

EXPERIENCIES OF AN ERASMUS-STUDENT FROM FINLAND AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MISKOLC

© Anu Karrimaa
Anu.Karrimaa@uta.fi

I wrote the first pages of my diary on an aeroplane on my way from Finland to Hungary at the beginning of August 2006. I was to spend the following semester in Miskolc as an exchange student, and I listed some of my expectations concerning my stay in Hungary. I asked myself a question: 'Why do I want to go abroad? And why to Hungary? And why right now?'

Why Hungary? That is an easy question: as a student of Finnish Language it was natural for me to come to the country of a 'relative nation'. On the other hand, I cannot give any simple answer why I wanted to leave Finland for five months and come to Miskolc. I expected to get new experiences, to make new friends, to get acquainted with another culture, and to learn something about Hungary as well as about myself. Now, after spending almost three months in Hungary, I have happy news to write into my diary, as the reader will find it out later.

I arrived in Miskolc at the beginning of September. By that time I had already spent one month in Hungary, in Pécs, on an Erasmus Intensive Language Course. So, when arriving in Miskolc I was not completely new to Hungary anymore. I had had my first impression about Hungary and Hungarian people already, and I somehow knew what to expect.

My friend, who I had already met in my home city, Tampere last spring, was waiting for me at the railway station. She and her boyfriend took me to my accommodation, which was arranged by the Erasmus Team of the International Relations Office before my arrival. I was completely shocked when I saw my new room at the Uni-Hotel.

The Erasmus Team had also arranged me a student tutor, who showed me the campus area and the libraries. The city and the university were quite much what I had expected: new and shiny and old and ugly live together in harmony. But, as I soon discovered, the outer appearances do not tell you what lies beneath.

As I wanted to attend a language course I came to Miskolc one week earlier than the other exchange students. After their arrival the orientation and the classes started. The International Relations Office and the great Erasmus team gave us a short introduction to life in Miskolc, and they also helped us to get the courses we wanted to attend. My learning agreement changed about ten times during that one week, since some of my "English" courses were held in Hungarian and vice versa, and I also found some new courses I didn't know about. After many arrangements I finally got my timetable done, and I was ready to start studying at my 'exchange' university.

As a student of Finnish Language I could not find too many English courses that would fit into my studies. So I took courses from different departments, and that was a good decision.

Now I am studying linguistics, literature, philosophy, Hungarian language and culture, and also Multicultural Education at the Department of Pedagogy; and I truly enjoy all my courses. They are interesting and well planned.

First I was a bit worried about how the teachers would react when a foreign student suddenly enters their classroom, without informing them beforehand (exchange students are not in the Neptun system) and without any proficiency in Hungarian language. As I have heard less than twenty exchange students come to Miskolc every year, so I have thought that teachers are not used to meeting exchange students and that they would therefore be suspicious towards strangers. Fortunately, my fears turned out to be completely groundless. All the teachers I have met are absolutely wonderful. They are extremely friendly, helpful and flexible. Each one was happy to see an exchange student in his or her class, and they were asking me questions about me and my home country. Some of them even treat me more as a guest than a student. In addition, they are all very good and professional teachers. It was a really pleasant surprise for me to see how everybody welcomed me to study in Miskolc.

Here I would like to mention the great Erasmus team of the International Relations Office again. They answered all our questions, they arranged the accommodation for us before we arrived. I happen to know that in Budapest, for example, exchange students have to find their own apartments with no help from the university. One more thing that we had beforehand were the student tutors; in Budapest, if I have understood correctly, they don't have this tutoring system.

During these two months in Miskolc, the Erasmus team has always been ready to help us. They make us feel that they care about our well-being, and that they are happy to have us here.

New friends

Of course, studying was not the only reason for me to travel abroad. I also wanted to see new places and especially meet new people. So let me say something about making friends in Hungary.

