

Ontario / Baden-Württemberg Exchange Report  
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Mannheim, Germany

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I had meant to start this report saying “tonight, on the eve of my departure from ‘Europe’ – that far off place encompassing so many countries – I can’t help thinking...” However, despite telling myself that on July 31<sup>st</sup>, I would have the time, energy and motivation (or at least, nothing better to do than) to produce this report, it never quite happened. I was alone in Frankfurt, a city I’d visited (even that word is a bit of a stretch) on the sole basis that my flight was taking off from its airport the following morning. But the very second I stepped through security at the Stavanger Airport in Norway earlier that day, saying goodbye to two of my very good friends who had also studied at Uni Mannheim this past spring, my mind didn’t dare lend a second thought to trying to summarize the last 7 months of my life - 12 days short of being 8 months, actually.

I still remember in fairly good detail a workshop my home university (U of O) had organised in April 2006. One thing they had tried to prepare us for was homesickness. We should be aware of the emotional cycle, we were told, where we would eventually experience a “low” over the course of our exchange, a low that would seem dramatically different from the honeymoon-stage following our arrival. This wasn’t my first exchange, and I really wasn’t expecting to have much of a coping problem, to be honest. When I was 16, I had spent three months in Mexico and, while most of the other Canadians had encountered a certain low period, I just kept loving every minute of my exchange. It wasn’t a constant “honeymoon period”, but I certainly wasn’t brought down by a desire to see and be with my Canadian family and friends (despite loving them and missing them, if ever they were to ask...) In any case, I expected I would follow

a very similar personal cycle this time around in Mannheim. And over the course of my semester abroad, I would say that that is pretty accurate. One thing I did not at all expect, however – and the U of O workshop did warn its students about this phenomenon – was this low period upon returning home. I had not experienced such a low at the age of 16; it had been my first time away from home and so I was really excited to see everyone again, thinking to myself that another part of my life was starting. Just looking forward to another step, I guess one could say. I didn't quite experience my return from "Europe" the same way though. To be fair, actually, I dreaded my return. I dreaded it so much; I fell into about 3 days of complete apathy.

I guess I could summarise the emotional aspect of my exchange as follows: ecstatic, excited and extremely positive, then stable, happy and routine-appreciative, and finally (facing pre-departure) devastated, unsure, doubtful of my future, already longing for the past I hadn't quite yet left. The truth is that this was an incredibly fulfilling experience in terms of my emotional/personal development, for lack of a better expression. So fulfilling, in fact, that I was worried about coming back to Canada, same-old, never-changing "Canada" (which really only refers to my immediate circle in Ottawa, but I kept calling it "Canada"; I had even stopped calling it "home" for most of my exchange.) On that night of the 31<sup>st</sup> of July, faced with repacking my luggage for the very last time (How many times had I packed it over the last 7 months!), I felt completely empty. I hadn't even known it, though. Curiously enough, my friend from Norway had pegged the feeling for me when responding to my SMS (known as a Text Message in North America). In my message, I was saying goodbye for the last time from "Europe" with the few Euros left on my Handy (cell phone). My friend's response that followed said, 'You must be feeling really empty. It's okay, you will feel better. You will be excited to see them all again.'

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Two weeks have passed since I wrote my first attempt at recapitulating my exchange. Rereading it, it's odd because I still feel very much the same way. Often, when rereading passages from journals, for instance, I disagree or realize that my feelings have changed in regards to what I had written. And that's completely normal, because it's all a matter of perspective. The way I view my return home now surely can't be the same as it was the very day I arrived, or even merely one week later. Interestingly enough, though, I still recognize a lot of the fear and doubt that I described earlier. I'm still unsure of what to do with my life, and I don't know how to think "future". Looking back, I guess I lived the past 8 months of my life by strictly being "in the moment". I didn't know where I would travel to next, who I would meet or have as a travel companion; I didn't even know what I would be eating for dinner on a daily basis.

