Over about three months I had the incredible opportunity to visit six countries and fifteen cities. Throughout this time (along with the time leading up to it), I attempted to share my experiences with friends and relatives by keeping a blog of my travels. On the following pages you will find descriptions of the ups, downs, and everything in between from my time abroad. So please, sit back, relax, and enjoy the story.
81 Days!

Only 81 short days until I leave on a jet plane. While that may sound like a long time to some people, I feel as if I have a thousand and three things I need to accomplish before I go. Perhaps most importantly, I need to successfully get a National Visa in order to stay in Poland for 3 months.

In addition to being a lot of confusing paperwork, the Polish Consulate requires its visa applicants to go to the Consulate in person to apply. Therefore, I will be taking a quick jaunt down to New York City next week! And as of right now it seems like it will be quite an interesting jaunt.

My journey will begin just after midnight Thursday night Friday morning, when I leave for Syracuse’s Regional Transportation Center (a short 10 minute car ride from campus). At approximately 1:35AM I will depart from the lovely city of Syracuse for good ol’ NYC.

Pending a smooth bus ride down south, I hope to arrive in NYC at 6:35AM. Upon arrival, my goal is to immediately find sustenance in the form of coffee, unhealthy breakfast food, and free WiFi. My appointment at the Consulate is set for the bright and early time of 8:30AM.

I’m currently crossing my fingers that the Polish Consulate determines that I’m not a serious threat to their beautiful country quickly so that I can explore NYC a little bit before I pass out from exhaustion. Thankfully my roommate is heading back to Syracuse the same weekend I’m in New York City so when I tire of urban exploring I can take a short (to my knowledge) train to her home to either leave for Syracuse that night or the following morning.

While next weekend sounds incredibly exhausting and probably possibly stressful, I’m truly looking forward to seeing New York City and getting my first taste of Poland (hey, it may not be a big piece of Poland, but it’s still technically Poland).
A Taste of Polska

As it turns out, I got my first taste of Poland sooner than I thought! Yesterday morning I received a text message from my cousin Kathy asking if I wanted to go to the Polish Festival in Downtown Syracuse. I was thrilled for the opportunity to try some Polish food and get a feel for the Polish community in Syracuse.

After scoping out the festival, we (Kathy, Paul, Cecilia, Kurt and I) decided on a place to eat. After considering our options, we settled on Eva’s Polish Restaurant. It was clearly a crowd favorite, based on the line. The long line allowed me plenty of time to decide on which Polish delicacy I wanted. After careful deliberation, I decided on the Kielbasa sandwich. It was delicious. In addition to trying the Kielbasa, Kathy was kind enough to let me try a few bites of the Polish sampler plate she got. If Polish food in Syracuse is any indication of how the food in Poland will actually taste, I seriously can’t wait to stuff my face when I’m abroad.

Now the festival was more than just food, they also were selling a ton of Polish merchandise and were enticing the crowds with a little polka.

All in all, it was a wonderful evening of food, fun, and polka. Only 79 more days!
Ticket to Ride

June 27 was a crazy day for me. Most importantly, I made my way to the Polish Consulate in New York City. Here is a look at how I went from Syracuse to New York City to Pennsylvania in 24 hours!

12:50am: I arrive at the Syracuse Regional Transportation center. After asking a worker there which gate my bus will be at, I discover that the Megabus actually picks up outside, in front of the building. Kind of weird, but I head out front regardless. My bus is due at 1:35am.

1:35am: No sign of a bus yet (ugh), but I pass the time by talking to two friendly women that are also taking the bus to NYC. At this point I'm crossing my fingers for a electrical plug to charge my phone and a window seat.

1:50am: The bus finally arrives. Now I am obso ready to go to sleep until we arrive. As the bus pulls up, I see that it is filled to the brim and is weirdly a double-decker bus. I quickly find a seat (unfortunately not a window seat, boo), plug in my phone (but there are electrical plugs, yay!) and get ready to knock out for the ride.

Next, the bus driver gets on the intercom to announce that we will be stopping at the next exit to take a 30 minute rest stop (seriously?). We finally get moving again at 2:30am.

5:00am: I've been able to catch an hour or two of sleep. The Megabus is incredibly uncomfortable. All I want is a foot rest (take note, Megabus workers). We stop again for another rest break. I'm starting to get anxious as I check my phone's gps and realize we're still 2.5 hours away from the city. At this rate we won't be there until ~7:45am (as opposed to the advertised 6:35am arrival time). Thankfully, my appointment at the consulate is not until 8:30am.

7:40am: I have arrived in New York City (only a little more than an hour late)! I couldn't wait to get off the bus. As soon as I make it down the stairs I start to book it in the wrong direction. I was so ready to start moving. I walk for about 5 minutes, before realizing I was walking in the opposite direction of where I wanted to go. I hastily reorient the map in my head and begin working my way in the right direction. In no time I make it to the gorgeous Polish Consulate.

8:25am: Despite arriving at the consulate at 8:05am, the doors do not open until 8:25am. To pass the time I talk to two other women who are waiting to get schengen (short term) visas. Upon entering the consulate, I am stopped by a buff Polish security guard. He asks me why I am there and goes through my bags.
Apparently I am not a threat as he hands me a ticket with a number on it and tells me to take a seat. The room is relatively small, with a single TV (broadcasting Polish news), a “Poland Springs” water cooler and 3 windows. The women in the windows ring a bell and a screen above the window appears with a number to tell you who to go to and when.

I am the second person to enter, so a woman in front of me gets her visa work taken care of. After a few minutes I hear a bell, foolishly assuming the second bell would be for me, I head up to the window. An older woman asks me what I need, when I tell her I’m there for a visa, she looks at me confused. It’s at this moment that a voice behind me speaks up, “Uh I think she has the wrong number…” *Oops*. Apparently I should pay more attention to what I’m doing. While I was number D401, this guy was number A100. Completely different. I go back to my seat with flushed cheeks.

After another 5 minutes or so, my actual number is called. I am lightly questioned about my reasons for going to Poland by a younger woman. I guess I convinced her that I have no malicious intentions as she scans my student ID, takes my passport and money, and lets me go on my way. As I exit the consulate, I run into my friend Madeline, her mom and her friend Jenny and we make plans to meet up after she works out her visa stuff.

Upon exiting, I realize I’m not sure where I want to go. I decide to walk down Park Avenue towards Central Park. On my there I see Grand Central Station and decide to stop there *mostly because I really have to pee.*

**9:35am:** It doesn’t take me long to find a bathroom in Grand Central Station, thankfully (although the first one I found was closed – causing an outrageous line at the one I ended up at). Grand Central Station is HUGE and crazy beautiful. I spend a fair amount of time watching an older woman expertly play the violin. After exploring a little bit, I begin to head out.

On my way out of the station, I see an art exhibit by the exit. Although, I think it was more of an interesting form of advertising. Called “Eat the Art” (sponsored by Castello Cheese), they had several pieces of cheese based paintings hung on makeshift walls with real life replicas next to them. Now here’s the cool part, you had the opportunity to try the cheese in each real life replica. What a weirdly awesome thing to do. I feel like Jason Deal would especially appreciate this.

**10:05am:** As I actually leave Grand Central Station, I get a text from Madeline informing me that they are done at the consulate and are heading to Times Square. I begin to walk in that direction.

I get to Times Square first, where some sort of martial arts competition is taking place. While waiting for Madeline, her mom, and Jenny I watch the martial arts, which turns out to be choreographed… and set to Pokemon battle music. *Seriously.*
When Madeline + crew arrive, we spend our time walking around Times Square. First we went into Toys R Us, and saw the full-size Barbie house and T-Rex. Silly, but fun. We also went to the Hershey store, where we shared a bag of mini Reese’s cups. Yum.

At this point, we chose to sit in the center of Times Square for a while to people watch and talk. There was one guy who was walking around giving people yellow and red cards (like soccer) for taking selfies. It was pretty entertaining to say the least.

Random fact: The characters in Times Square are extremely creepy. Especially when they take their heads off. *shudders*

11:50am: We left Times Square and head towards Penn Station where we stop to eat at a Chipotle with Jenny’s cousin. I was surprised by the long line (not unlike the line at the Syracuse Chipotle during the school year), but remembered that it was a work day in the city. Eating feels wonderful, and I begin to feel the fatigue from barely sleeping since Wednesday night.

1:20pm: After lunch, it is decided that it’s a good time to head home. Thankfully, Madeline, her mom and Jenny are also leaving using the NJ Transit and we struggle through Penn Station together. Penn Station could really stand to have more signs and helpful people hanging around. I just miss the 1:29 train and have to wait until 2:51 for the next one. Madeline’s train leaves at 1:50 so we hug goodbye, with the realization that the next time we see each other will (probably) be in Lithuania. Crazy!

While waiting for my train, I walk around looking for a place to sit. My feet are exhausted. It takes a while, but I found a secluded seating area where you had to show an attendant your ticket in order to get it.

2:45pm: I am finally able to board my train! I was honestly surprised by just how nice the trains were. The Metra in Chicago could definitely take note. It’s only a short train ride to Montclair, where my roommate Morgan was waiting for me.

3:35pm: Morgan picked me up at the Upper Montclair train stop and we left straight from there for her lake house, where we were going to spend the night. The drive is beautiful, despite the traffic we ran into. A pit stop at Dairy Queen made the ride go a little quicker too.

6:30pm: We arrive at Morgan’s lake house, a beautiful place with an outstanding view. It feels great to relax and enjoy the lake view. It’s crazy how I can start the day in one of the busiest places in the world and end the day on a serene lake.

