



SMEAL International Programs Newsletter

Spring 2010, Warsaw Poland

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“Why Poland?”... The number of times I was asked this simple question is more than I like to remember, but the memories and experiences I had while studying abroad last spring at the Warsaw School of Economics in Poland, are priceless. Being an avid traveler, I knew that I wanted to study abroad and return to Europe, where one can easily hop from one city and country to the next via plane, rail or

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bus. Having already explored Western Europe and dealt with their expensive prices, I was off to a land where the American dollar would triple in Polish Zlotychs.



I began my semester abroad with a week in London, where after taking in all of the popular sites I was off to Warsaw, to my home for the next four months of my life. I remember that upon arrival into this snow-covered terrain, I knew right away that I was no longer in Western Europe, which was exactly what I wanted.

My new home along with the nine other Americans on the program was in an ALL Polish dorm, where we were able to interact one-on-one with the other Polish students. The beginning of my semester in Warsaw also marked the first time (in my entire life) that I began cooking food other than Easy-Mac and Raman Noodles. The groceries were so cheap compared to the States and I really admired the concept of being environmentally

friendly and having to bring your own grocery bags to the store or being forced to pay for them.

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My favorite place in Warsaw had to be the Stare Miasto, the oldest section of the city, which was completely destroyed in WWII, but then rebuilt a few years later. Having been under Communist rule until 1989, Poland has really advanced in the last 20 years in order to become one of the powerhouses of Eastern Europe.



My classes took place at the university along with the other Polish students, where there were five CIEE courses offered only to us Americans, in addition to the required Polish language course. I must admit that Polish is one of the hardest languages to learn to speak, with 33 letters in the Polish alphabet and the W being pronounced as V in English, for example. We also had the option of taking any additional classes with the other Polish students, where I chose to take International Competiveness, Public Finance, and A Review of Classic American Movies, which the Polish students take to improve their English-speaking skills.

As the semester rolled on Warszawa continued to amaze me beyond my wildest expectations. The people and culture were more than I could have ever asked for from studying abroad. Throughout the semester I found that a huge part of Polish culture and society was the National Opera where we Americans saw the ballet of Romeo and Juliet, the first ballet that I had ever seen. We also saw a Beethoven/Chopin concert held at the National Palace in honor of Frederic Chopin, the famous Polish pianist whose 200th birthday was being celebrated the entire year throughout the country.



My program included two all-expense paid field trips within Poland. The first trip was a study tour to the city of Gdansk, located on the shore of the Baltic Sea. The

train ride was six hours (compared to 16 hours 20 years ago), but we were able to see even more of the Polish countryside (which is very flat since Poland is a huge plain), as well as the summer country side homes, which once belonged to the Russian Communists before its fall in 1989. The entire weekend we enjoyed the traditional Polish cuisine native to the region, including the fresh seafood from the Baltic including sander, crayfish, salmon, and prawns to name a few along with the typical Polish meal of pierogi.

The most significant experience was our visit to the Solidarity Museum, where we learned about how the Polish stood up for their rights against the Communists. Their victory against the Soviets was a predecessor to other countries throughout Europe following suit in the pursuit of their rights. We finished our weekend by making a visit to Wisterplatts on the Baltic, which marked the place where the Germans started WWII as well as a visit to the neighboring town of Sepot, known for its popular beaches in the summer and where we walked on the pier extending in the Baltic Sea. It was while tasting the extremely cold salt water of the Baltic (which could freeze your hand in a matter of seconds) that I looked up and realized where I was on the map. What I had gotten the opportunity to experience and discover during my four months abroad made me realize how fortunate I was to have had the opportunity to study in Poland!



Our second trip was a week-long study tour to Krakow (a southern Polish city). It was here that I visited one of the largest salt mines in the world in Wieliczka, saw a panoramic view of the city from the bell tower of the Wawel Cathedral (where many Polish dignitaries are laid to rest), and one of the most eye-opening experiences was our visit to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps, where millions of Jews from across Europe were murdered by the Nazis during WWII.

While in Poland I also made my way to several other Polish cities including Torun, Poznan, and Wroclaw. A really great thing about my program was that all personal travel within the country could be reimbursed as well as entries to museums, concerts, etc.

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Poland experienced one of the country's most tragic losses during my semester abroad when a plane carrying the President and 95 other officials crashed in the Katyn Forest in western Russia, where over 22,000 Poles were murdered by Stalin's secret police 70 years ago during WWII.

The Republic was on its way to commemorate the loss of this Polish intelligence, but they too would not make it home alive. It was taking part in this week of national mourning that I felt like a true Pole, someone who had lived through something tragic, had to once again remember the past, but look to the brighter future.



They say, "Time flies when you are having fun!" and before I knew it my four short months abroad had come and gone. Studying abroad is not only fun, but it is able to teach you so much more about the culture and surroundings than you ever can learn in a classroom! It was not only great to be able to study in Poland and to learn about all that this country has to offer, but to then be able to have such access to the surrounding cities and countries of Europe was an added bonus. My adventures living out of a carry-on and jumping from hostel to hostel include the countries of Denmark, Sweden, Germany, The Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Czech Republic, Poland, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, before ending my journey abroad in Istanbul, Turkey.

Happy Valley is a great place, but the opportunity to study abroad is life-changing. As St Augustine once said, "The world is a book, and those who don't travel read only one page." Do widzenia! (Goodbye in Polish)





