

My American Experience

By Martin Kabrt

The beginning of this story could be traced back to March 2011, when I applied for the scholarship to attend the CTY Summer camp in the USA. At that point, I had only a blur clue what exactly I was applying to and I sent the application, without any expectation of being admitted, just because this program promised visiting the US, where I have never been before. However, things changed as I passed the first round of the admission process and started realizing that there is a real chance I might get the scholarship. As I proceeded in the admission process, my interest gradually grew and by the time I was invited to the interview, I already knew almost everything about CTY Civic Leadership Institute and its mission and wished so bad I were admitted. Which--- I eventually was.

I found myself on the beginning of a path with still many obstacles ahead. The first foe I had to slay on my way to the US was mind-devastating common-sense-contradicting American bureaucracy. The countless number of forms, confirmations, certifications, and acknowledgements almost dissuaded me from going to the US. Some forms were understandable, most were, however, irrational or even ridiculous. Does an 18-years old Czech student coming for a summer school really need to confirm that he never “ordered a genocide” and does not plan to “practice terror while in the United states”? Does there really need to be a special form about using a sunscreen while in the US? Do we need to be fingerprinted three times and photographed twice? These and similar questions tormented my mind while I was waiting three hours in the American Embassy, when applying for the visa. I was able to overcome this part of my journey only thanks to Mrs. Linda Noell, who helped me with every step we had to take. Now I can tell that the American experience was worth all of that endless form-filling.

Having completed all necessary steps to departure, the Czech group of seven high-school students assembled on Ruzyne airport, Prague, on June 25th, full of expectations and concerns at once. After 10 hours of flight and 3 hours of additional bureaucracy at Dulles airport, we were introduced by Washington DC to the United States of America. With fallen jaws we gazed at buildings we knew from the pictures, unable to accept the sunlight and hot and humid weather when according to our watches it was already long after midnight. After a couple of hours drive, most of us finally arrived to the terminal station of our journey – Peabody Campus of the Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, where we arrived one day earlier before the official beginning of the program.

The following three weeks passed at enormous speed. We quickly managed to overcome slight initial uneasiness with foreign environment and only wondered how incredibly friendly and open everyone was with us. Having grown in old-tradition, rather conservative and homogenous Czech Republic, we were astonished how modern, liberal and diverse American culture is. Accustomed to very tradition-based conservative environment, I felt initially even slightly offended by extreme informality and casualness that accompanied meeting a foreign person. This kind of attitude would be considered as disrespectful in the conservative Europe. However, within days I got used to it and enjoyed openness, friendliness and informality with which I was treated. With such an attitude, it was not difficult to make a lot of friends even on a closer level than I am with most of my friends at home. The only question that kept returning to my mind was how much sincere this friendliness is and to what extent is it just pretence and habit. For example, when an American asks another person how is s/he doing, an American does not even expect a response and if so, then always a positive one. It

Attachment

becomes a phrase instead of an honest interest in how the other person is doing. In Czech Republic, we do not ask random people how they are doing, but when we actually do, then we really care. I experienced more than one faux pas due to this misunderstanding. For example, I replied to the immigration officer at the airport to this phrasal question honestly, that I'm not really doing well, because I just waited for three hours in line. He was confused and did not say anything.

Having met so many African Americans, Asian Americans and Hispanics yet on the first day, we realized the truthfulness of the simile comparing America to a melting pot of cultures. Cultural diversity could be noticed on every corner, but I encountered it particularly in the context of food. In the US, one can get food from all parts of the world without having to leave one food court.

It has been constantly repeated to me that the experience with America I get at CTY-CLI is very far from the real America. I hope they were right, because if the 'real' America was just like CTY, I would have been extremely jealous that I was not born in the US. I was astonished how nice, helpful and respectful people were to each other at CTY – this camp pretty much fitted my vision of utopia where people respect each other, help each other and work for common good, without any distinction of race, nationality, religious affiliation or sexual orientation. I personally for the first time in my life saw a community of young people where an individual does not have to follow stereotypes in order to be included, a community where not sameness and conformity, but variety and divergence from traditional routes is appreciated.

The three weeks, however, had gone very fast and in the Friday morning, July 15th, we had to say goodbye to Peabody Campus, CTY, Baltimore, and, primarily, to all our new friends and significant others, instructors, residential assistants, teaching assistants and all others. A wonderful way to do that was the CTY tradition called Passionfruit, where anyone could share with his/her impressions, thoughts and feelings about CTY and about leaving. Nonetheless, the Czech (and Slovak) group was not finished with its awesome program. After leaving Peabody, we visited the main campus of Johns Hopkins and then enjoyed a delightful weekend in DC with representatives of CTY International and the initiator of the whole trip, Martin Herman. This weekend made up for everything we missed of the US, having prior to that point seen only Baltimore. However, even this amazing weekend loaded with experiences eventually found its end and we set off from the American coast, heading home – overfull with thoughts, feelings, impressions and experiences, but definitely not willing to return to Czech Republic. Arrival to rainy lazy Sunday at the Ruzyne airport concluded the most interesting three weeks in my life. However, I'm already determined to return to the homeland of Lady Liberty, some day.