I have already mentioned a friend of mine who picked me up at the railway station at the arrival. She was an exchange student at my home university, University of Tampere, last spring. I met her there, and we were sending e-mails during the summer. She was my first friend here, and she also turned out to be one of the best. During the first week she helped me in every single matter. She took me to the supermarket to buy my first necessities, she gave me some cooking equipment, she was my translator wherever I needed translation, she showed me the city... And after I got accustomed to living in Miskolc and did not need so much help anymore, she became a really good friend, always ready to keep me company and take me with her everywhere she was going. She was my first Hungarian friend, and therefore she gave me the first impression of Hungarian people.

Naturally, many of my friends here are exchange students. We have students from Finland (my roommate is one of them), the Czech Republic, Sweden, Poland, Germany, Turkey, and Estonia. We live in the same corridor in the Uni-Hotel in double rooms, and therefore we spend a lot of time together with cooking, chatting, and even studying. Every now and then we have a party, that is, we buy some wine or beer, or we go to some bar or disco. I do not drink much alcohol, and I am interested in going to bars, but still I always have fun with my friends when having a party.

There are also some local students who spend a lot of time with the so called "Erasmus guys". Two of them are student tutors, who have already "hung around" for years with exchange students. The rest are their friends or their friends' friends. I must say I really like the company of these Hungarian students. They show us how normal students live in Miskolc and make us part of the student culture. They can also help us in our problems, as they constantly do.

In my lessons I have got to know some other Hungarian students. They have all the time been really helpful and friendly, they have accepted me well and they want to be my friends. They invite me to parties, and sometimes it seems that they even compete which one is allowed to help me. They are brave, they come to talk to me and they are interested in me. Even the smallest smile or kind word make me glad in this foreign country far away from home, so I have been really happy to have been accepted so well in this student society. And always, when I get lost or have some other problem, every student, regardless of their proficiency in English, has been ready to help me. I have no bad words to say about Hungarian university students.

Being a foreign in Hungary

I have mentioned many good things that I have come across during my stay in Hungary. But, naturally, I have had my problems too. Although the University staff and the students have been extremely kind to me, being "külföldi" may cause some problems anywhere. The first problem, for which I was prepared, is the language-wall. When shopping, for example, I have to carry my English-Hungarian-English dictionary all the time with me to be able to ask questions. If I get lost in the city, there is no one who could help me. Buying a train ticket can take fifteen minutes, because the staff may refuse to understand me until I start to speak perfect Hungarian. But, fortunately, language walls can always be broken, if all the participants want it so. Many times Hungarians have started to help me immediately when I say at least one word in Hungarian, and sometimes they even get very interested in me.

I have also had some problems at the Uni-Hotel. It is even a bit *too* new. That is, sometimes it seems that no one knows anything about anything. The rules are arbitrary and they change daily. Things are arranged so slowly that even a paralyzed snail could move faster. No one knows where to pay the rent, and how much it is; we must pay for weekly cleaning, but the cleaner does not visit our rooms; it took one month to get an Internet connection, and still it is not working properly; we had to wait six weeks to get some kitchen equipment that they promised we would get "tomorrow"; the reception cannot answer our questions; we can hardly take our friends into our rooms; and so on. Anyway, I don't think that we have these problems just because we are foreigners. It is probably the same situation with local students. But sometimes it is very tiring to live in a dormitory where it is frustratingly hard to get anything arranged.

A foreign student can arouse some suspicion also when trying to manage in the city. For example, when my roommate was trying to buy a student price train ticket, the staff did not believe that she was, as a foreigner, entitled to this discount, even though she had a Hungarian student card. Getting prepaid SIM-cards for our mobile phones was also quite an adventure: each shop had different opinions about the prices, and some of them even wanted to get our Hungarian Identity Cards – which, of course,

we don't have. We all got those SIM-cards, but some of us had to pay a double price of the price that the others paid.

