

Will Trip to Riga (Latvia) Fall 2005

Studying abroad is an opportunity afforded to the precious few. Studying abroad *through* your university where all you have to do is bang out an application form, attend the myriad of “how to teach the coddled college students how to handle life abroad” meetings, arrange your travel plans and pray you show up at the appropriate center on the appropriate day; is an opportunity afforded to an even more precious few. Studying abroad with all the afore-mentioned university arrangements *and* getting all expense paid trips to Weimar and Riga, subsidized museum tickets and free lunches? Now that’s just ridiculous. At least, sitting at the end of my whirlwind European encounter reflecting on all the could-a, should-a, would-a’s, I am brutally confronted with just how preposterous this whole experience is. But, I suppose that the 33 of us studying in Berlin courtesy of the generous mothership Stanford University are standing so far in front of the line separating privileged from unprivileged that the staggering, cavernous rift is a little too hazy to make out.

Studying abroad certainly has a reputation at Stanford. OSP advertises it as a chance to “achieve cultural literacy in another society, gain understanding of another perspective on the world, and in turn deepen your understanding of yourself, your own society you’re your values.” Students advertise it as a grade-boost, a “all expense paid” vacation (its easy to forget that \$40,000 per year is not all expense paid) and, of course, an experience in cultural reciprocity. International Relations students, to their chagrin or delight, are required to go abroad, which fortunately means the overseas programs supply classes that work out in their favor. Engineering students, on the other hand, have to face the excruciating decision between the seductive pull of pre-arranged cultural emersion, often without any engineering classes, and the necessity to finish all of the 9,000 major units before their death. In any case, OSP always seems to find an acceptable number of applications from across the academic spectrum, if not, a little heavy on the fuzzy side. To make Berlin even more appealing, it’s the only Stanford OSP program that does not require a language requirement (besides aggressively competitive Oxford, and Biology-focused Australia). What is more (!) is the unique Krupp Internship immediately offered to all Berlin students if they want to return to Berlin and get paid (€1000 per month) in a field of their choice in a relatively inexpensive city, holds no equivalent in any other overseas program. It is no wonder that Stanford in Berlin’s rap is improving. It’s no wonder that the program has gone from _____ students in _____ to 33 students this fall quarter. But, in light of recent articles in the Stanford Daily, one must reinstate the cohesion between students of the “intellectual elite” (as one of our teachers humorously dubs us) and the generous parent institution that affords us that title. That is not to say that this article will embark upon a path of unadulterated praise for the program that gave me this opportunity, but rather take the tongue out of the cheek in discussing the same program, which heretofore has often been made light of.

At a university of classy excess (the portly ice sculptures at New Student Orientation immediately come to mind), I often brush past the lavish luxuries I could grasp if I only reached. I haven’t applied for a research grant, I did not do Sophomore College, I don’t plan on writing a thesis. Therefore, Stanford in Berlin lies in my realm of rare seized opportunities. Despite the fact that I am an IR major and did have to go *somewhere*, I already knew I wanted to go abroad and Berlin was my choice based on

latent interests in architecture and post-war urban reconstruction. Immediately upon arrival we were handed donated book-size fold out city maps, city guidebooks, notebooks for classes, all the money to cover our in-city transportation and a key to the center. I was reminded to open my German bank account as soon as possible so my €14 per day stipend could be immediately wired. Then, upon meeting my host mother, I was shuttled to my private bedroom with my private bath in a characteristic old-woman flat overlooking the canal. Not exactly the cramped city life I was expecting when I left home. So, sitting on a pile of cash in a churning urban center, I lived beyond my means for the first few weeks entirely unconstrained by school (although not necessarily a grade boost, studying abroad is certainly not a source of home-campus-style stress) or a job. I developed relationships with students who I had hardly seen before in my life and even took that aforementioned jaunt to Weimar, courtesy of Helen Bing, the patron to the recently named “Bing Overseas Program.” I went to museums en masse, with the knowledge that I’d get half of my already reduced ticket price back. I went to Latvia, one of the ten newest EU member states, courtesy of George Will (who also took us on a city-wide boat tour), who was recently given a medal for Germany’s Citizen of the Year: the highest award offered to a civilian. I can laundry list the achievements and generosity offered by various Stanford donors and why my study abroad program is better than yours. But, here’s where the story gets juicy. Perhaps I wouldn’t have to if the sentiment were not spreading that OSP, specifically Stanford in Berlin, is getting a bad rap. Perhaps I wouldn’t have to if words like “ungrateful,” “irresponsible,” and “whiny” weren’t floating around. Perhaps I wouldn’t have to if more than one voice was on the table for the general overseas experience. But it’s not, so here I am, trying my best to generate a little more objectivity and perhaps failing at the plight.