While yesterday was insanely busy and contained three different kinds of transportation, I loved every second of it. I get more and more excited for Poland as each milestone (like this one) passes. 72 days!
AccessGranted

Against all good judgement, the fabulously naive Polish government has bestowed upon me a visa (or wizja) to their country! (Cue the celebration and/or fireworks).

It appears as if all of the trouble and various modes of transportation to and from New York City were well worth it and I won’t have to make more than one trip to the Polish Consulate. Now all I have left to do is get on the plane!

Just kidding. It’s unfortunately not that simple. But I am one step closer to the international terminal!

48 days!!!

Crunch Time

As I am writing this, there are currently only 3 (3!!!) days left before I leave for a semester of adventure, kielbasa, and airline-supplied peanuts. I have not packed a single thing yet, nor have I fully figured out what I should pack. So I’m clearly totally prepared to leave for three months.

That being said, I do believe that I have everything I need to go and only have a few things left to do before boarding the plane on Tuesday. It is absolutely insane to think that I will be in Lithuania in just a few days!

When I leave on Tuesday I will be flying into Vilnius (the capital of Lithuania) to begin our 16 day traveling seminar. Over these first 16 days we will be exploring Vilnius, Sejny, Krynki, Kraszniany, Lublin, and Warsaw.

During this time we will be jump-starting our semester abroad, making these sites of history our new and ever-changing classroom. While we will be crazy busy during this time and will have lots of work to do, I know this will be the most incredible way to begin my semester abroad.

Next time I write, it will be from Europe! I can’t wait to tell you all about my time across the pond!

Do widzenia!
Leaving on a Jet Plane

As unbelievable as it feels, I am finally in the incredibly beautiful city of Vilnius, Lithuania! I left home on Tuesday, September 9 to start the adventure of a lifetime. After an uneventful ride to the airport, I checked my bag, said my goodbyes, went through security and walked to my gate to wait for my flight.

Nearly seconds after hanging up with my mom after I got to the gate, a young woman came up to me and asked if I was going to Poland and if I was Katelyn Olsen. I said yes, with what I’m sure was the most befuddled look on my face. Turns out she was another student on our trip! Kelsey (the other student) and I chatted for a bit about the trip before boarding our plane to Brussels. I felt fortunate to have a flying buddy.

I did not have the option to choose my seat on the flight so I was semi-concerned about the potentially less than desirable seat I could receive. However, I was lucky enough to somehow get upgraded to Economy Plus where I got so much leg room, I had no where to rest my feet (first world problems?).

Despite all the legroom I had, I couldn’t help but be jealous of the business class passengers that sat the row in front of me, with only a thin veil separating us. The flight itself was uneventful, and I was in Brussels before I knew it.

After exiting the plane, Kelsey and I had to go through border control and security (again) before arriving at our gate for our flight to Vilnius. The lines were incredibly long and we had some concern about making our flight, but we ended up getting to our gate only minutes before boarding began.

Boarding in Brussels was definitely an interesting experience. After they scanned our tickets, we went outside and boarded a bus that took us to what seemed like the middle of the tarmac to board our plane.

At this point, we met up with another girl on our trip, Page, who had flown to Brussels from Venice. I slept for most of the short flight, and woke up ready to start this trip.

We landed in Vilnius around 2:30pm local time (which is 6:30am Chicago time. Yikes.). We did not have to wait long for our luggage and then headed out to look for our professors, Hana and Juliet, who were meeting us at the airport. Thankfully, they were waiting right outside a coffee shop in the arrival area and only a few minutes later we were in a taxi headed to our hotel in Vilnius.

Overall, the trip was long but easier than anticipated. I am loving Vilnius so far and can’t wait to give you an update about this beautiful city!
Walking Around Town: Vilnius Part 1

Between September 9-13 I had the pleasure of exploring the beautiful city of Vilnius, Lithuania while simultaneously getting the opportunity to learn about the oppression and destruction of the Jewish culture that occurred here.

**Day 1**

After everyone’s flights arrived in Vilnius on Wednesday, we met up with our instructors Hana and Juliet in the lobby of our hotel at 7:45 to walk to dinner. While everyone was clearly somewhat tired from their travels, the excitement of walking through this new city was palpable. The journey to our restaurant took about 20 minutes of walking through winding roads, small alleys and unique architecture. I was somewhat surprised by the amount of graffiti I saw on the walls of buildings, but it somehow added to the atmosphere of the city. The restaurant was small, but quaint, tucked into an alleyway. The dining room had maybe four or five tables and our party of 12 seemed to overwhelm the room. For dinner I ordered the beef cheeks with a potato cake and glazed carrots. Everything was incredibly delicious and made me excited for more Eastern European food.

Walking home from dinner, I couldn’t help but feel thankful for the opportunity to be here while also bursting with excitement to see more of the city tomorrow.

**Day 2**

We began our first full day in Vilnius eating breakfast as a group in the lobby and going over the syllabus for our first class, Negotiating Identities Across Europe’s Borders. The main thing on our schedule today is a walking tour of Vilnius.

Despite my original thought that the walking tour would be of touristy Vilnius, we immediately jumped into our class with a walking tour of Vilnius’s Jewish history. Our first stop was inside a building off of a small alleyway near “Old Town” to see the remains of an old Yiddish sign.

This sign is one of the only remaining Yiddish signs in Vilnius, a place where there was a large enough Jewish population, you could get by just by speaking Yiddish. According to our tour guide, Yiddish was practically the second national language of Lithuania.

The next stop on our tour was the last remaining synagogue in Vilnius. Prior to WWII there were over 100 synagogues in the city, but after the war and Soviet occupation, only this one remained.
While the synagogue was closed during the Nazi occupation, it stayed open during Soviet occupation only because of the brave members that chose to help run the synagogue despite what it would do to their reputations. This synagogue was one of the 63 synagogues open in the 11 time zones the Soviet Union covered.

Another stop on our tour was this unassuming building that once housed the Jewish mafia prior to WWII.

Our tour guide made a point to inform us of the normal lives the Jews lived prior to the Nazi and Soviet occupations, including having their own mafia. Many people living in the neighborhoods behind this building worked as beggars. The guide even mentioned a woman who would hire a nanny while she went to beg because it was enough to be her full time job. Across the street from this building was a school for pick-pocketers that would teach small boys the art of pick-pocketing.

Just a short walk from here were the outskirts of the Jewish ghetto that was established September 6, 1941. Despite the hard life in the ghetto, there were 27 sports played and over 100,000 books borrowed from the library.

Here the tour guide showed us the old Jewish neighborhood. In the 14th century many Jews moved to Lithuania because they had more lenient laws that they could live under. At this time, the Jews could own pawn shops and were given three streets to live on. The only things the Jews could not accept at their shops were horses at night (because they would likely be stolen) or clothes with fresh blood on them (they could accept them if the blood was dry). In 1568 the Jewish community was officially established in Vilnius.

Our final stop was outside the location where the Great Synagogue once stood. Up to 6000 people were able to worship in this synagogue at once. Unfortunately it was destroyed during Soviet times.

When the tour ended, we were given the rest of the afternoon/evening off to explore the city. A group of us took this time to walk through some of the more touristy parts of town, including this gorgeous church.

After exploring the city for a while, the whole group met back up at the hotel to get to know each other better. We eventually decided to go out. We got a little lost on our way, but it was the perfect way to end our first full day in Vilnius.

I feel like I learned so much in just this first full day, I can't imagine what I will get from the rest of this trip. In order to give Vilnius the full attention I think it deserves, look out for the remaining posts describing my time there.
Tolerance and Culture: Vilnius Part 2

Day 3

Our first stop on day 3 of our stay was the Jewish Museum Center of Tolerance. The center was started about 20 years ago and is owned by the state. They hold many concerts and talks and their main activities include education, culture and arts. Despite being named the Center of Tolerance, I felt that it was more of a museum of Jewish culture. As we walked through the different floors, we were met with many pieces of work done by Jewish artists and artifacts of old synagogues. I really enjoyed one room in particular that allowed you to take a memory stone (a part of Jewish culture) and leave it by the picture of a child. When you placed the memory stone by the picture, the room lit up and a song written while in the ghetto played. It was beautiful.

Upon leaving the Center of Tolerance, we walked farther into town to head to the Jewish Museum also known as the Green House. The Green House is a small building hidden from the main road as it is set far back in an alley, shaded by the trees.

As we walk up to the museum, the tucked away location automatically gives you a feeling of secrecy, as the Lithuanians have yet to fully accept their role in the Holocaust. When we get to the museum, we are shown through the rooms by our Austrian guide, Marcus, who is there fulfilling his required military duty.

When you walk into the first room of the exhibit, you are immediately hit with the hard facts of the Holocaust in Lithuania. Lithuania was the first German occupied country in 1941 with an original population of about 220,000 Jews. By the end of WWII, 90% of those Jews will be killed. Unlike other countries, there was massive Lithuanian collaboration to kill the Jews and the Lithuanian Nationalists helped the Nazis. Perhaps the most striking incident of this is the mass murder of Jews in Paneriu Forest, where about 70,000 Jews were shot, killed and left in pits. (I will go more into this later).

The second room we enter is reminiscent of the the Tolerance Center as it displays the culture of and the famous Lithuanian Jews. We had already received a lot of the information between our walking tour and the Tolerance Center.

