wonder to live in a different world for a time. Living here I've been able to observe my own country through the eyes of the Austrians. Lui and I discussed how America is so powerful and great and Austria is so small in comparison and how we've both grown up with such a different mind-set because of this. Through my study abroad experience I have also learned so much about Austria as an individual country; until now I have always combined it with Germany in my mind, but they really are separate entities. Most importantly I've learned how to examine, critique, and gradually accept the differences between this country and my own and enjoy the experience.

Interviewee: Luise Fidelsberger (friend)