I will admit that when we had to get out of the bus on our way to Weimar to do a walking tour of Martin Luther’s hometown, I bitched my way through the cobblestoned village. I’ll admit that I bitched about almost every itinerized item that forced us to wake up at 800am and go to bed at 1100pm. But, in hindsight, I certainly harbor guilt for whatever administrative ears I might have offended and hope they realize it was only an ironic sense of youth that inspired my complaints. That being said, what exactly do I mean by “ironic sense of youth?” As members of this privileged class, I have noticed in my fellow Berlin-mates and in myself an inherent revulsion to pre-planned, pre-paid entertainment. Not all kinds of entertainment, of course. When the prepaid plans involve food of any sort, no one hesitates to jump on the train. But, when confronted with opportunities to experience and see *real* history (which many of us study) in its de facto locations, we balk. I don’t doubt part of it is due to exhaustion, part of it due to the feelings of overprotective mothering generated from some of these excursions, but my final conjecture is that of an awkward metaphysical reaction to an uncomfortable experience of privilege. It originates in the same place as our mediated response to “Oh, so, where do you go to school?” “Uh, you know, the Bay Area.” “Where in the Bay Area.” “South. Palo Alto.” “What school.” Stanford, all right! I go to Stanford. Now please don’t look at me with an awkward mix of envy and reprehension. I know it’s a good school. I tried to avoid this moment. And, undoubtedly, our modesty is somehow confused for a lack of appreciation, an expectation that Stanford is somewhere we’d inevitably end up.

Although our seeming irritation during our planned excursions is not the same as this display of secretive modesty, I have no doubt they come from a sense of profound bafflement and misguided gratefulness. We want the benefits of privilege without having to answer to those without the same benefits. So, it's not that we *aren't* grateful, it's that we don't want to be expected to *be* grateful by whatever parents, friends, aunts, uncles or teachers we tell about what we've done. We don't want to be reminded of the opportunities we aren't taking or the ones we should value more than we do by people who wish they could be in our shoes. No one wants to be told how to experience what they experience when they experience it. On top of that, when the myriad of activities are not ones that pluck at our particular heartstrings of excitement, we undoubtedly feel guilty about our failure to appreciate something that is surely so worthy of appreciation. It's the same as the feeling at Stanford when you haven't studied for a test as much as you should have, and, confronted with the questions and the blue book all at once, the latent guilt about how much studying could have been done (if you had only stopped uploading pictures on your facebook profile) gives way to anger and irritation. And what better place to direct that anger than towards the object of our frustration? The brutal cycle continues. We are all brilliant students and we all have an inherent knowledge of the importance of culture in life. But, in the assailing cold of a winter day in Riga when hunger and weariness has somehow clouded our judgment it's impossible to appreciate the House of the Blackheads to the full extent of its glory. So the next day when we wish we had heard what the tour guide said about the theory of its conception and the year of its construction, it's too late. Such are the complex inner-workings of the mind of a college student. Such are the conflicts between what we express and what we actually feel.

Psychology aside, Stanford in Berlin is nothing to joke about. It doesn't surprise me that so many donors are willing to step to the foreground to make an amazing program even better. Sure, I could have lived a solid pleasant life without a three-day trip to Riga, but that doesn't change the fact that I did get to go there and now I have something to say about the city. I didn't need to see every museum in Berlin, but someone's generous contribution compelled me to rightfully feel that I should. I didn't need to go to Weimar, but now I can say I've stood in Goethe's house and seen Buchenwald and been to an Onion Festival. Sure, no one is forcing me to feel grateful besides myself, but painful reality we all must face is that at this time in our lives we are in no position to offer more than a measly scribbled out letter to those vaguely known faces who have given so much to us without asking for a thing in return. And the best we can hope is that this fortunate education we are all in the process of receiving will eventually allow us to pay this all forward. And I think we all feel uncomfortable with that. Uncomfortable about the uncertainty of our futures. Uncomfortable staring success in the face and reaping the benefits of the generosity we all hope to be able to eventually afford. Uncomfortable receiving what we're not sure we deserve. Yeah, I worked hard. But, did I work *that* hard?

My point is, it's easy to say that it all sucked, that you didn't get anything out of it and what is important about going from foreign land to foreign land are all the different climates in which you can find yourself in a drunken stupor. But, I don't believe that for a second. I believe you can try to piss on all the accoutrements that don't suit the way you perceive your life to be, but when all is said and done, and someone down the road is

comparing their well-traveled-ness to yours, Riga is going to be at the top of your list for bragging rights. But, instead of trying to speak to those whose attitudes I am not attempting to change, I want to speak to those whose dedication I don't want to offend. At the risk of sounding ingratiating, redundant or meek, Thank You. Thank you Mrs. Bing, Mr. Will, Stanford in Berlin staff and Stanford Overseas Studies. You all have truly made this an unforgettable experience.

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