Another downer related to returning deals with cash!! I had budgeted for my time away, and I made it out just fine while I was there. Due to a slight oversight on my part, though, I hadn't quite thought of the money I would need in Canada. In theory I should have some money in my bank, but there are delays with cheques being deposited, especially with bursaries and scholarships related to the exchange. Basically, money that I had counted on won't enter my possession before mid-September. It's not the end of the world, of course, since living with my parents for this month, compared to living and travelling on my own, is incredibly easy on the expenses. What's difficult is not having the funds to do what I grew accustomed to this past year: going out all the time! The pace has certainly slowed down, and that's a huge adjustment for me.

Enough about the slow, ongoing readjustment period I'm now dealing with. It wouldn't be so difficult, I imagine, if my experience hadn't been absolutely amazing! I participated in the Spring Exchange with the University of Mannheim, just 30 minutes away from the better-known city of Heidelberg, and roughly one

hour south of Frankfurt am Main by car. The spring semester, which most German Unis call the “summer” semester, started on Tuesday, February 19<sup>th</sup>. Most of the exchange students, though, arrived one month earlier, myself included. The roughly 30 students who arrived in early to mid-January took the intense German courses from the Winterakademie. That first month could not have been any more relaxed and easy to live with. Basically, we attended class from 9 AM to 12 PM, Monday through Friday. In the afternoons, the Winterakademie tutors organised different activities for us, ranging from visiting neighbouring cities, to attending hockey matches, to museum tours. In the evenings, the same tutors would bring us out for educational pub tours, wanting only for us to feel completely at ease in our little Mannheim, and comfortable when ordering beer. The first month was just non-stop socializing, partying, outings, and very, very little work. The language courses did require *some* of our time, but the teachers really weren’t very demanding. Perhaps I should restrict myself to my experience: *my* teachers were not demanding. I was in the advanced (not “extra advanced” or “expert”, i.e. the C level, but the intermediate advanced B level) class, based on my results from the placement test we took on our first day. The groups were ideal: no more than 10 people, everyone at a similar level. If you’re travelling to Germany without any knowledge of German whatsoever, you will probably have a very different experience with the Winterakademie (it sounded like some of my friends were being worked pretty hard, but they did pick up a fair amount in their first month...)

Right then, the first month: “class”, outings, partying, partying, partying, and trying to wake up on time for “class” the next day. I have yet to mention the very best thing there was (and still is) at Uni Mannheim: VISUM (Verein Internationaler Studentenpartenschaften an der Uni Mannheim). VISUM is a student organization run by students for students. It plays an exceptional role in welcoming international students, getting them involved in uni life, activities, travelling and parties. I have never seen such a well run program! If you’re going to Uni Mannheim, you have to check out the website: <http://visum.uni->

[mannheim.de/](http://mannheim.de/). I bring this up because VISUM welcomes the exchange students on their first business day in Mannheim. VISUM gave us a quick tour of the city, escorted us to the Deutsche Bank to open our accounts, informed us of where to accomplish all our wonderfully bureaucratic tasks during our first weeks... Also, when you're chosen to attend the Uni Mannheim, the International Office (AAA), a separate office from VISUM all together, will refer you to VISUM (behind the scenes, you're not even aware that they're doing this for you) so that you can be coupled up with a VISUM buddy. This person will help you with any questions you may have, possibly pick you up your first day, show you around town, and probably be the first German person you meet, therefore a great networking starting point! Most unis have something similar – at U of O, we have a mentoring program that is run much the same way. However, since the network is so big with VISUM and since there are so many activities (weekly international parties, international cook-offs, themed parties, trips to Berlin/Dresden/Hamburg..., clubbing, grilling parties/bbq's, etc.), your buddy and the entire organization make being in Mannheim so easy and constantly up-beat.

