

Riding the Rails

Marc Petrequin

It's amazing how secluded we all see ourselves in relation to the rest of the world. Each day we adjust or adjust to a routine of places, time, and actions that we think will best fit our interests for the present and future; everything else, like where our luxuries come from or where our weapons go is a distraction that has no relevance to the here and now. Though we may not realize it, the ever-morphing environment of college life may be the idea time to drift away from this mindset, when we mature past parental dependence while still avoiding the prospect of being locked into the responsibilities of a career. Partially with regards to this observation and partially to my parents' insistence, I decided to spend a summer semester abroad.

Admittedly, Poland seemed as arbitrary a destination as any other summer program available, and I was not about to solely look for programs relating to my major. I'd never been there, nor studied any significant amounts of the region's history, so at least it seemed like the perfect setting to bring light to any hidden artistic talents that lay dormant within me. Suffice to say, for the first month and a half of summer I'd be letting my interests in computer science take a backseat.

It was not the first time I'd traveled to Europe. My family and I had spent time vacationing in France and Ireland, and once spent a few days touring London. Compared to the miles of paperwork and packing inventory involved in this current venture, my living with students across the Atlantic seemed like a long sleepover at first, albeit one that required memorizing new words for "Hello" and "Thank you." Still, I saw this as the perfect opportunity to get a feel for world travel and learn how to handle myself in a strange environment.

This turned out to be no great accomplishment. Even in a different hemisphere, the routine of getting up and going to class with breakfast on the way became elementary after the second supervised tour. The sunroof-lit classrooms laden with the aroma of acrylic and plaster and the chatter of the radio let all the practitioners of the arts feel right at home. Even the weekend excursions to the nearby cathedrals and art museums felt like long field trips from primary-school, as though sticking together and following the local rules were the only requirements to having a fun, enlightening experience. And after nightfall, the crowds around the street performers and in the nightclubs seem as lighthearted as those in the states. Though there were still things we learned to appreciate as Americans, like drinkable tap water and public shower curtains, for the time being we only cared about what we could appreciate as humans.

After the school program ended, my parents made plans for me to meet up with my older brother and ride the Euro rail with him for two weeks. Needless to say, despite how fast we journeyed from one city to the next, there was always time for a looming sense of acknowledging the authenticity of what once was only referenced through words and pictures, just as one would expect to feel when finally seeing a wonder of the world or a historical monument. Either from the moment you step off the terminal runway or finally step out of the subway station to breathe in a moment of pioneering wonder, you truly begin to feel cut off from a familiar setting, more so than when moving to a new town or trekking across the diverse geography of the US.

Perhaps inevitably, this shade of xenophobia is gradually traded for an invigorating sense of adventure. Your new mandate is to load as many film canisters as possible with the irreplaceable segments of what seems like an infinite reel; your eyes want to absorb the centuries of art and architecture chiseled into humanity's sculpture while your tongue eagerly anticipates being bathed in fine beer and wine before being pampered with rich bread and meats. Part of your

mind demands that you reach out instinctively for as many opportunities for exploration as possible in hopes that at least one will be the golden memory that truly defines the experience. Another part implies that a more casual approach must be taken, as everything that you take the time to enjoy will contribute to the greatest experience as a whole. Somewhere between them you find solace, as though this trip is just a beautifully bizarre dream to be dove into and wrapped around yourself to harness as many memories as possible before your eyelids finally yield to the rising daylight from the familiar world you left behind.

But somehow amidst the adjusting to a social routine, either that of school or casual traveling, we find the greatest culture shock to be the lack of one. Maybe it's strictly the case in Europe where numerous peoples and cultures seem to mesh together like the view outside the train window, but eventually only the most profound similarities among the places visited make the greatest lasting impression. The people in Europe still work at the same jobs we do to get by, they still have issues like poverty and pollution to manage, and they enjoy shopping for miscellaneous luxuries and watching movies on the weekends to relax. They take the time to enjoy their culture and history, and they want to find love, raise a family, and help shape the future by contributing to its new generations. Perhaps most of all, whether they realize it or not, they all wish to fuel that one spark of unique imagination to shape a lasting influence in the world so they are no longer bound by mortality but emboldened by it. When these traits are fully realized, suddenly barriers like the language they speak and the money they spend seem as trivial as what they pour on their fish and chips.

And the world just seems smaller from then on. All the traits and interests discovered within the so-called foreigners of the world bring light to the universal need to survive and the universal desire to find meaningful distinction. Albeit a faint connection, it subsequently makes the joys and grief of the world less of a national motive and more of a human one. Just as the cobblestone streets of London seem no more alien than those of an American city one would visit on the weekends, the diluted cries of the sick and hungry in Africa and South America sound much closer, and the wars throughout the Middle East are no longer as efficient and sanitary as we pretend on private broadcasting. One doesn't need to visit the ruins in Dechau to understand how man's inhumanity will ultimately burst through the trappings of civilization.

Perhaps the signature events that truly emphasized this idea were the meetings with other students along the train cars and hostels, all journeying with a similar reverence. Whether they were Japanese, Dutch, Brazilian, or other Americans, they created a new profile of a college student: the kind that could face the vastness of the world just as casually as that of a local community, with countless opportunities for social assistance and personal enjoyment just down the rails. How fantastic it will be when we have created a world where these rails stretch from Europe to Africa to the Far East and down the spine of the Americas. Finding a human identity along such a path will no longer be a concern for the student, but for every citizen of this planet.

On the long flight home, just as sleepless as the trip east, I thought about how minor my expedition must have been compared to that of my Irish ancestors who braved storms, sickness, and bigotry just to find a piece of earth to call their own. Today I know the promised land of happiness and prosperity is no longer across the ocean void, but throughout the world where humans have found balance between global and personal needs. The statue "Liberty Enlightening the World" that greeted my ancestors in a vast and threatening world not only speaks "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breath free...." It also says "We shall make the trip to them. Pack your bags."