At the University I have had only one real problem because of my nationality: I cannot get a library card. I can go into the libraries and read my books there, but I can't borrow books for example to write my essays, or can't read on trains when I travel all around Hungary at weekends. Fortunately my Hungarian friends can help me, they borrow the books for me. But, of course, it is a bit difficult to call them every time when I need some books.

Differences in university life

If I compare university life in Finland and in Hungary, I can definitely find some differences. Not so many, and not so serious, but differences anyway. The only one that could cause me some trouble is the academic calendar. In Finland the academic year starts at the beginning of September, and in December we have the exams. At Christmas we have about two weeks holiday, and the spring semester starts at the beginning of January. Here, in Hungary the system is a bit different, because the exam period lasts till the end of January. Since I'll have to be back in Finland before January (because I will have to start my spring semester in time), I must accomplish all my courses before Christmas. I'm sure I'm going to make it, although the last week may be a bit busy for me.

First I had some troubles with this system of "lectures and seminars". In Finland, if we have a course, we have one or two lessons a week, then we pass the exam, and that's it. Here many courses consist of lectures and seminars, which are separate units. I have heard that there should be differences between lectures and seminars, but so far I have not figured out what those differences are. But with the help of my Hungarian friends I found my way to all the lessons I'm supposed to attend in order to accomplish the whole course, so this little problem does not bother me anymore.

What I was happy to see when coming to the university here was the easiness of the administrative procedures. I know that in Finland all exchange students must do a lot of paper work, they must officially register at the university and they must enroll in all their courses beforehand. Here all I did was to pay some money in the post office and I got my student card immediately after that. As I mentioned, I did not have to enroll in my courses beforehand; instead, I got a class attendance permit from the International Relations Office, and by showing that to the teacher I am free to attend any class I wish.

Teaching methods themselves are similar to those in Finland. We also have lectures where teachers teach and sometimes the whole group is discussing, and we also write essays and exams, we go to the libraries and study independently. What first was a bit difficult for me was the fact that here getting credits is harder than in Finland. If in Finland I did a course that is worth three credits, here I would get only one or two. I need enough credits to get my student grant, so I had to count carefully the credits I'm going to get.

Everyday culture shocks

If there are differences between Finnish and Hungarian students' lives, there are definitely some differences between Finnish and Hungarian everyday

lives. Let me now list some of those (mostly positive) culture shocks that I have come across in Hungary.

First of all, Finland is quite a rich country, at least when compared to many Central or Eastern European countries, which is due to different historical backgrounds. Therefore I see most Hungarian cities old and dirty. Some of the baths I have visited could never be open in Finland, and my dormitory in Pécs closely reminded me of a mental hospital of the 1950's. But this is what I expected, and I have not been bothered by this at all. Besides, in many cities I see efforts of reconstructing the old building new, and of all the former 'friends' of the Soviet Union I have visited Hungary is the most "western". Yet one thing I feel sad about is the amount of beggars and even children in the streets. This amount is quite high compared to Finland, because the Finnish social security system is relatively tenable, and the government tries to reduce the number of homeless people to the minimum. I have never seen a homeless child in Finland, because they are usually taken to governmental care if their parents are unable to afford to take care of them.

Living in a dormitory was something completely new to me. We do have student apartments in Finland, but not dormitories or "kollégiums" as in Central European countries. We have two-room apartments for married or dating couples, but most students have their own little apartments, where they live alone. We also have so called "cells", where two or three people share one kitchen and one bathroom, but they still have their own rooms with their own room keys. Here two or even eight people can share one single room.

However, I must say that I do enjoy dormitory life. Of course there is no chance of getting any privacy, but, on the other hand, I never have to be alone, there is always a friend for me. The feeling of belonging to a community of some kind is quite pleasant after all. I would like to have this kind of dormitories in Finland too, not because of the community feeling, but because of the price: living alone in one room in a big city in Finland is not a cheap business. Student dormitories could provide some cheaper accommodation for those students who can hardly afford normal life in Finland.