I briefly mentioned AAA, and they also played a very important role in making my time in Mannheim painless. They set everything up for you regarding school administration. Tasks such as finding health insurance (mandatory for all German students, and incidentally, exchange students as well), matriculation, getting your student card, purchasing a semester ticket (unlimited transportation on all but ICE trains in and around Mannheim for 6 months, price 98 Euro).... etc., etc., etc., are all set up and simplified by AAA. They are also responsible for setting up your accommodation, if you choose to use their help. Everyone at AAA was so helpful. If you have to make an overseas phone call, or fax your home uni, or just need an office to receive a package for you, AAA won't even bat an eye. I was told that exchange students would be treated like gods, and in most cases I couldn't contradict that sentence. I do know that some of my friends have a very different story to tell about AAA, but I can only report my

experience. Unlike some students, I was a very straight forward case. Those who had something to criticize about AAA usually were students who I would categorize as “exceptions”. A little note, however... I dealt mostly with two people in particular at AAA, who were always very helpful. Both of them have left AAA and have been replaced. I can't really offer any insight on the team there now, except to say that they did deposit my Kaution (deposit on room) promptly into my account and made sure to send my transcript ASAP to U of O for me.

So far, hopefully I've made it clear that VISUM and AAA both received gold stars in my books, and Winterakademie did a pretty good job, too. I do have one major criticism, though, regarding the entry process. Although I was infinitely well informed on parties, travel opportunities, pub crawls, etc., I didn't have the slightest idea as to how to register for courses and/or exams. On the first day of the semester, some mandatory information sessions were held for us, to inform us on some of these questions. I found that session to be somewhat repetitive and non-pertinent to registration. The only thing I actually found out was that we had all just missed the deadline for online-registration. That was definitely frustrating, because I was on an *educational* exchange, after all. I had to fend for myself to get into classes. Uni Mannheim is first and foremost a business and marketing school, and so there wasn't too much information available for literature students. If it weren't for my Winterakademie tutors, who all studied Germanistik, I would not have acquired the tricks to landing my courses. I had to deal with possibly the grumpiest, unhappiest, most unhelpful, secretary for Neue Germanistik. Using the usually widely accepted phrase “I'm an exchange student and wanted to know...” meant nothing to her. I had to put my name on the lists of the courses I wanted to take, but obviously they were all quite full. Frau Grumpy had taken away the full ones, and therefore I couldn't even put my name on the waiting list. She refused to give me the professors' email addresses so I could contact them directly, and ultimately I got them through the tutors. Once I connected with the professors directly, registration was a breeze. The profs were accommodating and understanding of my situation. They would also

check up on me from time to time through email, to see how I was keeping up in the classes, as the courses were in German and somehow they figured out I wasn't a native speaker.

I think it would be pretty safe to say that most of us were looking forward to the beginning of the classes. It was a chance to meet Germans, have some routine and be really busy. Also, our relationship with VISUM only really started in mid-February. When it comes to my view of the studies portion of my exchange, it truly is personal (i.e. subjective, not private) and I doubt very much that anyone of us could relate the same thing regarding it.

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Ottawa

My workload was heavy enough because it took me that much longer to do everything in a foreign language. Simply reading 200-300 pages a week was quite the task for me; it was frustrating that I wasn't able to pick up the subtleties of the languages and so on. However, things did improve. All of my work picked up upon returning from the two weeks of Easter break. I had 4 oral presentations to prepare. Considering they ranged from 10 minutes to 45 minutes, I was feeling the pressure... However, I was fortunate enough to have had a German partner for these presentations and that was the best thing that could have happened. It meant that I had immediate access to the formalities of the projects: length, style, formatting of documents, etc., which were very different from how I had done things at U of O based on the MLA guidelines. It also meant that I had support when wanting to express a certain idea, but was unsure how to. Finally, working with a German partner made me, from start to finish, research, think, draft and write in German. That was also the beginning of my more meaningful friendship with German students. After having worked together on those presentations, we would get together outside of class as well, and later on studied for the exam. Also, my partners were very understanding of the barriers that language sometimes imposed on me and offered to look over my

final papers. We opened a two-way street in that regard – I met with them also to look over their French or English work, or simply to speak French with them, to help them practise.