In the next few rooms we learned more about why the Jews in Vilnius were targeted, the Kaunas ghetto, and the spiritual resistance within the ghetto. One of the reasons that the Jews were targeted in Vilnius was because they celebrated when the Soviets invaded in 1940 because they viewed the Soviets as safer for them than the Germans. Due to this, the Lithuanians stereotyped the Jews as communists. The Kaunas ghetto was established in 1941 and was ultimately liquidated in 1944. The Vilnius ghetto, established around the same time, was liquidated after two years. Despite the horrors of the Holocaust and the ghetto life, spiritual resistance was strong within the Jewish community. The partisans wrote many songs during this time and a theater was even established within the ghetto.
While thousands of Jews were killed during this time period, many were saved by Lithuanians that hid or otherwise helped them. The Righteous Gentle award (which is given to anyone who saved a Jew’s life during the Holocaust) has been given to 793 Lithuanian citizens as of 2010.

We finished our tour of the Green House with a discussion with Rachel, a survivor of the Kaunas ghetto. Rachel, speaking with conviction and clearly full of wisdom, spoke of the spiritual resistance within the ghetto and of the number of witnesses to this tragedy that did nothing but idly stand by. Our time with Rachel was incredibly touching as she left us with the insistent purpose to “don’t be indifferent.”

After leaving the Green House with heavy thoughts on our minds, we were given the afternoon to explore Vilnius once again. The first thing that my group did was go to lunch. We headed toward the center of Vilnius and found a cute Italian restaurant with outdoor seating. I ordered a small Bambino pizza, which claimed to have cheese, tomato sauce, and fried potatoes (potatoes are the best). This is what I received.

French fries on pizza should really become a thing in the US.

With sufficient food in our stomachs, we carried on with our exploring of Vilnius. Today we went much further and found more of the touristy areas of the city and went off the beaten path as well.

We ended our exploring with some ice cream and cheesy touristy photos in Town Hall Square. Despite the fact that today was only my second full day in Vilnius, I feel as if I have already learned at least two week’s worth of information. I know that we have another heavy day in Vilnius tomorrow, but I am looking forward to continuing to get a better understanding of the Lithuanian Holocaust and the roles that identity play in this tragedy.
Victims Throughout the 20th Century: Vilnius Part 3

Day 4

Our final day in Vilnius was also the heaviest of the four. We started out the morning by packing our lives back up into our suitcases and putting them on the bus. From there it was a short bus ride over to the Museum of Genocide Victims (KGB Museum). We ended up getting there before the museum opened, giving us time to explore the area some.

During this time I chose to sit in a nearby park and soak up some vitamin D with my classmates. It was nice having this free time to laugh and get to know each other. On many levels, it feels as if I have known my class for so much longer than 3 days. Traveling in this foreign place brought us together incredibly fast.

The KGB museum opened at 10am and our guide met us in the lobby. She started our tour with a short history of the building we were in. Built in 1899, the building was originally a courthouse until it was taken over by the predecessor of the KGB in 1940. The Gestapo were centered here in 1941-1944 until the KGB regained control of the building and kept control until 1991.

With this introduction, the guide led us into the basement of the building where the secret prison for political prisoners was kept. When prisoners were brought here they were first placed in very small rooms, referenced to as the “boxes,” where they waited for their documents to go through. From here they went to the search room where everything was taken from them and they were photographed and fingerprinted.

There were around 28 thousand prisoners that went through here during the second Soviet occupation. The prisoners here were only kept here long enough for interrogation and then they were shipped either to mental institutions, deported to Siberia, or executed.

The reason many prisoners ended up in mental institutions following their stay here was because of the torture they endured during their time. The most striking form of torture they mentioned on the tour, to me, was the solitary confinement in water. Prisoners were stripped to their underwear and then kept in a room that was filled with ice water (which eventually turned to ice in the winter). There was only one small bar in the center of the room not submerged in water that the prisoners could balance on to attempt to stay out of the water for the (up to) five days/night they stayed here.

After seeing the deplorable conditions the prisoners were kept in, the guide showed us to the execution room. 1038 people were executed here after being sentenced for betraying the motherland. Most of these bodies were then taken to Tuskulėnai, where they were buried in a pit.
Once we finished our tour of the KGB prison, our guide then took us upstairs where there was an exhibit about the Soviet deportations to Siberia. In 1941, the first year of these deportations, 17,000 people were deported from Lithuania to Siberia. These people mostly consisted of intellectuals and independents. Following WWII, deportations began to place every year until 1953. No fewer than 39,000 children were deported during this time.

With this, our tour of the KGB museum ended and we headed to Tuskulėnai Peace Park, where many of the KGB prisoners were buried in a pit. The park was originally constructed by the Soviets to hide the bodies that were buried here. Despite their efforts, the burial site was found and a memorial was built for these people. The memorial consists of a large dome shaped room that is lined with the 724 boxes that each contain the individual remains of every body that they found on the park premises. The boxes are simply marked with a number and seem to be endless. It is a very powerful memorial.

Following our tour of the Peace Park, we loaded back onto the bus and drove a short distance to Paneriai Forest. Here is where the Holocaust truly began. Here was the start of the mass murder of Jews. Prior to German occupation, the Russian army had dug pits here to store fuel and other necessities. Once WWII began, the Germans used these pits as a place to execute thousands of Jews. From the ghetto in Vilnius, Jews were marched to Paneriai, executed, and pushed into the pre-made pits. During the Holocaust, 100,000 people were murdered here. Of those, 70,000 were Jews. Men, women, and children alike were killed here. When the Nazis realized the war was coming to an end, they attempted to hide this genocide by burning all of the bodies in one pit.

When walking through this park, there are a smattering of memorials to different kinds of people (Lithuansians, Russians, etc) and the path leads to the different pits. While this is an incredibly tragic site of history, it would be difficult to get the full story without a guide. Unfortunately there is a severe lack of signs to signify what atrocities happened here. However, there is currently a competition going on to redesign the park to be more informative to the masses. I’m hopeful that a redesign will bring more people to this historical site and will hopefully aide in informing the public of this tragedy.

Following our somber tour, we loaded back onto our bus and finally headed on our way to Poland.
Entering the Borderlands: Sejny and Krasnogruda

Upon leaving Vilnius, we drove for ~2.5 hours through the Lithuanian countryside, eventually crossing the Lithuanian border into Poland. From there, it was short drive to Krasnogruda, where we would be staying for the next several nights. Krasnogruda is on the outskirts of Sejny and is very close to the current Lithuanian border.

Driving to our destination took a little longer than one might expect however, because we were driving on a “two” lane country road that looked like it had never heard of a tour bus, much less had one drive on it. Due to this, we were actually dropped off at the end of the driveway, left to carry our bags the rest of the way.

After the struggle of getting our luggage there, we finally arrived at the Manor. Our residence for the next several nights was the former home of Nobel Prize winner, Czesław Miłosz, and the current home of the Borderlands Foundation.

The next morning we began the discussion portion of our class (Negotiating Identities Across Europe’s Borders) in a conference room upstairs in the Manor. It was nice to finally be able to discuss the immense amount of information we were fed over the last several days.

In between discussions, we went to the basement of the manor for lunch. Lunch was soczewiaki (lentil-filled potato dough dumplings), a salad, and a drink that tasted a lot like Kool-Aid. Our meal was then followed by coffee, as most of our meals have been. It must be a Polish/Central European tradition. The next day we got back on the bus and headed into Sejny for a few workshops with the Borderlands Foundation. The Borderlands Foundation was created here in an attempt to reconcile the local community with their multicultural past. Prior to World War II, Sejny had been 70% Jewish. Of that community, only one member survived the war. Due to this, there was no transmission of information of Jewish culture to the new generations at home or at school. As a solution, the Borderlands Foundation hopes to act as a bridge between the community and its Jewish past.

The Borderlands Foundation is centered in an old synagogue in the center of Sejny and acts as a common gathering place for the community. In order to inform the community of its multicultural past, the foundation took to the arts to spread their message. By starting out by listening and gathering stories from the locals, they were slowly able to piece together the place’s past.
One key aspect of the foundation is its work with children. The foundation reaches out to children in the local public school and helps them come up with ways to engage the community with its past. The outcomes of this work are absolutely beautiful. The first group of children they worked with made a model of what Sejny once looked like and wrote a play to display what Sejny was once like. This piece of work has been shown all over the world. Other groups of children have done things such as creating a game to help learn the history of a person or place and even making multimedia videos to share stories.

Compared to Lithuania, Sejny’s attempts to reconcile with its past are well thought out and really seem to be making a difference in both the local and global communities. It was really quite incredible to see all of the great things the Borderlands Foundation has been able to accomplish so far (with limited help at that) and I look forward to seeing what more they will do in the future.

Later that night, back in Krasnogruda, we were lucky enough to receive a private performance of traditional Jewish music from one aspect of the Borderlands Foundation. The music was absolutely phenomenal and I wish I was able to understand the words.

During our final full day in Krasnogruda, we followed up the previous day with more discussions and general classwork. Despite all of the work we did while here, it was really nice to be on the countryside for a few days and just relax. That night, we finished our time here with a bonfire, complete with kielbasa.

As a final goodbye to this beautiful place, Tory and I woke up especially early the next morning to watch the sunrise over the lake (located behind the manor). It was the perfect way to leave Sejny. Next stop, Krynki!
Remnants of the Past: Krynki

Perhaps one of the saddest sights to see is a place that was clearly once so full of life and culture falling into a state of disrepair. Krynki, a city with a population of 9,000 (70% of which were Jews) in its prime, now has only 2,000 residents (without a single Jew present).

We started our time in Krynki at an abandoned tannery. In its prime, the city had over 24 tannery factories and 60 small workshops. Now the main street of tanneries is almost completely abandoned. As our guide, Cecylia, led us through one of the many abandoned tanneries, I couldn’t help but wonder what this town looked like years ago. What I imagine once being a center of livelihood in Krynki now gives me chills as broken bottles and ancient dust line the floors and graffiti fills the walls.

