

Cambridge

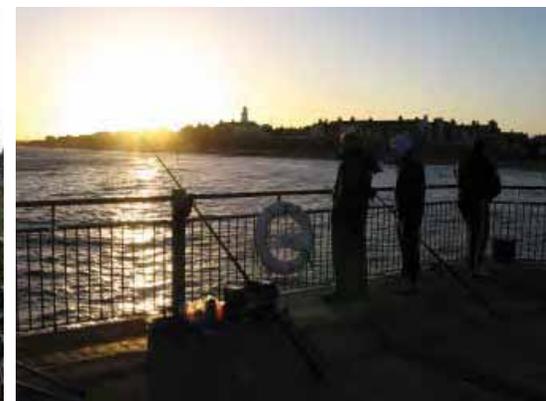
European Shenanigans - A Wallenberg Report by James Munk

Around February of last year, I applied to take a year off from schooling to do youth work with a Christian organization in London. This was an unpaid position and though my living expenses were to be covered it was unlikely that I would be able to do much traveling. However, this prospect was drastically changed when I was awarded a very generous Wallenberg scholarship. What follows are a few things I've learned living in London and traveling around this amazing continent.

It is easy to believe that because we speak the same language the British culture should at least be similar to the American. After living in London, I saw this was not, by any means, a correct assessment. To generalize, it seems that Americans and the English disagree on direction: whereas Americans are concerned with the outward, the British are much more introverted. I mean this not in the pejorative sense, but rather in terms of where they put their energy and import. Though a tired cliché, tea serves as an excellent example. It's a simple beverage—little more than dirty water—but to the English it's a form of art. It is not just a matter of having hot water; you must perfectly heat the



Outside London and at the coast



water, teapot and mug. One must add the milk at the right time and right measure, pour as not to spill, adding water to tea (never otherwise), and—obviously—mind the tea cozy. The American answer: the grande-mocha-latte-soy-cappuccino... with whipped cream. I don't think it's an issue of opulence versus austerity; rather, whereas we add substance in response to value, the British show value by being more concerned with the existing substance. We enjoy a good cup of coffee so we dress it up; they enjoy tea so they are more careful when making it.

The same can be said of their architecture. Think of the American suburban home with painfully-perfect manicured lawn and brand-new vinyl siding. Or rather, take an urban housing block with bright paint, detailed porches, and articulated flower boxes. In London, even the "most posh" neighborhood seems to have chipped paint and sagging gutters. But then you go inside. Like tea it is the existing substance that gets the attention: recessed spot lighting in the bedroom, skylights in the shower, amazing molding in every room, and variable-flow toilets in the bathroom.

This tendency, to imbibe rather than spread, is mirrored in the "depth" of history and the urbanism found Britain; London is perhaps the best example of this. From the different accents found within the city to low-ceiling pubs and the churches vastly older than our nation, one is immediately struck by how much deeper the cultural roots run. Places have the acclimated import of many generations using and loving them—and it pleasantly shows.



Sidon, Lebanon

Similarly, this depth is seen if one considers a section of the city's transportation system: we find underground metro lines beneath sub-terrain pedestrian paths, public streets, the top deck of a double-decker buss, lifted highways, and above it all the air traffic of five major airports. London is a tapestry of buildings and systems. Learning to travel vertically has been one of the enjoyable parts of living in this city.

Though most of my time has been spent in London, I've had opportunities to travel abroad. At the end of April, I visited Lebanon for a theological conference; Lebanon is strikingly beautiful. In such a small country, there exists a richness which I think few nations could replicate. Beyond the dramatic landscape of the country and lavish hospitality for which the Lebanese are renown, there exists a wealth of culture, history, religion, conflict, hope, and sheer love of life that makes visiting the nation exhilarating—if not frightening. Picture driving though the mountains, flying round hairpin turns thinking “this is it, I'm going to die,” only to come screeching to a halt because the driver wants to show you a cedar that is 4,000 years old; that about crystallizes my experience of Lebanon.

There was one incident there that was very challenging for me but an invaluable lesson. The situation came to a head when we took a tour of Tyre and Sidon—Hesbola-controlled Tyre and Sidon. Now, I'm a 6'2", brown hair, blue-eyed, very American man. Walking though the crowded bazaars and suks of Muslim Lebanon was amazing—but I couldn't shake the feeling that we did not belong. It's worth mentioning that a few days earlier the American battleship USS Cole arrived



Beirut



in the Bay of Beirut. It's one thing to talk American Foreign Policy on the third floor of TCAUP; it's another to look out your window and think of the US missiles pointing back. I better understood why I wasn't so welcome in the markets.