To work on our projects and papers, or simply to meet, we would often gather at my apartment (better term is *Wohnungsgemeinschaft*, i.e. WG – “common living space” as a very rough translation). I lived in the *Hafenstrasse* apartments. They were basically made up of 6 “houses”, each constituting a 6-floor mini apartment building. Each floor was divided into two; each side had 3-5 rooms, therefore 3-5 people. Each room had a bed, a desk, an armoire, a bookshelf, a sink and mirror, internet, and the biggest windows. Each half of the floor shared a shower and 1 or 2 toilets, and both halves shared the common kitchen, which connected both sides of the building. So 10 people to a kitchen... It wasn't the cleanest of establishments, unfortunately, despite the *Putzfrau* (cleaning lady) coming 3 times a week. I don't want to scare anyone... but with the heat of May and June, we did have a maggot-control problem. I would still have made the same decision, though, knowing then what I know now. *Hafenstrasse* was at the most perfect of locations; it was right on the ring street of the city, only a 10 minute walk from the Market Place, and from there, only another 5-7 minutes to uni. The entire city was very walkable. Of course, when you're running late for your morning class, the bus line 60 runs right outside the WG – so convenient! On the back side of the apartments, we would look out over the *Verbindungskanal* – the canal that connects Germany's two largest rivers: the *Rhein* and the *Neckar*. It's beautiful (granted, beyond it is the *Ludwigshafen Industrial Park*...) We spent lots and lots of time out on our HP – the “*Hafenstrasse Pier*”! We had constant grilling parties (BBQs), sat out there to chat, ate dinner there (no maggots to be found!) or maybe some ice cream from the *Aral* gas station down the street. If no one else was around (which seldom happened) but the sun was, then we would do readings out there or sunbathe...

The very last few weeks of the semester, from the beginning of June, were insanely hectic. I was writing 3 final papers (1 in French, 2 in German, 15 pages each). Those 30 German pages took a very long time to write. I spent back-to-back days in the library (so did my other friends from the exchange), researching and typing. It was so hard to concentrate though because Mannheim (and most of Europe at the time) was having a heat wave. Air conditioning is not exactly as wide-spread in Europe as in North America. We looked like we were going to the beach when we sat in the library: tiny tank tops and shorts. It was just so hot. Another thing that made concentrating so difficult was the fact that a number of exchange students were already starting to leave. The last thing I wanted to do was sit in a library on a Saturday, especially when I could have been making the most of every last moment with good friends. In the end, time was escaping us and we were living in frenzy.

Saying goodbye was incredibly difficult. I made friends, very, very good friends, from all around the world. I do believe we'll have the chance to see each other again, but of course things will never be the same. Every time someone else would leave, I could feel the core of my exchange breaking and, well, ending. I'm very nostalgic about my time away already. It's hardest to think that I won't get that feeling back, and I can't keep it alive where I am now. It's not very easy sharing my experience with people back in Ottawa, except for with those who have already lived something similar. I'm guessing that that's another reason why my return has been a little frustrating; every reference I make or inside joke I think of is completely lost on people who weren't with me. I just wish they would all "get it", but instead it takes a lot of time and effort for me to eventually explain the entire 7 months to my friends and family.

For instance, it's so hard to sit still for an entire weekend, when earlier this year I was flying to a new city every 14 days. It's incredibly aggravating to have to depend on our poorly developed public transportation system (it's a nightmare in

Ottawa! Punctuality is not one of our traits...) compared to the dependable, fast and punctual system in basically every big European city.

Now that I've come back to the subject of dealing with my experience at the present, I think I'll end my recount. One last thought, however. I have taken many lifestyle aspects from my exchange and implemented them here. I've just moved into my down-town apartment, within walking distance to everything. I'll be making my daily trips to the market and grocery store. I'm also acting as a "buddy" to an international student here, and am very intent on being active with the international activities and events. I am starting to look forward to this year, and am doing so partly by incorporating aspects of Mannheim here in Ottawa. Perhaps, in that respect, I am keeping my exchange alive. As well, I'm planning my vacation with my Mannheim friends who will be coming to Canada next summer. Mannheim/European living suits me very well, and I'm about to find out how adaptable Ottawa is to it! Of course, I imagine I won't be in one place for too long...