In many ways, this introduction to Krynki set the stage for much of our visit. The disappearance of the Jewish culture and people clearly left a gaping hole that this community has yet to really acknowledge or reconcile with. This is clear both in the tannery district and the Market Square because the Jewish community owned many of the businesses that helped the city to flourish. However, in their absence, the city feels vacant.

Of the places that Cecylia took us, the conditions of two of the synagogues made it clear to me that this town is lacking in attempts to make contact with its Jewish past and is instead trying to forget it. A striking example of this was the conversion of one of the old synagogues into a dance hall where a disco was held, shortly following WWII and the death of millions of Jews. It is currently being used as a gym. This, combined with the overgrown ruins of the Great Synagogue, left me with more questions than answers.

When our tour continued with a new guide, Joanna, the evidence of the tense past in Krynki continued to grow. Walking through the town we saw a myriad of houses that appeared to be anywhere from 10 to 100+ years old. New houses were just yards away from homes that looked as if they were barely standing. The stark contrast between them gave me a distinct feeling of uneasiness within the town.

Not only did this contrast give an indication of the possible tensions within the town, even today, it also demonstrated a sincere lack of pride in the conservation of both the town’s aesthetics and history. While I might see a well-kept garden in one yard, just next door the yard would be overgrown with weeds.
The walk through town leads us through the back roads of a farm and eventually brought us to the edge of field. One edge of the field is lined with stones of varying sizes, forming a wall that is falling apart in some places. This wall, that appears to be long since forgotten, establishes the border of the old Jewish cemetery.

Despite the dilapidated wall surrounding the cemetery and the knowledge I already had, I still held out some hope that the graves I would be seeing would still be mostly intact. Once we stepped foot inside the cemetery, however, my hopes were immediately dashed. Had some of the gravestones been much shorter, I could have mistaken the cemetery as an empty field.

The long overgrown grass masked what few grave stones appeared to be left. Grave stones that were carefully and lovingly hand carved to mark the resting place of parents, friends, children, and more. Just the knowledge that these sites are not being given the respect and recognition that they deserve is incredibly heartbreaking.

As a whole, our afternoon in Krynki was eye-opening on many levels. While we have seen different places that are trying to come to terms with their Jewish histories and the tragic effect World War II had on them, this small town (with the exception of a few locals) appears to be intent on keeping the past in the past.

What I find to be the most unsettling here is the distinct lack of pride in this community. Pride in their history, pride in their upkeep, and pride in their community as a whole. As Krynki continues to age and the population continues to shrink, I can’t help but wonder what an incredible part of history will be lost with their memories.

At most, it is my hope that in Krynki, and places like it, people might begin to see the communal benefits in embracing and reconciling with their communities’ pasts as a way to secure a more harmonious and tolerant future for the community as a whole.
Reviving a Lost Culture: Lublin

Driving into Lublin, I couldn’t help but fill with excitement as we drove past beautiful architecture and bustling bazaars. As much as I loved the Polish countryside, I missed the hustle and bustle that fills a city. Lublin is the ninth largest city in Poland and sits about two hours west of the Poland-Ukraine border.

The main purpose of our visit to Lublin was the Grodzka Gate-NN Theatre Center. What once began as an independent theater in the 1980’s has now evolved into an incredible cultural center for the city.

Upon arriving at the gate, we were promptly greeted by our guide, Magdalena, and ushered into the building. In the main entrance to the museum aspect of the institution, Magdalena supplied us with an extensive history of the gate. The Grodzka Gate, where they are located, was once the passageway between the Christian and Jewish parts of the city. The NN, on the other hand, means “no name” and is what is written on the graves of people whose identities are unknown.

The institution was forever changed, however, in 1997 when a woman introduced herself to the theater by saying, “I am the NN.” This woman, who was a young child at the start of WWII, was hidden in Lublin after being picked up from the streets by a kind woman. Due to the nature of her survival, she had no idea what her birth name was. Therefore, to her, she truly was the “NN.”

This woman’s story inspired the Grodzka Gate-NN Theatre to invest itself in discovering and sharing the Jewish history and culture of Lublin. One of the main ways this institution is now accomplishing this is by collecting the oral history of Jewish Lublin. To date, they have collected over 1000 testimonies.

Of the more than ~40,000 Jews that lived in Lublin prior to WWII (1/3 of Lublin’s population), only about 0.5% survived the war. Many of the Jews that remained after the war either immigrated or changed their names. Currently, Lublin’s Jewish community consists of 60-100 people.

One of the ways that the Grodzka Gate-NN Theatre is recording Lublin’s history is by putting together folders containing information and statistics about the houses that were Jewish from Old City.
One of the greatest aspects of this institution is its focus on remembering that every victim in this war had a face, a name and a history. Pictures of Jewish people and places line the hallways of the museum and force you to truly think about the impact of the nearly complete loss of a people.

Perhaps just as important as the victims of this tragedy were the righteous that helped or hid Jews during the war. The Gate recognize the righteous in a room that is all white and titled “Lights in the Darkness.” The room is filled with oral accounts of the attempts (some successes, some not) of the righteous to save their Jewish neighbors, friends, or otherwise.

Our tour of the museum was concluded here and we were given the night to explore Lublin. The city is beautiful, especially at night. Pubs and restaurants line the cobblestone streets and light-hearted conversations fill the air.

The next morning we met at the Grodzka Gate-NN Theatre again for a few workshops. These workshops helped us to gain a better understanding of the kind of work the institution does and the importance of education within the community.

Following our workshop, we met back up with Magdalena for a walking tour of Lublin, with a focus on its Jewish history.

When our tour concluded, we were given time to reflect on our time traveling so far and come up with a presentation symbolizing all that we had learned. While some people paired up and others presented individually, each presentation encapsulated the beauty and horrors of our trip thus far. While we have been learning about so much death and destruction, we have also met incredible people and institutions that are doing outstanding works of reconciliation despite what roadblocks they may have encountered thus far.

I can’t wait to see what other incredible people/institutions we meet throughout the semester and how the world can be changed one step at a time.
Home for a Week: Warszawa

Our arrival in Warsaw (or Warszawa) marked a distinct shift in direction for our traveling seminar. While the last week or so focused on our class, “Negotiating Identities Across Europe’s Borders,” our week in Warsaw would begin a different class, “East Central Europe in the 20th Century.”

After settling into our hostel, we went for lunch for a final meal with Hana and Juliet (until we get to Wroclaw) and to meet with our new professor for the week, Dominic.

Following our meal, a few of us broke off from the group to go and explore the city. Warsaw’s Old Town is absolutely gorgeous and the pictures don’t do it any justice. The vibrant colors of the buildings stand out against the day’s grey skies while the square bustles with life.

Exploring the alleys, without any goal in mind, was exhilarating. Our explorations ended back at the entrance to Old Town, at the top of the viewing terrace.

I can’t think of a better introduction to Poland’s capital than our impromptu tour.

The next morning began our week of intensive class. Sunday was filled with 6 hours of (more or less) straight lectures. That was rough. Fortunately, we were set free as soon as class ended at 3. Unfortunately, we were also sent off with a large stack of readings.

Our week carried on with a hodgepodge of lectures and field trips. We always began our days in the Palace of Culture and Science and usually went to a site that went along with the day’s theme in the afternoon.

Our first trip was to the National Archive (more specifically, the Institution of National Remembrance), where we got to see the incredible number of documents the Polish government has kept from its socialist times (1939-1990). We even got to flip through a few of the old documents. Unfortunately, I didn’t take any pictures here.

The next two trips we took were to the Institution of National Remembrance’s educational center. Our first trip consisted of a lecture focusing on the Volhynia Crime. The Volhynia Crime occurred in southeast Poland between 1941-1944. Here there was a great amount of tension between the Ukrainians and Poles. This led to Ukrainian Nationalist crimes against Poles and the death of approximately 130,000 victims in 4,300 villages. The victims included men, women and children, regardless of age. Needless to say, it was disheartening to hear of another attempt of ethnic cleansing in Poland.
The second trip we took the educational center was more interactive than first and consisted of two workshops. The first split us into two groups and had us each create a “mind map” of occupied Poland. It was fascinating to see our different views on occupied Poland.

In the second workshop, we were paired off and each given a story of a righteous to present. The creativity and will to survive of all of these people was outstanding and forced you to wonder if and how you would do the same.

One of the most interesting trips we took was to the Warsaw Uprising Museum. Here we learned all about Polish resistance in the Warsaw ghetto and the 63 days its residents spent attempting to regain independence. The uprising began at 5pm (called Hour W) on August 1, 1944 and ended with a surrender on October 2. With the beginning of this uprising, the systematic extermination of the Poles in the ghetto also began. Following the end of the uprising, Warsaw would be leveled to the ground.

The final class trip we took during our time in Warsaw was to the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. The museum, shaped to represent the parting of the Red Sea, has not opened its permanent exhibit yet and so we were only able to see the current temporary exhibit. Personally, I wish we had the opportunity to see the permanent exhibits because they sounded incredibly interesting.

As a whole, our week in Warsaw was incredible. We found so many cool cafes to work in and unique side streets to adventure through. While I was more than ready to be out of our hostel (Side note: Don’t let the hostel wash your clothes, an Australian man may steal your pants. And by that I mean an Australian man stole my pants. Seriously.), I was definitely sad to be leaving Warsaw. On the bright side, we’re finally on our way to Wroclaw!
Home Sweet Wroclaw

After 16 days of straight traveling, we finally arrived at our new home in Wroclaw! Wroclaw (pronounced “wrote-shlaw”) is the fourth largest city in Poland and sits on the Oder river.

