

OBW Exchange Report  
September 2011 – August 2012  
University of Toronto – Universität Tübingen

First off, I would like to say that a year abroad is an invaluable experience that everyone should take advantage of, and for that I'd like to thank both OBW and my home and host universities for making it possible. In the case of the OBW program, we had an excellent staff that answered all our questions and gave us just enough support to navigate the legal aspects of exchange. That being said, it's also a very independent program that expects a level of autonomy and initiative.

I chose Tübingen because I wanted to be in a smaller city to learn German, and I wanted to be able to take courses towards all my majors. I study Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations/Archaeology and Peace and Conflict Studies, and Universität Tübingen is a very well regarded university with strong departments in both fields. I was able to take courses that weren't offered back home, especially in Archaeology. If you plan on graduating the year after you come back, **make sure** to get all of your credit requirements out of the way (distribution requirements, etc.). I also knew that I probably wouldn't find courses that matched up exactly to those back home, and made sure to take all of my core courses back at UofT and left the broader requirements for Tübingen. The nice thing is that your credits will transfer as Pass/Fail, so the marks will not immediately show up on your transcript or affect your GPA (at least for U of T).

The German university system is a bit different from ours – the ECTS system, and the marking schemes, for example. All of my courses had 100% exams or presentations. In the cases where I needed more ECTS credits for them to be transferred, I had to write 20-page papers on a given topic. The hardest part is easily the language barrier – German as a second language classes are fine, but sitting through a 2-hour lecture in rapid German one month into your exchange is one of the most daunting experiences I have ever had. My advice is to take more lectures (Vorlesungen) and fewer Seminar classes in your first term if possible – it takes a while to get used to academic German, and on top of that, Seminars consist almost completely of student-led presentations. I found this to be extremely difficult, as every student had a different pace and style of speaking that made it really hard to follow and get everything out of the presentation. My classes also organized a series of excursions to museums that housed collections we were studying, and we got to meet and speak with the curators and researchers whose works we regularly use in class. It was such a great experience, but at the same time, I feel like I could have gotten so much more out of it had I been more comfortable with my German. That being said, don't be scared, take one as a challenge! I was also happy to get the chance to take classes I couldn't back home – I took French classes both semesters, something I couldn't do back home because I'm not enrolled as a French major. It made for an interesting schedule! The professors in Tübingen are excellent; all of my teachers were extremely approachable and kind, and willing to help me out. I had professors propose possible research topics, bring me books and articles to help me out on my seminars, give me an overview of German essay writing, etc. German as a second language classes (or ADAF) are really useful and I recommend them to everyone. There are courses ranging from general

language and literature to phonetics and intensive grammar. I took a few of these classes, and while some were better than others, it was a great place to improve my German and meet other international students. Don't be too worried about your German – the sheer fact that you are living in Germany, hearing it and seeing it everywhere will speed up your language learning tenfold. You pick up things just from hearing them in context and they really do just stick. Being in classes with German students also forces you to step out of your comfort zone and speak to others in German. Of course it's extremely frustrating when you can't express yourself properly, but most people were pretty understanding if your German wasn't perfect and were still interested to hear where I was from, what I was studying, etc.

I was very fortunate to receive the Baden-Württemberg Stipendium for a semester, which was extremely helpful. I was also given a room in the Prinz Karl residence, the Foundation's housing for students who got the scholarship. It was easily the best residence I've seen in Tübingen – right in the middle of the Old Town, a short walk away from the University, shops, restaurants, the train station, etc. The rooms were spacious, clean, with a shared kitchen and bathrooms. Because it was a building of all exchange students, we didn't exactly speak in German all the time, but it was a nice way to meet other internationals as well.

Administrative tasks – The most important lesson I learned, was to always go by what your exchange office says. There was a bit of a misunderstanding with my September language course, whose staff had arranged for all the administrative work. They were under the impression that as a Canadian, I already had excellent government health coverage that would be valid in Germany and therefore I wouldn't need to buy into the German policies. This is not true, and although I had already heard this from OBW, I still signed a waiver thinking it would be all sorted out, but no – it most definitely wasn't. I was instead left uninsurable by any public provider for the rest of my stay. In the end, I had to buy a private policy, which was complicated and completely unnecessary. You also run into the possibility of never being able to buy into public insurance ever again – so if I were to move back to Germany, I risk not being insured.

Another important task is applying for the residence permit - do so as soon as possible. When applying, the Bürgeramt will ask you what day you want to leave by. Although you may not yet know when you will be returning, set a date as far ahead in the future as you possibly can (e.g. Sept 1). I knew we finished classes around the end of July, so I put down the 10<sup>th</sup> of August as a reasonable date. You might change your mind though – I for example decided to stay a bit longer and travel. A lot of people, myself included, found themselves in the situation where their residence permit would expire before they could get out of the country. I was worried if the permit also applied to the rest of the EU – it does, but you are allowed to carry over the days left over from your 90-day tourist status into the future. That means if you received your residence permit in the fall, some 30 days into your stay in Germany, you would have a full 60 days as a tourist once that permit expires, say the 1<sup>st</sup> of August. It all worked out for me, but a friend of mine had to leave the country and get a special visa, because the Bürgeramt put down a very early date, and her flight was 5 days later. She was told that the consequence for overstaying your residence permit is running the chance of being blocked from Germany for the next 5 years.

## Life in Germany

Living in Germany is great – the cost of living is affordable; the quality of life is excellent. Student housing is subsidized, groceries are quite cheap and there is plenty of variety. Tübingen is a rather expensive town to shop in, but the larger town of Reutlingen is about 10 minutes away by train and Stuttgart only 45 minutes away. Germany is fairly centrally located for travel around Europe and beyond. I tried to plan trips during holidays and long weekends, but my schedule made it difficult to do too much. I travelled through Germany, Belgium, France, Denmark, Cyprus, and Austria, and my big trip of the year was interning for seven weeks in Ethiopia during the semester break in March. Regional travel is quite easy with the Deutsche Bahn, which connects every city and town in Germany as well as international connections to other countries. A cheaper option to train travel is going by bus – Eurolines, for example, runs to all major cities, and often schedules night trips. I did this twice to Paris, and saved on a nights' accommodation and a day's travel time, which was nice. If travelling by air, it is always better to book your flights well in advance if you have a long weekend or a particular destination in mind. The fact that most destinations were relatively close by took away some of the urgency of booking in advance for me, but prices really do go up spectacularly the closer you get to your travel date, even if you're just going an hour or two away by charter flight.

All in all, my experience in Tübingen has been excellent and unforgettable. I've made some wonderful friends, met many new people, learned a new language, and tested my own limits. I've always dreamed of living abroad, in a different language and culture, and now I'm happy to say that I've done it and am already looking forward to doing it again.

If anyone has any questions about OBW, Tübingen, or Germany in general, feel free to send me an email. My address is [h.gebremedhen@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:h.gebremedhen@mail.utoronto.ca)

Viel Spass, und viel Erfolg in Deutschland!

Helina Gebremedhen