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Helsinki Committee for Human Rights - Budapest, Hungary

Karen Bemis

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Hungarian Helsinki Committee
Budapest, Hungary

Karen Bemis
University of Georgia School of Law
Global Internship 2010
I’m Karen, a rising 2L at Georgia Law, and I’m spending my summer working for the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, a human rights organization in Budapest. Early in my 1L year at a public interest mentoring event, a then-2L who had spent her summer in South Africa through the Global Internship Program told me that I should make a beeline for Dean Rusk to apply. She said I’d be able to look forward to a wonderful summer when 1L seemed unbearable and that this would make it all easier. Best. Advice. Ever. When you’re taking six classroom-based courses, it is hard to feel that your work has any bigger impact than grades on a transcript. I’ve really been looking forward to this opportunity for hands-on learning that benefits someone other than myself. And it goes without saying I’ve been looking forward to the travel!

I felt that it was very important to spend this summer abroad because it’ll be a long, long time before I’ll again be able to spend a few months anywhere in the world I wish to go. I worked in Boston for a few years before law school, and I remember looking over my first job offer and realizing there’d be no more pre-set winter, spring, and summer breaks. For those who might worry about the added cost of summer or a semester abroad on top of law school expenses, money is certainly scarce when you’re a student, but time will be scarce when you’re finished, and it’s easier to make money than time after graduation.

In making the most of my summer, I’m trying to maximize work and travel. For a nominal fare increase, I was able to make a stop in London on my way over to Budapest, and that’s where I’m writing this now. After two days of sightseeing, I’ve settled into the biggest Starbucks ever on Fleet Street to work on journal write-on for an evening. I’m staying in a cheap hostel near Kings Cross— am law-nerdy enough that I could not resist staying in a hostel that’s a remodeled courthouse, even though a friend told me it sounds like the perfect setting for a horror movie. London has certainly earned its reputation as one of the world’s most expensive cities, but I’ve been overjoyed to learn that some of the world’s best museums—National Gallery, British Museum, Tate Modern, among others— are free! The city is very walkable and the double-decker city buses beat pricey tour buses, hands down. London has proven to be a worthwhile and surprisingly affordable detour on my way to Budapest.
London Photos

View from London Bridge

Changing of the Guard

Royal Courts of Justice
Originally, I had planned to spend the whole week in London and explore it for a couple of days with a friend who’d be in Paris, but when she remembered she had to attend her cousin’s wedding, both of our travel plans changed. I decided to see where a discount airline could take me, and on the recommendation of one German history scholar turned law student, took advantage of easyjet’s roundtrip fare to Cologne, Germany, for under $100. Kayak, my favorite flight search tool, scans for fares on the discount carriers (Ryanair, easyjet, etc.) as well as the major international carriers. I’m somewhat obsessed with their buzz feature (www.kayak.com/buzz) which searches for lowest fares from your departure point to various regions (e.g., Europe, Asia, Central) if you’re flexible about your final destination.

Arrived in Cologne yesterday, and I’m regretting I didn’t learn some basic travel phrases before I left. I’ve been getting by very well considering the only words I know in German are “kindergarten” and “auf wiedersehen,” but it’s just kind of embarrassing to not be able to show I’m making some effort before communicating exclusively in English. Sara in LCS told me to review some Hungarian before I got to Budapest, and I’m really wishing I had made the time to do so before now— at least English is a Germanic language! Hungarian is a separate beast entirely.

So, about Cologne— it is home to two marvels of engineering: Kölner Dom, Germany’s largest cathedral, and kölsch, a clear, hoppy beer. Today I took a ferry tour on the Rhine, and I was able to get a great perspective on both, drinking a cool kölsch on the top deck and watching the skyline, dominated by the dom, pass by. Afterwards, I grabbed a late lunch and learned about the perfect timing of my trip— it is currently asparagus season in Germany. The white asparagus I ordered was as thick as carrots, and it was topped with an incredible hollandaise that made my favorite brunch place seem as if they top their eggs benedict with canned nacho cheese.