Upon our arrival in Wroclaw, after a 5 hour bus ride from Warsaw, we took a few tram rides and eventually ended up at our apartment for the semester. Located just behind a Lutheran church, we are rooming in the attic of a building owned by the church. The 11 of us share the top floor, occupying 6 rooms and sharing a “kitchen.” The rooms are large with slanted roofs, wood decor and are each fit with their own bathroom.

While our flat is nice, the best part of it is definitely its location. We are less than a five minute walk from the Rynek (market square) and the tram stop that takes us to school. It’s so easy to get around here, and I love it!

During our first full day in Wroclaw, Ula (our program director) took us around town to show us the ropes. We started out by heading to the Rynek. My favorite part of walking to the Rynek is the fact that, to get there, we have to walk through this small alley that is overshadowed by a gorgeous willow tree. I honestly think it feels akin to going through the wardrobe (from The Chronicles of Narnia).

The Rynek is full of brightly colored buildings, restaurants, and even a 24/7 flower market. It all feels just a bit unreal. When Ula felt that we had spent a fair amount of time in the Rynek, we moved on to the next part of our tour, the mall. The mall is a straight shot from the Rynek and even has a grocery store in the basement (the longer I am here though, the more I realize this is a common thing in Poland).
Our next stop, the fresh market, was another major destination for us in Wrocław. The market is in a giant warehouse and is filled to the brim with fresh fruits, vegetables, flowers, meat and (of course) pierogi. Every time I come here it feels like an adventure because you never know what you will find.

The final stop on our tour was probably my favorite. Ula took us to a lody (ice cream) shop just down the street from the fresh market. By the time we got there, it was about 1:50pm and the place opened at 2pm. Despite the fact that the place didn’t open for another 10 minutes, there was already a line of at least 30 (if not more) people outside. This was a clear sign that this was good lody.

Thankfully, the line moved incredibly fast (they must be used to this kind of craziness) and we were choosing our flavors in no time. I decided to get a scoop of strawberry and a scoop of cream.

*Best lody ever.* The line was completely understandable now.

We finished off our tour of the city taking the long way home, contently devouring our lody.

From day 1, two things are incredibly clear to me; 1) That Wrocław is incredibly beautiful and is going to be a fantastic home for two months and 2) I will be eating a lot of lody this semester.
On Top of the World

Leaving up to our first weekend in Wroclaw, we received an email from Ula asking if we would be interested in going hiking on Sunday. Needless to say, we were all excited to get out and see another part of Poland.

The particular hike that Ula was taking us on would lead us to the top of Mount Ślęża, a mountain in the Sudetes foothills. Mount Ślęża is 718 meters high and 30km outside Wroclaw.

The climb to the top was rough, or at least it was for me. Nothing makes you realize how out of shape you are like getting halfway up a mountain and realizing you’re still an hour and a half from the top. Ooph.

The sore legs I endured the next day were well worth it though. The view from the top of Mount Ślęża was unreal. If only it wasn’t so foggy! I can’t imagine how far you could see on a clear day.

Thankfully, coming down the mountain was much easier than going up. And it would have gone even faster if we hadn’t gotten a tad bit lost on the way down. All engulfed in our own conversations and split up into smaller groups, the 11 of us managed to take the wrong route down. Luckily, a few of us (read: 3/11) had their Polish phones on them and were able to receive Ula’s worried calls when she realized we got lost.

So back up the mountain we went. We actually ended up being much closer than I had thought, but my legs sure were not happy to be going back uphill again.

The trip the rest of the way down was more or less uneventful post-getting lost. We all carried on with pleasant conversation and enjoyed the fresh Polish air. The more I see of Poland, the more I love every bit of it!
Finding Refuge: Prague and Northern Bohemia

After two weeks of settling into Wroclaw, we are back to traveling with our “Negotiating Identities” class. On this particular weekend trip we are headed southwest; first to Prague and then to Dresden.

We left Wroclaw mid-morning on Thursday ecstatic to be seeing the Czech Republic that afternoon. With a few pit stops on the way, we finally made it to Prague around 5pm where we were greeted with a beautiful buffet and Krista. Krista works at the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. and was our guide in Prague for the weekend.

Following dinner and a discussion on the weekend’s program, we were set free into the night to explore Prague. Seeing Prague lit up under the night sky is truly a unique experience.

We wandered through the small alleys, trying not to trip over the cobblestone while simultaneously attempting to soak in the city. We are only able to wander for so long before remembering that we still have class in the morning.

The next morning we left the hotel and headed to the Robert Guffman Gallery where there was an exhibit about Jewish refugees that came to the Czech lands after World War I.

Because of the pogroms (organized violence against Jews) that were taking place in the east, many civilians fled west seeking peace and safety during the interwar period. The vast majority of these people came from the regions Galicia and Bukovina.

The exhibit, while consisting of just three rooms, was filled with information on the lives and hardships the new refugees faced in the Czech lands. We learned about life in refugee camps as well as the prejudices against refugees during this time period. While this information spanned the first and last rooms, my favorite was the center room. The center room contained televisions that broadcast interviews with people that once lived in these Czech refugee camps. Very cool.
Following our tour of the gallery, we headed to the Institute of Ethnology. Here we were given a lecture on “The State of the Jews in Czechoslovakia” by a post-doc, Jacob Labendz, from Washington University in St. Louis. While the lecture was only an hour, I feel like I have a much better understanding of the post-WWII Jewish community in Czechoslovakia.

At this point in time, we were once again set free to explore the city. Sam, Andy and I took this time to take to the streets and see what we could find during the daylight. We wandered through an outdoor market, admiring the beautiful handmade trinkets and jewelry and the freshly picked fruit. One of my favorite finds while walking around was a street band. Mostly because of the interesting collection of instruments that it consisted of; a tuba, bassoon, oboe, banjo, violin, and bass/cymbal combo. What.

The next morning, we had another bout of free time before heading to Northern Bohemia. We took this opportunity to visit St. Vitus Cathedral. While the climb up the hill felt like a lot at the time, the view it revealed was breathtaking.

Perhaps just as breathtaking, if not more so, however was the inside of St. Vitus Cathedral. Incredibly detailed stained glass windows sprawled across the ancient walls, letting colorful light shine in.

After visiting the church we took our time going back down the hill, even stopping at a cafe with a look out before getting back on the bus.

It was a fairly short drive to Northern Bohemia where we convened in a church to discuss the presence of the Romani in the Czech lands. Prior to arriving in Northern Bohemia, we conversed about race riots that had occurred in this area in 2011. Due to the stigma surrounding the Romani, they are often discriminated against. One of the most common ways that they are discriminated against is in the education of their children. Romani children are often picked out to be sent to “special” schools, where the education is sub-par. The few children that make it all the way to college usually leave to find better opportunities elsewhere.

As a whole, it was quite the mind-opening experience. One of my favorite aspects of this program has definitely been being able to hear the viewpoints of people that often go unheard.

Following our discussion we left Northern Bohemia. Next stop, Dresden!
Reconciliation and Reconstruction: Dresden

When working with the memory and reconciliation of a place of destruction, there are three options for moving forward. You can do nothing, leaving the scars to speak for themselves. You can rebuild what once was, making a replica of once stood and what will stand again. Or you can start from scratch, building something entirely new.

The question of what should be done moving forward is especially difficult in places such as Dresden, Germany. A well connected city during World War II, it was bombed on February 13, 1945. To this day, the city struggles with its mixed identity, being both a perpetrator and a victim.

As we follow our guide, Janosch, to the heart of Dresden, one of the first things I notice on our walk is a small graffiti display, about chest height, on the side of the wall. “ALL NAZIS ARE BASTARDS” is sprawled across the wall in bright red spray paint, instantly making it clear to me that Germany’s Nazi past is ever-present in at least some of its citizens’ minds.

Furthering my point, our next stop is at a memorial for Jorge Gomondai. On April 6, 1991, Gomondai was taking a tram home at which point a group of Neo-Nazi youths attacked him and threw him off the tram. He died from the injuries a few days later. Jorge Gomondai’s death is notable in Dresden’s history because he was the first victim of Neo-Nazi racism in the city. Even today, Neo-Nazis are a big issue in Saxony.

The presence of these racist and anti-foreigner attitudes so many years after the Nazi and socialist regimes in Eastern Germany forces you to wonder what it will take for peace and reconciliation to take up permanent residence here, or if it is even possible.

As we keep walking, we eventually reach a point where Janosch tells us to stop. Here he attempts to make it very clear that we are about to cross the line that separates what was and was not bombed. Any buildings that may appear old were rebuilt after the bombing.

What strikes me most about this reconstruction is the normality of it all. It burned down, so we rebuilt it. While it is never that simple, the sheer amount of reconstruction sure made it seem that way.

We first see the complications of rebuilding upon arriving at the Frauenkirche, a church at the center of town. The Dresden bombings led to the collapse of the church in 1945. While the church appears to be from the 18th century, its reconstruction began in 1993 following the reunification of Germany.
The Frauenkirche was not simply rebuilt, however, as elements of the original building were used to remind the public of its troubled past. From the outside, dark bricks speckle the overall sand-colored building. Despite first looking like a cosmetic choice, these dark bricks were actually recovered from the original building and were then reused for its reconstruction. Thus, reminding everyone of its tragic downfall.

