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My Time in Fulda

I went to Fulda, Germany in hopes of bettering my German skills. This is a goal I believe I accomplished, but to say my experience in Fulda was limited to just working on my German would not be a fair assessment. The Summer University hosted people of all ages from twenty-two different countries and therefore exposed me to a variety of new cultures, languages, and beliefs. When considering all of the conflicts going on in the world today, it was unbelievable yet also encouraging for me to see that so many cultures could intermingle peacefully, respectfully, and amicably. To me, this aspect of diversity is what made my experiences in Fulda so memorable and special. I can now say that I have new friends from all over the world. I've also gotten a taste of several foreign cultures, which I may never have had the chance of knowing were it not for this Fulda scholarship, and that is something I will always cherish.

There were many activities either provided by the program which helped bond our group together. Perhaps the best example of this was the salsa workshop. On the third day of the program, a large portion of the group met for the first lesson of the workshop. During this hour and a half, I chatted and danced with people from Israel, Iran, the Netherlands, Spain, Russia, Greece, India, Italy, and Hungary. It was a great way to kick off the program, because everyone who participated got to know each other in a positive and encouraging environment. On Monday evenings, this workshop was followed by a salsa dance night at a local bar, which became very popular among the students.

By the end of the first week, groups of friends had formed. However, the program did not foster cliques and certainly not discrimination. One could move freely between groups of people, always with a welcoming feeling, regardless of your nationality. From my experiences, I

wouldn't have thought this to be an easy feat, considering the variety of cultures at the Summer University, yet somehow this occurred naturally among the students.

In addition to making friends from around the world, I also experienced a boost in my German skills while in Fulda. I remember arriving at the train station on the first day, being taken to my apartment, and then venturing off on my own to explore the city. Even though it was only my first day in Germany and I had been awake for over twenty-four hours, I couldn't help but shove my exhaustion aside and explore. I knew that if I wandered around, I may be lucky enough to get slightly lost. I approached the prospects of this happening with excitement rather than anxiety because I was itching to practice my German in a real life situation. What better way to do it than to ask for directions? Luck would have it that I did get a little bit turned around in the city. I politely asked a stranger how to get to a specific street, and while they may have been a little surprised by my American accent at first, they were able to understand me and responded clearly. As simple as this task was, I was quite pleased with myself for pulling it off, because nothing is more satisfying when learning a language than when you are able to use it effectively in real life situations and actually see the results of your hard work. After redirecting myself to a familiar landmark, I then wandered into a small bakery where I purchased a drink and was actually complimented on my German. I was again quite pleased with myself, and excited to start my studies on such a positive note.

When I wasn't navigating my way through the city trying to have as many verbal exchanges as possible, I was most likely in class. We started the day with three hours of seminar, followed by a lunch break, and then three hours of German. My seminar was the only one taught in German, and it was divided into two parts. The first two weeks were taught by a professor from West Virginia University. We focused on a short period of German history, spanning from

slightly before World War I through World War II. We also covered the different styles of art which accompanied these time periods which I found immensely interesting. Our second half of the course saw a change in professor as well as a change in subject. Our teacher for this portion came from Kenya, but now lives in Germany with her husband and two children. Rather than focus on Germany and its unique history, we instead focused on its cultural characteristics as compared to our own cultures. I found this second half of the seminar to be incredibly fascinating and thought-provoking. Not only did our teacher compare her Kenyan culture with the experiences she has had with her husband's German culture, but we were also exposed to the many contrasts among our own cultural norms as students. Our professor promoted an environment that encouraged respectful discussion, which I believe was a key factor to this half of the seminar. There were indeed times where difficult hypothetical questions were asked and many of us differed greatly in our views, but there was never a feeling of hostility. Rather, there was one of understanding, and even curiosity.

My German class was slightly larger than my seminar. I ended up placing into the C1 level, which was the highest offered. The first few days served as a bit of a shock for me because I was so accustomed to comfortably learning German at home with the professors who have known me for the past three years. This class consisted of students from the Czech Republic, Albania, Brazil, Russia, Uzbekistan, the US, Italy, and Kosovo. All of us possessed different backgrounds and experiences in learning German, which created a bit of a gap in terms of everyone's true level. Still, the professor effectively created a cohesive class, in which I was able to learn new approaches to learning German which I hadn't previously been exposed to.

In addition to practicing my German for six hours a day in my classes, I also found our excursions to be great opportunities to use German. Whenever we were scheduled for a city or

museum tour, there was almost always an English tour and a German one. The students who were just beginning to learn German chose the English tour, as well as those who were either not confident enough to face an entire tour in German, or were feeling mentally drained from class all week. I made it a point to always choose the German tour, even when I realized there was a possibility of missing some information. Yet, if I had to pinpoint the single aspect of my German which improved most profoundly in Fulda, I would choose my listening comprehension, which I believe is largely because of these tours.

When reminiscing on my trip, two of our excursions stand out quite memorably for me. The first is Cologne. I loved everything this city had to offer. It was big enough to harbor a true city lifestyle, but not so big that I felt completely overwhelmed. I remember marveling at the massive Cologne Cathedral, not only wondering how humans could have possibly built a structure so detailed, but also attempting to get the entire building in frame of my camera. This was no easy feat. After several attempts of contorting myself to get the best angle, I resigned myself to the fact that capturing the magnificence of this structure required a lot more than my iPhone. The second excursion that has left an impression on me was our trip to Buchenwald. This trip was certainly a departure from the nature of our previous excursions. The weight of its historical significance was practically tangible. There isn't much left within the barbed wire fence of the camps, yet what remains is an overwhelming feeling of pain and suffering. Our entire tour remained understandably somber, and when members of the group began to get emotional, others were there for comfort, which, in my opinion, spoke volumes about the uniquely accepting dynamics of the Summer University and its feeling of community.

In all, my trip to Fulda was one I will never forget. Not only do I have close to one thousand photos commemorating my trip, I also have new friendships, as well as a deeper

understanding and appreciation of the German language, all of which I owe to your organizations, the Sister Cities of Wilmington, the German-American Women's Club, the University of Delaware's Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, and the Delaware Saengerbund. Thank you very much for allowing me this opportunity!

Here are some photos from my trip:



Here I am with some of my friends in Berlin at the Brandenburg Gate. (Left to right: Me, Yvonne, Kai, Brenda, Elina)



In front of the Cologne Cathedral



The view at Wartburg