It’s just a quick trip here, and I’ll return to London on Tuesday before departing for Budapest. My flight was cancelled due to the British Airways strike, but fortunately, I was able to schedule another flight for Thursday. I’m currently debating whether I want to see Bonn tomorrow or if I’ll take a daytrip to Bath with my extra time in England— leaning towards the latter. Will post again if I make another stop on the way to Budapest.

Auf wiedersehen, London

Sunday, May 23, 2010, 08:40 PM
Cologne Photos

The Rhine from the ferry

Have kölsch, will travel

Inside Kölnner Dom
The train ticket prices to Bath scared me off (as did the affordable but unbearably lengthy bus ride alternative), and I decided to spend the rest of my time in London thoroughly exploring the sights. One thing I found particularly interesting were the Elgin marbles. These are the famed sculptures and friezes that Lord Elgin took from the Parthenon. Modern Greece has been making demands for their return since the 1980s. Arguably just as fascinating as the sculptures themselves was the way in which the British Museum presented them, focusing heavily on destruction and vandalism at the Acropolis and the way in which Lord Elgin saved the marbles from further ruin and created a renewed appreciation for classic Greek art with their installation in the British Museum in 1816. Both explicitly and subtly, the display countered visitor's presumptions about the rightful owners of the marbles and forcefully argued that ancient Greek history belonged not just to the Greeks, but to the world. In short, it was law made art.
I arrived in Budapest on Thursday, and it's been unusually cold and rainy in the city. The old facades look even better in gray mist than they did in Saturday's burst of sunshine, but that doesn't change the fact I'm freezing!

In terms of gear for chilly weather, I brought a hoodie (which had a near-fatal collision with some highlighters while I tackled write-on in transit) and a barbri poncho. I hope I get points from my regional director for spreading the gospel of barbri bar prep to Central Europe. Fortunately, my office is laid-back, so no one seemed to mind me showing up soggy and looking ready to get 1Ls locked into this year's bar review rates.

Having successfully located Magyar Helsinki Bizottság on Bajcsy-Zsilinszky út, I was feeling pretty confident on Monday morning. That soon faded when I was given a background research assignment to familiarize myself with international human rights law and was forced to acknowledge that Pierson v. Post was not going to be of any help whatsoever this summer. Despite familiarity with the social issues involved, I must admit that I know basically nothing about the state and international legal instruments that are used to address those issues. With this crash course in human rights law, I'm certainly going to learn a lot--I only hope that I can be of some benefit to the organization as well.
Four years ago, I interned at an organization in Delhi that, among other work, provided homes and educations to orphaned and abandoned children. One of the most eye-opening things from that summer was learning that some of the children were neither orphaned nor abandoned—they were merely lost. Children had gotten separated from their parents in train stations or even in the cities where they lived and simply because there were too many people for the state to keep track of them all, particularly the poorest. It was often impossible for social service workers to find these children’s homes and reunite them with their families. There was one young girl whose story was particularly unfathomable to me. When she was three or four, she got separated from her family. She was able to tell a social service worker the slum where she lived, but no more. The social worker walked around the slum with her for hours, trying to locate her family, but no family claimed her, nor knew who would claim her.

This summer, one of my projects is to assist a staffer in his work on statelessness. Like the “abandoned” girl, there are millions of individuals, even entire groups, who become lost. Despite having been born and having lived within the borders of a nation, because of redrawn borders, political shifts, or intentional efforts to deny citizenship to marginalized groups, these people lack enforceable legal ties to any nation. Lacking nationality, they may not vote, apply for a travel document, or marry. As the UNHCR explains in Nationality and Statelessness, A Handbook for Parliamentarians, “Often, even the most basic of rights—the right to education, medical care, and employment—are denied to individuals who cannot prove a legal connection with a country.” (Source: UNHCR)

Because of the significant rights that come with nationality, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts that every person has a right to a nationality. It is a right that is easily taken for granted—while I certainly recognize the tremendous benefits that come with American citizenship, I have not previously considered the benefits that come from nationality generally.