By rebuilding the church in this way, it subtly acknowledges its past without overshadowing the church as a whole. In addition, its reconstruction can be seen as an attempt at reconciliation with funding for the rebuilding coming from German, English, and American donors. By bringing in the foreign entities that destroyed the church, Dresden is effectively building a more reconciled and peaceful future.

Our next stop, the Dresden synagogue, varied greatly from the Frauenkirche. Burned down during Kristallnacht in 1938, the Jewish community was originally unsure of what to do with the empty space that remained.

The decision was ultimately made to build a new synagogue and community space on the land. A key point to the decision to build a new complex on the land was the fear that reconstruction of the former synagogue would deny the atrocities that happened both during Kristallnacht and the Holocaust as a whole. The new buildings are careful not to overshadow the painful history of the synagogue either, with the space between them evoking thought about the past and growth in the future. The past is evoked from the old synagogue’s outline and the growth from the orchard.

While it is easy to sympathize with the hardships that accompanied the destruction of both of these buildings, you find yourself having a hard time likening them to each other too much. The Jewish synagogue was destroyed on a night where Jews all across Germany were personally attacked and victimized by the Nazi party. The acts were full of hatred, giving an insight of what was to come. In comparison, the Frauenkirche was a casualty of war within the land of the perpetrators. While destruction was the main purpose of the bombings, its purpose was also to aid in the end of World War II.

Herein lays the difficulty of memory work. How do we memorialize both the synagogue and the Frauenkirche, without taking away from the suffering of either? How can you acknowledge a group's suffering, even if they aided in making another group suffer? In many ways, you end up with more questions and uncertainties than answers and assurance.

Dresden, as a whole, is clearly struggling with these questions as they move further into the 21st century and further away from its socialist times. Despite the presence of Neo-Nazis in the area, the city appears to be getting closer to reconciling with its past and creating a more peaceful future with each passing year.
Poland's Royal City: Kraków

Of the three weekend trips that we were to take as a class, I think I was the most excited for our trip to Kraków. Prior to arriving in Kraków, I had heard nothing but praise for its beauty, ceramics and history. Thankfully the city stood up for, if not surpassed, its praise making it one of my favorite cities by far.

We arrived in the Jewish district of Kraków on a rainy Friday morning, with our first stop being the Museum of Galician Jews. The museum was created by a British photojournalist, Chris Schwarz, in 2004 and its main exhibit mainly consists of photographs taken by Schwarz himself. The museum is powerful, as small traces of a Jewish past in Poland are photographed and displayed strategically in an attempt to tell a story of the joy of a culture and society that once was so rich and the now tragic remains.

From the Museum of Galician Jews, we began a walking tour of Jewish Kraków with our guide, Goska. The first stop on the tour was the oldest synagogue in Poland, which was likely established in the beginning of the 15th century. One common feature of synagogues in Poland is their height, or lack thereof. As a rule, synagogues were never allowed to be higher than nearby churches in Poland, to demonstrate politically that the church was greater than the synagogue. To make up for the lack of height, many synagogues are built further into the ground, making it so that you walk down into the synagogue.

After exploring the synagogue on our own for a little bit we then followed our guide into the surrounding neighborhood. The neighborhood (named Kazimierz after the Polish king Kazimierz that allowed the Jews stay in Kraków) was once a center of Jewish life. In fact, the area looked the same as it did in the 1930s-40s up until recently and was where Spielberg filmed parts of Schindler’s List.

However, since the film came out the area has become a “Jewish Disneyland” (as Goska described it to us) of sorts, with people from all over the world flocking to the neighborhood to catch a glimpse of where the film took place. Walking through Kazimierz, we were constantly passing or being passed by large golf carts advertising tours of Jewish Kraków and Schindler’s factory. In addition to these tours, the center of the neighborhood was filled with restaurants that claimed to sell “authentic” Jewish meals, when in reality the restaurants are likely owned and operated by people of non-Jewish descent. As a whole, it makes for a very strange experience.
Continuing the tour, we entered a nearby bar to go to its second floor outdoor seating. Instead of grabbing drinks, this location allowed us to take a glimpse into the Jewish cemetery across the street. The cemetery is surrounded by a tall brick wall, but the bar’s location allows us to catch a glimpse of the enclosed space. Here we learn how the best or more important members of the community are buried closest to the center of the cemetery, where the members that were not thought of as highly were buried close to the cemetery wall.

To better explain this, Goska brought up a story of an old miser that once lived in the area and was buried in the cemetery. During his life, the people of the Jewish community felt that this man, who was quite wealthy, was in the wrong for not donating money to the poor because he had the money to spare. So upon his death, it was decided that this man would be buried near the cemetery wall to demonstrate that he was a miser during his lifetime. However, as the weeks went by following the miser’s death, a group of poor people stopped receiving the anonymous donations that had been supporting them. It did not take the community long to realize that the man that they thought to be a miser, was actually quite generous. Therefore in an attempt to show that the miser was actually a great man, the Great Rabbi was buried next to the man, also next to the cemetery wall.

From the bar, we moved on to the Jewish Community Center (JCC), which happens to be the first JCC in Poland. The center was built as a result of an initiative of Prince Charles of Wales to give the Jewish community a meeting place. The building gave off a vibrant, youthful feel and certainly made me feel that the Jewish community refuses to be left in the past. Currently, the JCC has about 500 members.

The final stop of our tour was Wawel Hill, where the Royal Castle and Cathedral are located. Kraków was the capital of Poland until 1596, when Poland’s king (King Sigismund III) decided to move the capital to Warsaw. The reason for this move was that Warsaw was closer to Sweden (where he was also king), making his commute between the two much shorter. I guess you have to do what you have to do when you’re king of two countries.

We ended our tour by walking down the hill and into Kraków’s Old Town, a large town center full of gorgeous architecture. Unlike many cities in Poland, Kraków was lucky enough to be spared from much destruction during WWII and was actually the capital of Nazi-occupied Poland. This city is clearly rich in culture and history, and I feel lucky to have been able to hear even a small portion of it.
An Incomprehensible Site: Auschwitz

On a grey, misty Saturday morning, our bus pulled into an already full parking lot. Outside a relatively plain looking brick building, tour groups of all ages mulled around without a clear sense of purpose. Seeing signs for currency exchange and snack bars, I was reminded more of an airport terminal than a site of mass murder and evil. All of this gave me a certain added uneasiness about what I was about to walk into.

After receiving our headphones and receivers (given to us so that the guide would not have to talk very loud and limiting the disturbing of other groups) and being introduced to our guide, Szymon, we left the building and walked to the entrance of Auschwitz I.

Suddenly we were standing beneath the iconic “ARBEIT MACHT FREI” (Translation: work will set you free) sign that marks the entrance to the camp. While I stood and stared at the sign, unsure of what I thought about entering a place of such suffering, Szymon made sure to distinguish the difference between a death camp and a concentration camp.

Death camps were set up as mass murder machines, allowing for the industrial-like killing of people whereas concentration camps were originally set up to isolate the enemies of the Third Reich. Auschwitz began as a concentration camp, but quickly became a death camp. Of the 1.3 million people the Nazis deported to Auschwitz, 1.1 million of them also died at Auschwitz. 90% of those that died were Jewish. Death was this machine’s main export.

Disturbing as it is, the Nazis did not let these corpses go to industrial waste. Ashes were used for fertilizer, hair was used to make fabrics, gold teeth were melted down, and prized possessions were sold. One of the rooms we visited in Auschwitz I was fitted with displays of artifacts left behind. One display in particular was filled to the brim with shoes of all shapes and sizes. Despite how large and encompassing this display seemed, it only contained 5% of the shoes found on the premises. Another display contained suitcases that likely once held a family’s prized possessions. It is impossible to imagine all of the lives that were connected to these artifacts.

Of the displays at Auschwitz I, perhaps the most emotional was a new exhibit on Jewish life. Upon entering the barrack you are immediately drawn into the first room where you are captivated by videos playing all around the room. These videos, complete with traditional Jewish music, really play with your heart strings as you realize how much of a community and a culture was completely ravaged and destroyed through the Holocaust.
A different room in the exhibit is filled with children’s drawings, painfully reconstructed from drawings found in the camp. Walking through the room you see drawings all over, from the edge of the windowsill to just below the ceiling. It’s heartbreaking to see a child’s recreation of life around them with an understanding of what they were seeing.

The final room in the exhibit contains an impossibly large book. This book, titled “The Book of Names,” contains the names of the Jews that were murdered. Each entry contains the name, date of birth, place of birth, and where the person was murdered. The book is set up in a way that, in order to read it, you are forced to put yourself between the pages. It is an incredibly powerful experience as the small type and large pages enumerate the death and destruction that the Holocaust procured.

From this exhibit we headed to a different part of the camp where we saw where some of this death took place; the gas chamber. Silently, our group slowly walked into the dark, cold room that once acted as an early model of the Nazi’s killing machine. Scratch marks filled the walls and I couldn’t help but consider how incredibly terrifying it must have been to die in such a disturbing place. It’s something I hope I never have to encounter.

On this note, we loaded back on to our bus and took a short drive over to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The first thing Szymon made a note of telling us is that everything that we see here was built by prisoners. In fact, the camp was under construction until one month before the prisoners were liberated. Looking at the rows of barracks and the unbelievably large footprint of the camp, it is hard to imagine the number of prisoners it took to build such a site.

The first place we stop is one of the barracks, reconstructed to look as it did when prisoners lived there. Long, wooden bunk beds fill the room. We are forced to imagine the number of people, rats and lice that once resided here. It’s not an easy thing to do.

The latrines are our next stop, where two long, concrete rows are centered in the room. With no toilet paper offered, and nothing to protect your bare skin from the equally bare concrete, I know I hope to never have to use a bathroom like it.

