

Winner for AFS International's "My Different View" Essay Contest

Alexis Duecker – 2007 1st Place Winner

“Werde der, der du bist.”*

-Nietzsche

Even I, who was hypersensitive to environmental and cultural idiosyncrasies, underestimated how different it would be. I expected Western Europe to be, in essence, quite similar to America, and in many ways it was. But seemingly minute details contributed to an extraordinary experience, the weight of which continues to become clear. The changes I underwent during my year in Germany were nuanced, as my realization of those changes has been since my return.

No matter how much I read about Germany and its natives before I left for my first experience in Europe, nothing could have prepared me for their seemingly stoic honesty. An inescapable characteristic of their culture, candor “German-style” did not leave me unscathed. Coming from a culture wherein political correctness and ‘feelings’ generally take precedence, I received a shock in Germany. My American foibles were brought to unforgiving light. I spent many a thoughtful, often teary night rehashing not only my own, but my country’s alleged (perhaps legitimate) negative aspects.

But when my German friends acknowledged that I spoke without a typically American accent, when my water polo coach praised my rapid skill acquisition, and when my host parents told me they loved me, I knew they spoke the unadulterated truth. When my host parents confided that they considered me their daughter, and when my area’s representative to the Bundestag exclaimed that my German pronunciation was the best he had heard from an American, I knew it was genuine.

I used to be unflinchingly American, dogmatically patriotic. Before I left for Germany, like thousands of high school students nationwide I had begun to consider my college options. The years preceding and including my sophomore year, I was dedicated to obtaining acceptance into the United States Naval Academy – my father’s alma mater and a source of familial pride. Gradually and almost imperceptibly, though, my view of the world and America’s role in it adjusted to encompass my thoughts and feelings as a figurative dual resident of America and Europe. Seeing the depiction of America through the frank German media, discussing with my peers and adults the repercussions of the apparently ubiquitous American military presence, and rationalizing to myself the administrative policies of my two countries inevitably led to a broader worldview. Upon my return, I applied and was accepted into Barnard College in Manhattan – a cosmopolitan atmosphere which will nurture my fresh state of mind.

The challenge of attempting to reconcile the difference in opinion between my natural and host families served as a crucible for many of the changes I underwent. Even as a reasonably well-adjusted young woman, it was difficult to bear the responsibility of justifying the actions of my country and my own actions, which were ultimately the product of my upbringing. My time in Germany taught me the value of asking questions, and of learning their true, if harsh, answers. Germany has changed, in my eyes, from a land of “Bier und Bratwurst” to one of sincere people, whose attitudes and perceptions reflect their history. Consequently, I now realize that every country on earth is undoubtedly worthy of exploration and understanding.

Though my year abroad was spent in a wealthy, developed, progressive land, my ability to perceive and emotionally react to geopolitical distress has grown acute. My awareness of the existence of different cultures has expanded. I value the diversities, however slight, which account for a wide spectrum of personalities and populations. I am exponentially more appreciative of my natural family, my relatively privileged childhood, and the basically infinite opportunities available to me. I am conscious of the comparative global rarity of my situation; I am no longer naïve and do not believe if I do not see something, it does not exist.

On my last day in Germany, I remember the poignant train ride through the countryside, poring over sentimental letters from friends and hand drawn cards from my younger host sister. My most vivid memory, though, is of a German customs official, as he stamped my passport and politely ignored the tears on my cheeks, telling me simply that he hoped it – the culmination of a year - was good. Despite the initial homesickness, frustration, and loneliness, I can now say that my experience was not only good, it was the impetus to my defining myself. For me, Germany was the question. The altered path of my life will attempt to answer that question – honestly.

**Become who you are*

Out of 117 entries, the **first place winner** for the U.S. is **Alexis Duecker** of Malvern, Pennsylvania. Alexis was a Congress Bundestag participant in 2005.