The group for which I work is part of an international network of Christian groups which together comprise an organization known as Kairos. Towards the end of March, this organization held an international conference in Poland to which I was invited. This weekend was great by itself, but also served as a good launching point for a brief tour of Eastern Europe. Our agenda: Krakow, Prague, and Munich.



I must admit my preconceptions of Poland were somewhat grey. I suppose I was expecting to see large "down with capitalism" signs written across blocks of cement housing. I was very pleased and surprised to find otherwise. After the weekend conference in the mountains - a very striking landscape - we went to spend a couple of days in Krakow, a truly pleasant city. Krakow has a beautiful central square that anchors the historic part of the city. We spent many hours simply watching shoppers and street performers enjoy each other and the sun. To me the square exemplified what I liked so much about the city: perfect balance. The square was large but not cold; active but not crowded. It was a welcome change from the crush of London and the city seemed to me an ideal place to live.



There was a similar welcome balance in the people themselves. The Polish culture (and its former capital Krakow) can rightly claim a cultural richness on par with any great European civilization; however, there



Krakow, Poland



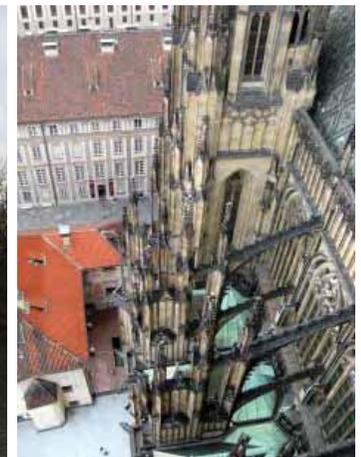
appears to be a certain humility and perspective that marks the Polish people from their neighbors. Poland's history is one of occupation, sorrow, and hardship; through this, its people seem to have latched on to more transcendent values (family, religion, customs) and place less stock in physicality—perhaps because it has so often been taken from them. Though the buildings were beautiful, one got the impression they did not exist for themselves: what made the city so nice was the people and the culture that the structures served.

From Poland, we were off to Prague. My travel-mate and I went by overnight train and unfortunately got off one stop too early—we were a fair bit outside the city. Though this meant a four-hour walk to where we were supposed to be, it did allow us to see a very interesting side of the city. Coming from the south, we noticed a marked difference in the urbanism as we approached the city walls; more so when we crossed over into the ancient city itself. One immediately understood what the riches of an empire confined to one place looks and feels like. Coming from a land (America) where wealth is found in the suburbs, it was bizarre to feel anxious in the outskirts and happy to get to into the city.

The city itself is hard to digest. Not because it was unattractive but rather because everything is so ornate and rich—the city's power and opulence is inescapable and somewhat oppressive. Everywhere you look you can see buildings that but for their existence in Prague would be studied as architectural centerpieces. My friend and I spent about nine hours a day simply walking and looking into and at buildings. A testament to the city: this didn't get boring.

The last leg of our journey was Munich. We learn in history class about the devastation from the World War II air raids but I'm now convinced one can't actually grasp its effect until you see a great German city. Walking the streets of a city in heart of Europe, it was impossible to shake the feeling that something was missing. The city itself was beautiful—clean, efficient, well ordered (very German)... but it seemed somehow empty.

Funny for me was how much I enjoyed the Germans themselves. I had read about American soldiers in World War II finding themselves (ironically) most at home in Germany itself. My experience was very similar. Our cultures share many of the same values—



cleanliness, order, directness—and I found it very easy to interact with them. Also, their beer is really good—really, really good.

Another eye-opening experience was talking history with one of the families we met and had dinner with while we were there. The mother told us a story about how her grandmother had rejected a Nazi order to remove some Christian objects from the school at which she was teaching—something for which she could have gotten into a lot of trouble. Our hostess told us how the grandmother planned to use the “Mother’s Cross” Hitler had given her as protection if the SS came for her. Like the emptiness of the city, history that is abstract in the mind becomes eerily real in the places where it was written.

One of the expectations for the Wallenberg award is that “students return with a broadened understanding of the world and an appreciation and feeling for the people they encountered.” This has certainly been my experience. I’ve built close relations with many dear people and have grown in my appreciation of the world and my place in it.



The North Coast of Ireland