

The Marian Beane Crossing Borders Writing Competition

Title: A Not-So “Sore” Sore Thumb

Afra Mahmood (amahmoo2@uncc.edu)

A wave of nerves overtook me as the aircraft touched down; “Welcome to Budapest,” the pilot announced. As a freshman, I never dreamed that I would gain the self-confidence to venture into a new country without the security blanket of having my parents around. As a senior, having spent a summer abroad in Granada, Spain, a week-long trip to Hungary and Austria should have been a walk in the park. Quite honestly, the source of my nerves was not fear of being away from the comfort of home. This was a new type of worry.

For months, I had perused through current events occurring in Hungary and Austria. With an openly anti-refugee and anti-immigrant platform, the leadership of both countries had adopted a sentiment of hate towards asylum-seekers, many of whom are Muslim. As a young Muslim woman sporting a brightly colored headscarf, the country’s growing anti-Islamic discourse worried me; according to a recent Pew Research Center investigation, 72% of Hungarians see Islam in a negative light. Aware that of the 10 million inhabitants of Hungary, a mere 5,000 are Muslim, I was prepared to stick out like a sore thumb. Growing up in United States’ deep South did wonders in building a sense of security in appearing differently than the majority. What I was not prepared for, however, was being in a community that prided itself in an ethnically homogenous population as opposed to the cultural melting pot of the West. Nonetheless, with a group of bright peers, I set off on a weeklong spree of sightseeing, touring, and “foodie”ing.

Budapest is a highly walkable city and, thus, it was customary to end the day having walked ten to twelve miles. These walks were not solely filled with eyeing the architectural beauty that contributes so deeply to Hungarian and Austrian history or the wide array of street food and sweets we devoured. They were also reason for conversation with the natives,

restaurant owners, and tour guides. Although I am unable to remember the specificities of each day, I can piece together my study abroad experience by these brief moments of human interaction. *Kiscarang* was one of the many quaint and homey restaurants I ate at during my visit. Filled with the smell of freshly baked bread, I took my seat and browsed through the menu. “Kosher, madam?” My eyes jolted from the menu to meet a pair of warm blue eyes belonging to a middle-aged woman. “I’m sorry, but we don’t serve kosher here but can I interest you in the Mushroom Langoch?” She seemed apologetic. It was the first time since coming here that my food preference of eating kosher was addressed and I was touched. Upon finishing the meal, she came to me again. “You must be tired of only eating mushroom, breads, and pasta,” she said with a smile. I laughed and my laughter was met with a small pat on the shoulder. “Try these places out, hmm?” She then proceeded to name a list of Kosher places in the area. She would never know how incredibly touched I felt in those moments for her apathy to my dietary restrictions.

Another event that humbled me occurred during a tour of Budapest’s Jewish Quarter. The Quarter was a bustling neighborhood, teeming with markets, spaces to socialize, and three remarkable synagogues. In the winter of 1944, the tragic events of the Holocaust resulted in the transformation of a place of congregation and camaraderie into a Jewish ghetto. Here, thousands died of famine and starvation. As our tour guide pointed out emblems scattered throughout the Quarter, she was quick to juxtapose the stark past with reminders of a revitalized present. Today, the Quarter is bristling with activity in courtyards, shops, cafés, and restaurants. She concluded the tour by sharing that the past’s demonization of the religious group was rooted in a lack of empathy. “Just like these days,” she concluded. She, too, noticed similarities. As the group quickly dispersed, eager to continue their explorations, I approached her to question the extent of

the impact of the past on modern life in Budapest. She shared that protests led by young adults are quite common. “Many of us don’t share the same views as the current leadership,” she said. I understood.

These were just the few moments that redefined my perspective of this new country. It took these small moments to make me understand how unfair I had been to jump to conclusions. In an increasingly interconnected globe, the media plays a dominant role in how we tend to perceive one another. We live in the era of fast journalism and click bait news title headings. In many cases, we as a society often tend to overlook the ability this virtual atmosphere has on the subconscious mind. We tend to underestimate how the words presented to us online can manipulate an untouched reality. In my case, the reality of the Hungarian country was misconstrued to the extent that I had unconsciously labeled everyone as “anti-Muslim”. It made me defensive, ready to be attacked for my identity, and most importantly, closed minded to the fact I had placed an entire country under the “anti-Muslim” umbrella. I’m not saying the anti-Muslim sentiment doesn’t exist but rather that it is not an overarching prevalent theme. It would be ignorant to deny that we all fall – to some extent – to the hands of the words we are fed, the posts we read, the opinion of others. Whether it be online or in-person, the world is shaped more or less by the thoughts we feed it. What if we only fed it the notion of loving? As an outsider, both Hungary and Austria appeared to be unwelcoming. I entered this new region of the world prepared to deal with uncomfortable glances, perhaps even sneers and unkind comments. The dramatization of what I perceived my reality to be in this new place was quickly diminished and replaced with fond memories of the warmth I felt from the Hungarian and Austrian people during my stay.