Talking about the costs of living, staying in Hungary has been healthy for my wallet. The prices here are very low compared to those of Finland. Especially food is really cheap for me here; on the other hand, for example clothes and hygiene products are about as expensive as in Finland. As far as my rent is concerned, I pay almost 30 000 forints per month for my room, which is about the same price I would pay in Finland for a similar room.

The food I buy is not only cheaper but also different than in Finland. Here the food contains a lot of salt, oil and fat, and fresh vegetables are not so popular. First it was a bit strange to eat so fatty food, but soon I got used to it. Besides, I can always buy food from the shops and make myself the food that I like, for example salads, if I wish. What I really miss sometimes is the 0,0 % -milk, that is, milk with no fat at all (or, as my Hungarian friend called it, "the white water"). I can buy low fat milk in Hungary too, but it is quite expensive, so I buy 1,5 % -milk. And I don't drink it, I only take it with my morning cornflakes.

When it comes to drinking habits, they are also different in Finland than in Hungary. Whenever a Finnish individual takes a glass of beer, he does it only in order to get drunk. And not just drunk but *really* drunk. In Hungary drinking habits are, from my point of view, much more mature. Hungarians don't have to get drunk every time they take alcohol. They can take some glasses of wine or pálinka just to feel more relaxed and to make the

conversation smoother. They also pay attention to the quality of what they drink. They enjoy good wines and dislike bad ones, while Finnish people consider wine as just wine. We call Hungarian way of drinking "the European drinking habit".

I hope that the reader here realises that I'm guilty of overgeneralization, but I think I must make some generalizations to be able to compare our countries in the first place.

It was Hungary where I learned to enjoy wines. In Finland wines are rare and expensive, and most people prefer drinking beer or vodka. We also have cider, apple or pear based long drink, which is considered as "beer for girls". Hungarians don't have this drink, but they have solved the problem by mixing wine with coke or soda water (what, personally, I had never even thought of).

I was surprised to see how much family and relatives mean to Hungarians. Every weekend students leave the dormitories and go home to their families. Sometimes they even take their dirty clothes home for their mothers to wash – something my mother would never do. I feel good to hear how my Hungarian friends talk warmly about their families. In Finland the attitude towards relatives can be displayed by one of our favourite phrases: "You can choose your friends, but your relatives are chosen by the Devil".

What also took me some time to get used to is kissing. From my point of view, Hungarians kiss everybody, every time, everywhere, irrespectively of gender or age. When friends meet, or part, they kiss, or at least they shake hands, as men sometimes seem to do. Sometimes they even kiss when introduced to somebody, that is, almost to unknown people! And, oh, I just love this habit. I wish Finnish people could be as open to touching and getting near to another person. Finns seem to consider touching and kissing as "trespassing to other person's territory". I'm quite sure that there is psychological evidence for the healthy effects of touching. Could this be the key to general depression in Finland?

Having a conversation with a Hungarian interlocutor has also revealed me one feature that is typical to Hungarians: they don't like having pauses in conversation. They seem to get quite awkward if they don't know what to say. Finnish people can have relatively long pauses in their conversations, and yet they don't feel uneasy at all.

Nonverbal communication is pretty similar in Hungary and in Finland. The only thing I didn't first understand was the way Hungarians show "one". They lift their thumb, which in Finland only means "good". When we show "one", we lift our first finger. Now, however, I have got used to this little difference.

About racism

There is also one thing typical to Hungarians that I cannot say I was happy about. That is, they are overtly racist towards certain ethnic groups, mostly Gypsies. Of course I'm not saying that we didn't have racists in Finland, quite the opposite; but what I am saying is that being so *openly* racist is not very acceptable in Finland. In addition, racism is not half as common in Finland than it is in Hungary. I have even heard young, intelligent people calling Gypsies "animals" who should not have human rights. Honestly speaking, that made quite shocked, even though I admit that Gypsies have problems in Hungary as well as in many other European countries. In Finland I would not normally make friends with racists, but here I have had

to moderate my attitudes, because otherwise I would end up being only with my Finnish friends.