For more information on statelessness, see the Open Society Justice Initiative. For a case study on the Rohingya, a Muslim minority group that has been denied citizenship in their native Burma, see “Stateless and Starving: Persecuted Rohingya Flee Burma and Starve in Bangladesh,” a recent report by Physicians for Human Rights.
The week's rain finally stopped in time for the National Gallop, a horse race inspired by Hungarian history. Following qualifying races across the county, riders compete in a series of races in Hero's Square, home to Hungary's tomb of the unknown soldier. This square, at the end of UNESCO World Heritage site Andrásy Avenue, also features the millennial monument which marks the thousand years since the arrival of the Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin. (The other end of Andrásy is also famous-- home to luxury good retailers like Burberry and Gucci.) The race is a celebration of Hungarian national culture, but also carries a sizable purse of 30,000,000 forints. That's $124,512.33 today, but given how the forint has been struggling, will probably be worth even more in US dollars by the time you read this. (The euro isn't doing so well, either. My rent, which is paid in euros to my Italian landlord, is now 13% less than when I arranged the housing six weeks ago. Good time to visit Europe!)

Anyway, having spent the best summer of my life in Louisville, I had to make it down to the races this morning! I was especially drawn by the lure of kitsch, given the promise of vendors from across Hungary selling their wares, though I found the items, overall, to actually be quite nice. I bought this beautiful wooden cheese board (love. cheese.) for ~$12, and yeah, I'm not going to deny it-- when I got back home, I skyped George (my fiance) just to show it off.

**The National Gallop**

The temporary track set up in the middle of the city
Post-skype, I headed down to the nearest M2 metro stop to go to the nearest IKEA. Scottie, a friend from Boston, is going to be visiting next week, and I thought the occasion called for a slight upgrade in living standards. My tiny apartment works just fine for me (especially as my roommate, a law student from Ohio, doesn’t arrive until next weekend), but for a guest, I
figured it was time to toss the fish-shaped, never-drying bathmat that came with the rental. Someone asked me recently if I would classify Hungary as first world or more like third world, and while as a stereotypical anthropology major I must avoid such categories, I have to say, you can't question the civilization of a country that has two IKEAs in a single metro area. While I only know about a five words in Hungarian right now, I'm fluent in IKEA Sweedish, and it reminded me of home to see Jokkmokk for sale in Budapest. Though it costs $40 less here!

My IKEA outing was a success, save for the fact that I don't know the metric systemic and accidentally bought a fitted sheet twice as large as needed for the guest bed. Embarrassing, yes, but at least I didn't crash a Mars space probe.
Yesterday, things were a bit slow at work in the afternoon, so I took advantage of the opportunity to learn more about Hungary. Near my apartment is Terror House, a museum that memorializes the struggle of the Hungarian people under Nazi and Russian Soviet domination in the 1940s through the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. (This revolution did not lead to a permanent removal of Soviets from Hungary, but did eventually result in new economic approaches and a less draconian political climate.)

The museum was quite dark, but it gave a valuable perspective on a country that has changed dramatically in the past 50-60 years. The building, on Andrassy Avenue, was home to the Arrow Cross (Hungarian fascists and Nazi supporters), and later, the Hungarian Soviet secret police. It now serves a memorial to those who died under these regimes. The work of the secret police in seeking out suspected dissents in the post-WWII era was extensive, and the headquarters expanded to other buildings covering a city block. In the basements of these buildings was an interconnected system of prison cells where people were held, interrogated, and tortured. Some died from malnutrition, disease, and mistreatment. Quite shocking to learn that this took place beneath the street I take to and from work every day.

