

Elizabeth Miller

RISE Final Report

“Do you speak German?”

“Well, no, not really.”

“Have you ever gone abroad before?”

“I’ve been to Canada. Does Canada count?”

When I told people that I was going to be living in Germany for a three month summer internship, the conversation generally went something like the exchange above. It did seem sort of crazy at the time, going to a new country where I did not speak the language when I had never even been out of the United States before. During my time in college, I was determined to study abroad but did not have the time to do so during the academic year due to the strict scheduling of my curriculum. I had heard about the RISE program last year through my school and from past participants at Penn State, and I decided that it sounded like a great opportunity to gain some work experience while fulfilling my desire for international travel.

As can be imagined, when I first arrived in Germany, I was very overwhelmed. I had just survived an eight hour plane ride and three hour train ride by myself to arrive in a country where I knew no one and could not even read the boxes of cereal when I went grocery shopping at Rewe. However, after a few weeks, I settled in and became more comfortable with my surroundings and my routine. I met Christoph, the PhD student with whom I would be working, as well as my colleagues and the other RISE students both in my institute and in Hannover as a whole. Everyone at our university made me as well as all of the RISE students feel welcome. We were their adopted Americans.

The work ethic and research environment at German universities is just as intense and structured as that in the United States, but the interaction between colleagues is much more casual and friendly. Heads of sections are not meant to be intimidating; in fact, I went out socially with my coworkers and superiors very often. They took it upon themselves to look out

for our well-being as well as our productivity. They wanted to present to us the Germany they know, both inside the university and out.

Research-wise, my stay in Germany was not easy, but good research experiences often are not. Although I have done research before, I was challenged to handle an area of materials science with which I had not worked previously. I ran into some complications which are typical of research with a language barrier to boot. As I was starting the project from scratch, I was able to take the experiment any direction I wanted to go, which was a blessing and a curse. I could use my best scientific judgment, but when something went wrong, I was left to figure it out on my own, making me very self-reliant. I became extremely familiar with our workshop's planetary ball mill, which I modified to mill ceramics rather than the steel for which it was intended to be used. Also, when I did not have the equipment I needed, I improvised, sometimes to the point of having elaborate Rube Goldberg-style apparatuses sprawled across the workbench in our laboratory. Ultimately, my project had a few successful results, and hopefully, Christoph will use the outcome as the basis for his thesis work. Although it was arduous at times, the research I performed this summer influenced the area of concentration I wish to follow when applying for graduate school this year.

While I was in Hannover, Christoph encouraged me to see as much of Germany and Europe as I could. One day when I was hesitant to leave a little early to catch a train, Christoph literally told me to finish work and go. He wanted me to have a solid work experience but also wished for me to see how great Germany and Europe are. During the summer, I was able to travel to Berlin, München, Hamburg, Köln, Heidelberg, and Amsterdam. I enjoyed local celebrations in Hannover like Schützenfest and Maschseefest and even got to see a professional soccer match! I saw everything in Germany from concentration camps to castles. Germany is a truly unique country with a rich history that must be seen in person to be appreciated fully.

What I found in Germany was not only an enriching academic experience but also a once-in-a-lifetime personal experience. Germans are a friendly bunch of people, and the RISE students of Hannover were very fortunate to have a great group of host friends. I have a wonderful group of individuals, both the North Americans from the RISE program and the

Germans from Hannover, with whom I will keep in touch. One of the ways I have decided to show my gratitude to Christoph is to send his favorite American candies to him. Hopefully, in this small way, I can repay him for everything he did for me during my stay. My experience with the RISE program gave me a new perspective on the United States as well as Germany both culturally and academically. RISE has left a lasting impression on me in professional and individual ways, and I would recommend the experience to everyone.

Disclaimer: "I agree that my report and accompanying pictures are used by the DAAD in printed materials, presentations and on the website in order to inform funding organizations, sponsors, and students about the RISE program."