From the latrines we head towards Auschwitz-Birkenau’s gas chambers. To get there, we follow the train tracks that reach deep into the camp. Stopped about halfway down is a cattle car, identical to one that would have brought prisoners by the thousands to the camp. It’s presence makes the otherwise empty railroad even more eerie.
When we arrive at the gas chambers, we see their expansive footprint. Unlike Auschwitz I, none of the gas chambers were left standing here. Only their ruins remain, destroyed in the days leading up to liberation to attempt to hide the truth of the camp’s purpose.

Our final stop in Auschwitz-Birkenau is the registration building. Here prisoners would have their belongings taken from them and their names would be replaced with a number tattooed on their bodies. In this building now resides an exhibit filled with pictures of individuals and families that went through Auschwitz-Birkenau. Some of the pictures are supplemented with stories of the people they feature. Displays like these make the numbers of the Holocaust so much more real.

As we headed back to the front of the camp to exit, I saw a few deer hopping around the ruins of a building. I can’t explain how strange it was to see this interaction between this industry of death and nature. It’s an image I can’t quite get out of my mind.

Just before leaving the camp, we took one final stop at the watchtower. Here we were able to climb to the top of the watchtower and see the camp as the guards would have seen it. Despite walking a large majority of the camp myself, I still have a hard time fully comprehending the sheer size of this once full death camp. Honestly, I still have a hard time comprehending the experience as a whole.

When we had walked around I had attempted to picture what the camp once looked like, full of emaciated, starving prisoners and aggressive guards. Try as I might, I just couldn’t do it. The evil and immorality of a place, such as this camp, forces you to question how so many people were able to go along with this industrialized death without speaking up or out. If nothing else, it teaches the importance of standing up for what you think is right.
The Weight of Memory: Berlin

In a situation as tragic and unmatched as the Holocaust, how can the land of the perpetrators hope to move forward while acknowledging and accepting their roles in this tragedy? Walking through the streets of Berlin, this question seems to be ever present as you pass by pieces of the Berlin Wall or happen upon a “stumbling stone.”

Of the many cities we have visited this semester, the subject of memory appears to weigh the heaviest on Berlin. This weight can be seen in many forms, from memorials to events to museums. In particular, however, I found the weight of memory to truly feel the heaviest at the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.

Located around the corner from the iconic Brandenburg Gate and within what was once the “death strip” (the space between the East and West Berlin walls), the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe sits on 4.7 acres of land. Consisting of meticulously placed unmarked gray concrete slabs of varying heights, the memorial first makes me wonder if I wandered upon a piece of modern art.

Instead of first walking through the intimidating monument, I followed our group to the entrance of the memorial’s museum, set just below the surface of the memorial itself. As I adjusted the earpiece of my newly received audio guide, I read the quote that welcomed us to the exhibit, “It happened, therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say” (Primo Levi).

From this quote, the seriousness in which the Germans take the Holocaust is immediately felt, as well as the need for education to try and prevent this from happening again. Continuing this theme, the first part of the exhibit that comes into view is a timeline. With the aide of the audio guide, I hear and see accounts of persecution and humiliation of the Jews in the 1930’s and through the Nazi Regime.

Sitting on a bench across from the timeline I attempt to understand the atrocities taken against the Jews, done often only for their shared religion. Despite how hard I try, I don’t think I will ever come close to understanding how mass genocides can happen again and again in history. When you sit and look at the faces of innocent people being berated and mistreated for long enough, it is hard to continue on without a large pit developing in your stomach.
Yet, you are forced to continue. You move from room to room, picture to picture, story to story. Soaking in the many small, individual ways Jews were systematically murdered. In one of the rooms the numbers of the Jewish people who were killed line the walls, separated into their countries of origin. The numbers range from tens to millions and are altogether unimaginable.

With every story of horror and the attempts to cover these mass murders, I start to understand just why Berlin feels to be so weighed down with memory. In the Nazi Regime’s attempt to erase an entire people, they also attempted to erase the group’s collective memory. In doing so, Germany is now charged with the moral responsibility to try and share these memories in the process of reconciling with their past.

At the end of the tour I return my audio guide and exit the museum. Climbing the stairs that lead you out of the museum, I am surprised to find myself in the middle of the memorial when I reach the top. This quickly leads to my exploring of the memorial. Despite starting in a group, I soon find myself isolated among the immense concrete stelae.

Despite feeling comfortable in my surroundings upon entering the memorial, when the stelae are much shorter and with the presence of my peers, by the time I am at the center alone and with stelae way over my head I feel uncomfortably alone. I can hear the screams of small children playing hide and seek among the stelae and see glimpses of other people at most crossing points, yet the feelings of disorientation and loneliness do not go away.

When I finally exit the memorial I have a hard time shaking how alone I felt when stuck between the concrete walls, even though I am again with my peers. While the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe has been criticized for its empty grey walls and lack of signs, it is definitely capable of leaving you thinking.

It has been a few weeks since we were in Berlin, yet I still find myself thinking of being stuck in the maze of stelae. I think of how the loneliness I felt in those few moments must compare to the loneliness of the few Jews that survived the Holocaust as they tried to maneuver through their own disorienting, gray maze of life. I think of how the weight of these stelae makes the disappearance of the collective Jewish memory that much more real and wonder how those memories would have shaped today if they hadn’t been silenced.

With my visit to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, I found a new understanding of what makes Berlin a city of memory. Berlin is not a city of memory out of a desire to be; instead it is a city of memory due to a necessity. It is clear that the recognition of Germany’s 20th century wrongdoings are an essential step on its long road to fully reconciling with its past.
Picture Yourself in a Town on a River: Liverpool

After a month of educational weekend trips, I jumped at the opportunity to get out of dodge for a long weekend in early November. This trip was especially exciting because I was flying to Liverpool, England to meet my incredible Dad!

My flight was early on a Saturday morning, but I was in Liverpool before I knew it. After some intense questioning from Border Control, I apparently convinced England that I had no plans to wreak havoc and was able to leave the airport to meet up with my dad. Lucky for me, it was just a walk across the street to the airport hotel.

Once I got settled into the hotel room, we were off to explore Liverpool. Getting to downtown Liverpool proved to be quite the experience all weekend. My brave father decided to rent a stick shift car for the weekend, making for an interesting time of driving on the left side of the road, while driving stick left handed. While he did a great job (I mean, we’re still here after all), I’d be okay with never doing that again.

We eventually found our way to downtown Liverpool though and got to explore the dock after parking in an impossibly small parking spot. The waterfront was my favorite area by far. Although I think that is true for me for pretty much every city I’ve visited so far. We spent the next couple of hours getting a feel for the area before grabbing dinner and retiring for the night.

The next morning we headed back downtown towards the waterfront, this time for our hop-on-hop-off bus tour. We obviously sat on the top of the double decker bus because where else would you sit on a double decker bus?

Soon we’re off navigating through Liverpool’s narrow streets. Architecture from several eras fill our panoramic views as modern buildings somehow seamlessly blend with early 20th century buildings.

After driving by the first handful of stops we chose to get off at the Liverpool Cathedral, a monstrous building that took 70 years to build.
Besides usually being architecturally beautiful, I love that European churches almost always have viewing terraces. Luckily for me, the Liverpool Cathedral also had a viewing terrace. So I obviously dragged my dad up to the top via two elevator rides and 100+ steps.  
The view was 100% worth every step. From the very top of the Cathedral we could see for miles all around Liverpool.  
After catching our breaths and enjoying the beautiful views, we headed back to the ground floor of the Cathedral. The interior of the building was almost as pretty as the views it provided.  
Instead of picking the bus back up in front of the church we instead walked over to a local pub called the “Philharmonic.” As we stepped into the building, Beatles music instantly came on over the speakers while our eyes adjusted to the most beautifully decorated bar. I think my dad was actually in heaven.  
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Both the food and the drinks here were incredible. If I ever make it back to Liverpool, this is definitely the first place I would go as soon as I got off the plane.  
After finishing out the bus tour, we ended our afternoon at “The Beatles Story,” an entire museum devoted to the history of The Beatles. Fun Fact: The Beatles are from Liverpool.  
Despite how much my dad loves The Beatles, I really did not know a whole lot about their history. The museum did a great job of incorporating audio clips and different visual displays to take you from the band's small beginnings to their world renowned fame.  
By the time we left the museum the sun was setting, so we grabbed a quick dinner and headed back to the hotel for the night.
The next morning we went straight back to downtown Liverpool, this time to do some exploring on foot. One of our first stops is the Walker Art Gallery. While it may seem small at first glance, the gallery seems to go on forever with works of art ranging from months to hundreds of years old.

One of the great things about Liverpool is that it is full of free museums. We spent all morning hopping from museum to museum, soaking in all the art, science, and history Liverpool had to offer. While we went to a few museums, the Walker Art Gallery was without a doubt our favorite.

By the time we finished museum hopping, mid-day exhaustion began to hit so we took a pit stop for tea time (my favorite time!). At little cafe in Liverpool One, Dad and I enjoyed a pleasant creme tea and scones and discussed all of the interesting sites we saw over the past day and a half.

Before heading back to the hotel for our final night in Liverpool, there was only one place left for us to go: Mathew Street.

Situated in the basement of a building on Mathew Street is the Cavern Club. The Beatles played here hundreds of times for their devoted fans. While the original Cavern Club was shut down in 1973, its new location across the street was built to look just like the original club did when the Beatles played there.