When I first learned of this museum, I found it surprising that a country would so openly confront such a dark era of its history. After the museum, I was slightly bothered that the overall impression was that these terrible events were something that happened to Hungary because of outsiders, with little emphasis on the role of Hungarians. For example, the museum emphasized the horror of forced Soviet labor-- some 600,000 were forced into hard labor on meager rations and under extremely harsh conditions, and of these, at least 200,000 died-- but glaze over the extent of Hungarian complicity. This is certainly nothing unique to the Hungarian retelling of history, of course. But it does raise the question what opportunities for reflection are missed when people look at dark period of history as something that came from without, from fringe groups and outsiders, rather than coming from ordinary people under pressure.

For US coverage of the museum's opening in 2002, see "Stark history / Some see a stunt : Memory becomes battleground in Budapest's House of Terror" (NYT).
My friend Scottie, a former roommate, came to visit in Hungary this week. I've been looking forward to her visit since before I got on the plane to Budapest— I hadn’t seen her since I left our Boston apartment last July and moved down to Athens. Being super considerate, she asked me what she could bring, and I didn’t hesitate for a second before responding “peanut butter!” For some reason, the rest of the world has not caught on to the wonders of peanut butter, and as tasty and nutella may be, it simply will not work in partnership with jelly to make the budget lunch of champions. (When I was in Delhi, I paid like $7 for some imported JIF, an insane amount to anyone familiar with the price of food in India, so clearly this has more to do with mild homesickness than frugality.)

This all is background for yesterday morning, when my doorbell rang. Expecting Scottie, I rushed down to open the door to the building’s courtyard, and I saw Scottie’s smiling face through the window. I swung the heavy wooden door open, and standing right next to Scottie was my friend Kristen (with whom my earlier London travel plans had fallen through). Scottie, clearly very pleased with herself for pulling off the surprise, exclaimed, “Well, I don’t have the peanut butter!” Scottie’s family works with the airlines, and she had gotten Kristen over to Budapest on a buddy pass— in business class, no less! They had been planning it for weeks and had taken great pains to avoid letting any clue slip, Scottie convinced that a single use of “we” would tip me off (and she was probably right about that). We went out for lunch at Hummus Bar (exactly what it sounds like and ridiculously good), and I assured Kristen she was 7,000 times better than peanut butter. Kristen replied, “Well, I’ve never had my worth compared to that of peanut butter, but I’m glad I win!” (For the record, Scottie had gotten some, but couldn’t get it past security, despite the fact it is neither liquid nor gel.)

After lunch, I returned to work. I was excited about my new project— background research on family reunification under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights— but disappointed to be spending three of the five days when the girls were in town at my office. When I told my supervisor about the surprise, he thought it’d be fine if I took a day of work to spend with them, so I took the following day (Thursday) off and we all took a daytrip to Eger in Northeastern Hungary.

Eger is an absolute must. It’s a little less than two and a half hours by train from Pest’s Keleti station, and the tickets were less than $20 for the return trip. The train wasn’t air-conditioned, but even in heat approaching 90 degrees, it was perfectly comfortable once the train was in motion. About two hours into our scenic ride through the countryside, we stopped for 15 minutes on the tracks of an unknown locale that was decidedly too rural to be our destination, and we began to wonder if we had accidentally taken one of the faster trains to Eger (which required a change of trains halfway through). Fortunately, the train began to move again, and we arrived in Eger shortly thereafter. We headed for the city center to grab lunch at Palatscintavár and escape the heat (Kristen definitely placed the best order— a glass and peach juice and a cheese-filled garam flour pancake, stuffed with chives and topped with fresh vegetables.) If the idea of heavy meat and gravy dishes in the Hungarian summer sun makes you feel ill, then Palatscintavár is definitely the place to go to get lighter fare!