In Finland racism is turned mostly towards Russians, but also Gypsies (we don't have very many) and African and Asian refugees. It can come up in many forms, from rude names to beating and even killing.

Russians are hated because of the World War Two, during which Finland had two wars with the Soviet Union. The antipathy towards our eastern neighbours is passed on from generation to generation, which makes me genuinely sad. Too many times I have feared for my Russian friends who leave the bar at two o'clock in the morning to go home by themselves. Unfortunately, sometimes my fears have not been groundless.

Gypsy people are considered to be thieves and alcoholics, and I suppose the same image is common in other European countries too. Personally I don't know any Gypsies, since we don't have too many of them. Yet I see Gypsies are humans who should absolutely possess all the human rights.

The hostile attitudes towards refugees are similar to those in every country: they are different, so they are bad. If they work, the racists think that they steal their jobs; if they don't work, racists say that they have come to live on our tax money. But I suppose it is the same situation in other European countries too.

There are also other minorities in Finland, such as "Finnish Swedes" (Finnish people whose mother tongue is Swedish) and Sami people (also called Laplanders), but the attitudes towards these groups are positive and friendly. For my nice surprise, Turkish immigrants are also nowadays a lot better accepted than before. They are considered to be hard-working and funny people.

What I have also noticed is that Hungarians are, at least on my Finnish standard, quite patriotic. I see Hungarian flags all around, and Hungarians are very proud of their nation. Sometimes they can criticise Hungary themselves, but if a foreigner does the same, they immediately become defensive and irritated. Of course they have good reasons for being patriotic, but I think it could be one reason for the racist attitudes. At least in Finland I see that the most patriotic people are also the most racist ones. I'm not a psychologist, but I suppose that here we speak about the fear that something could happen to the nation patriotic people are so fond of.

To mention the treatment of old and disabled people I think there are no big differences between Hungary and Finland. People don't have negative attitudes towards them, and in the buses, for example, there are usually seats especially for old and disabled people, and everywhere I go I can find a toilet ment for handicapped people. This only strengthens my image of Hungarians as family loving people.

Unfortunately I cannot say much about the equality between men and women in Hungary, because I'm not familiar with the structures of the Hungarian society. It seems to me that there are women working at the same stages of working life as men, but if I have got the correct impression, the highest positions are still largely occupied by men. In Finland the situation is that men and women are quite widely equal, although the highest positions still belong to men. At the University of Tampere, however, I think that the majority of students are women. So, maybe the situation will change when these ladies graduate and start taking their positions in working life.

Conclusions

So, what is it that I have learned of my stay in Hungary? What will I tell my family when I go home? What about my friends?

I could start explaining the things that are already obvious: I have learned things about Hungarian culture, I can speak a bit Hungarian, Hungarians are hospitable and kind people, etc. What I would like to tell them about are the social relations and new friends I have got my new experiences and my studies. What they would, maybe, like to hear are the economic and political matters, the current situation and the future plans of Hungary.

What I *will* tell them are quite much the same things that I have been meditating on in this article. I will tell about the similarities and differences between our countries, the people here, the life, and the studies.

However, I think that the most important things that this exchange period has given me are not that superficial. They are deeper matters, changes that have happened not only in my knowledge of other culture, but in the deeper levels of my mind. I have, according to my own opinion, become more independent, more flexible, and more adaptable than I was before. I have learnt to survive (or at least I have noticed that I *can* survive) in a foreign country. I have also learnt many things about myself: what kind of person I am like, what it is that I like and don't like and why, and what I want or do not want.

When I go back to my university in Tampere I will tell all my friends about Miskolc and explain them how good a destination it is for exchange students. Thus I wish to make Miskolc more visible and better known, and I also wish that more and more exchange students would take the risk and choose some other university than those of the capitals. As I said to my friend who was wondering at my choice of destination: "If you give it a chance, you will be happily surprised".