Inside the club we grabbed a couple of drinks and enjoyed the performer’s rendition of John Lennon songs. It was incredibly difficult to try and envision what this place (or I guess technically a place just like this) looked like when it was packed to the brim with screaming teenage girls. I think I would prefer the smaller crowd that was present tonight.

Soon we’re headed back to the hotel and I can’t believe the weekend is already over. I had such a wonderful time hanging out with my dad and exploring Liverpool. I am definitely lucky to have a father who is willing to travel halfway across the world to hang out with me for the weekend.

This weekend away with my dad made me realize how much I can’t wait to see my family back in the states again and just how lucky I am to have such a wonderful family.

But for now, it’s back to Wroclaw for more class and other European adventures.
Christmas Time is Here...

Around mid-November every year, a magical thing begins to happen all over Europe. Town squares begin to fill with pallets of wood that slowly turn into cute little houses in the following days. The Christmas Markets were coming.

In Wroclaw in particular, the Christmas Market fills the rynek (main square) with these little houses all selling different kinds of Polish delicacies, pottery, and mulled wine. This year the Christmas Market opened on November 21st.

When you walk through the crowds of people filling the stalls, you have a really hard time focusing on just one thing. Fresh paczki (Polish donuts) call your name in one direction while handmade ceramics drag you in the opposite direction. If I had the time, I could spend days giving each little hut the time it deserves.

The weekend of the opening of the Christmas Market was especially Christmas-y for our group, as we spent the Saturday night seeing The Nutcracker at the Wroclaw Opera House.

We all got dressed up to enjoy this Christmas classic, stopping by the Christmas Market just before to grab some food and drink.

The Wroclaw Opera is an absolutely gorgeous building, and no picture I took really did it justice. Seeing the classic Christmas ballet was a lot of fun, and helped us get even more into the Christmas spirit.

While the Christmas market was all set up on November 21, the Christmas tree in the center of the rynek was lit this past weekend in honor of St. Nicholas day.

Walking through the rynek is more magical than ever now, as we can all see that Christmas time is clearly here.
Cities and Coasts: Dublin

About a year ago one of my best friends, Alexis, and I realized that we would both be abroad in the following fall semester. This is something we had both dreamed about for years and had often joked about the possibility of meeting up in a foreign country. Through those years, it all seemed silly and impossible. What were the chances that we would 1) both be studying abroad at the same time and 2) actually meet up somewhere foreign?

Despite all of this, Alexis and I managed to beat all odds and figured out a way to make it work. In late October we solidified plans to meet over thanksgiving weekend in the beautiful country of Ireland. Words can’t describe how excited I was. On the night of Black Friday I boarded a plane to Dublin, ripe with excitement for the weekend to come. Alexis was arriving a few hours before me with her friend Taylor from school. We were staying at Taylor’s family friend’s home and so they headed there to drop off their things and headed downtown.

After a few minor mishaps, we were finally reunited on the streets of Dublin. We ended up meeting near the train station and did some exploring around the area. However it wasn’t long before we ended up on a train to Malahide to rest for the night.

The next morning Joe (whose house we were staying at) offered to drive us downtown so we could stop at the local Malahide castle. The castle itself is small, but beautiful. It even features a helipad that has been used only once, to let Margaret Thatcher land in Dublin.

From Malahide Castle we headed to downtown Dublin. After Joe dropped us off we grabbed some Starbucks and set off to find City Hall, where our walking tour of Dublin began. I was excited to get a feel for the city and learn more about its history as well.

At City Hall we met our tour guide, Jack, and we went on our way. Our first stop was Dublin Castle, conveniently located right behind City Hall.

From Dublin Castle we stopped by Christ Church Cathedral. Inside you can see a mummified cat and mouse they found in an old organ if that interests you.

Continuing on, we headed towards the Temple Bar area, learning about how to know when the pub you are in is a tourist trap and about some of the cultural work U2 has done in the area.

After a short break, we were on our way again, this time to Trinity College. Located in central Dublin, the college campus is a beautiful site and is also the oldest university in the country.
After a few more short stops, our walking tour ended. Following the tour, Taylor, Alexis and I stopped at a pub for some lunch before walking to the Guinness Storehouse.

Going through the tour, we learned how Guinness is made and what apparently makes it great. The tour had many interactive exhibits that taught you the history of the beer and its role in pop culture. Not all exhibits were historical, however. One exhibit in particular gave you small samples of the beer and had guides teach you the proper way to enjoy a pint of Guinness.

One of our final stops of the tour was a spot where we could learn how to pour the perfect pint of Guinness. Here a guide taught us how to ensure that we pour a perfect pint of Guinness every time and gave us all the chance to pour our own.

After perfectly pouring our pints (and receiving certificates for doing so!) we headed on upstairs to the top of the storehouse where the “Gravity Bar” was located. Here you could enjoy your freshly poured pint while simultaneously enjoying the 360 degree views of Dublin.

Upon leaving the Storehouse, we headed to the shopping area we were near the previous night. Unfortunately for us, we did not realize that almost every store in Dublin closes as 6pm. Although we walked around for a bit longer and found a few souvenir shops that were open. When we bought what souvenirs we wanted, we walked around a little bit more before finding a nice pub to grab some food in (it was actually the second pub we stopped at – the first one had already stopped serving food). It wasn’t too long before we were heading back to Malahide for the day.

The next morning we had planned a day trip to Howth, a town about 20min outside of Dublin. The day trip was actually another walking tour, done through the same company from the previous day’s tour and we ended up with the same tour guide as well.

From downtown Dublin, we took a quick train ride to Howth. Almost as soon as we got off the train we began our walking tour, headed just up the road to Howth Castle.

Although the castle is privately owned, the gates are always opened and (legend has it) there is always an extra place set at the table for visitors. This was an effort to save their reputation from many years ago when their closed gate gave them a poor reputation for refusing to help a passerby in need. This worked out in our favor, giving us a chance to see the castle up close and personal.
Our walking tour continued past the castle and up a golf course. We followed the path we were on behind the golf clubhouse and up the bluff located behind it. It was a steep climb upwards, but it was also 10000% worth it. The views from the top were unreal and my pictures do not give it enough credit.

I think our tour guide, Jack, was giving us information on what we were seeing, but I was honestly so in awe of the beautiful sight that I honestly could not tell you a single thing he said at the top of that bluff. We hung around here for about half an hour before making our way down. The trip down really made me feel like we were in rural Ireland and it was just unreal. Despite all of the cool places I went all semester, few seemed as unique as this.

When we got back on ground level, we headed towards the coast to a pub for lunch. Here our group enjoyed a delicious meal and got to know each other a little better. It was also a nice respite for our surely sore legs.

Following lunch, we headed to the coast. While I thought the views at the top of the bluff were outstanding, they were in a tough competition with the views from the coast for the best views of the trip.

Alexis and I were consistently holding up the group, trying to linger in the moment and fully embrace the views.

We were headed back to the train station (and back to Dublin) much too quickly. As much as I loved the city, nothing truly compares to the serenity of the Irish coast.

When we got back to Dublin, we rushed to do what little shopping we wanted to do before the stores closed at 6pm again. Thankfully we were able to get everything we wanted and also got to enjoy the city some more before leaving. After grabbing a quick bite for dinner, we headed back to Malahide one last time.

The next morning Joe took us all back to the airport. The three of us could not be more thankful for the Zortman’s hospitality during our weekend at their home.

Taylor and Alexis’s flight departed a few hours before mine so I spent my free time doing some school work and reflecting on the incredible weekend I had. As I waited for my flight to depart, I resolved to definitely make my way back to Ireland some day. There is a whole lot of Irish countryside calling my name.
Back in the USSR U.S.A.

As I sat on my bed no longer home, but back at school again, I realized that I have been back in the States for an entire month now.

After spending about three months in a foreign country, coming home is an incredibly strange experience. When I left to go abroad, I was expecting some sort of culture shock or home sickness, but was lucky enough to not really experience too much of either of those things. Being abroad made me incredibly happy, and I loved many of the challenges that came with being abroad.

I loved being forced into a different language, trying to communicate with people with foreign tongues and still being able to find commonalities. I loved trying new cuisines and finding pastries that I will forever be searching for in the states. And I loved being forced out of my comfort zone, being forced to sink or swim and actually swimming through the ocean of confusion that can be life abroad.

After talking with a friend over dinner the other night, I realized part of what makes coming home so strange. When you go abroad, you expect everything there to be different. And in many ways it is. But you also have all of these incredible experiences (like going to the Salt Mines in Krakow or watching the sunrise in Krasnogruda), where you go to places you probably never could have imagined of one day seeing (such as visiting Liverpool or Vilnius). Like it or not, these experiences change some part of you, in some ways that I don’t think I even realize.
Yet when you come home, you don't expect many things to be different. But they are. Not in extreme ways. But, subtly, pieces of your world have moved on without you (and you have moved on without other pieces of your world). It sounds like a selfish thing, to even think for a second that the world would not go on without you. But it isn't, at least, it isn't on purpose.

When you're gone for an extended period of time, people (including yourself) can change. Relationships change. Seasons change. Things simply change. Unless you spend your entire time away keeping up with everything back home, you will not be up to date with life/friends/family when you get back home. And that's okay.

As I look back over my incredible semester abroad, I often find myself amazed at everything I was able to accomplish in such a short amount of time. I mean, in the ten weeks I was abroad I went to six countries and at least fourteen cities. I find that to be absolutely remarkable. Now my goal is to make sure I keep working hard so that I can hopefully one day go back to Europe and see even more of its beauty.
Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed the many pages of thoughts, rambles and photographs that I chose to use to document and share my experiences across the pond. I hope to be back again soon... maybe even sharing my antics once again.

-KCO