After lunch, we spent quite some time at Eger castle checking out the views before heading to Szépasszony-völgy (the Valley of the Beautiful Women, or as translated on the directional signs, “Valley of the Nice Ladies”) but if we had to do it again, we’d skip the castle. Not because it isn’t worth it, but because we could have happily spent our whole afternoon tasting and buying wines
in the valley’s cellars. At the 30 or so wine cellars where representatives from vineyards around the region sold their wine, it was free to taste, 50 cents to $3 for a glass, and as little as $3 for a bottle. As we sipped wine in the first cellar, Scottie remarked, “I wonder how say ‘we’re not this classy back in America’ in Hungarian?” At the cellars, there were casks where you could fill empty bottles to get the best price, and having drank our way through quite a bit of water in the heat, we were more than prepared to do this! Upon returning home later that evening, we poured some fantastic white wine out of our water bottles and drank it with a spread of bread, cheese, and pears.

Tonight, continuing with the theme of “we’re not this classy back in America,” we are all going to see Mozart’s Don Giovanni at the Royal Hungarian Opera House. With tickets as low as ranging from a low of 400 HUF to a high of 16,900HUF ($1.75-$75), the opera is accessible to anyone who wants to attend— a pricing scheme I’d like to see implemented with performing arts back in the states. This weekend, we’re taking the train from Budapest to Bratislava, Slovakia, and from there, taking a boat up the Danube to Vienna. So, so much better than peanut butter.
Eger Photos

Central Eger

Eger Wine Cellar (690HUF = $3)
This morning, Kristen and Scottie got into a cab to catch Delta’s Budapest to JFK flight—hopefully they’ll encounter no problems! They’re both flying standby, and they’ve been religiously updating the flight lists to see how many seats are available, and as of last night, there were 20+ free seats in business class. It’s a 10.5-hour flight, but given that they’ll be given a glass of champagne as soon as they sit down, hard to feel too bad for them for having to take the long flight back. The visit was fantastic, but a huge wave of exhaustion hit me when they left— we’ve had a very busy few days!

Friday, when I was at work, they went to one of Roman baths that are perhaps Budapest’s most famous features. There are many to choose from, but the incredibly helpful flight attendant they had chatted with on their way over recommended Széchenyi Bäder, so they went there to indulge in thermal pools and bargain spa treatments. Apparently, there’s some form of pedicure where they take a razor blade to your feet— a practice banned in the US, but Kristen had nothing but rave reviews!

They got back a bit earlier than me and were able to thoroughly interrogate my new roommate, Stephen, who had arrived that day. Funny that fate, and my landlord Peppe, matched me with another American law student. Any disappointment I’d feel about not having the experience of living with a European roommate was abated by the facts that (1) it seems like everyone in Europe smokes, and I couldn’t stand someone smoking inside the house, and (2) being able to communicate in English. Though you know, the second point really isn’t as significant as the first— everyone in my office speaks English, along with several other languages. I’m editing and conducting research for one project director who is heading up a five-country survey on statelessness, and I swear, I’ve heard him speak five languages on the phone. Makes me wish I had spent time abroad polishing my Italian and Spanish— at this point, I can introduce myself and order lunch in those languages, and that’s about it.

Anyway, Stephen was great, so we invited him to the opera with us, and he was able to snag an extra 1000HUF ticket just before the show. He and Scottie ended up sitting next to an American college student who was trying to avoid speaking at all, and when he did, doing so in a forced British accent. Scottie finally got him to admit he was from America, Boston specifically, and when she said she lived there, too, he asked, “Oh, are you by chance affiliated with Harvard?” There are no words. Definitely glad luck landed me with Stephen instead of that kid!

Saturday, we went early to the train station to price the various options, and learned our original plan of train to Bratislavsa, boat to Vienna, and train from Vienna to Budapest would be an easy enough feat. We also learned that the total price of a round trip ticket costs half as much as does a one-way to Bratislava. Took awhile to comprehend that math through the language barrier, but we eventually caught on and got the cheaper round trip tickets for our one-way journey.
The weekend went by in a fast blur, and the most memorable part was surely our trip back from Vienna. We hopped on an earlier train that our planned one, tired and missing Hungary’s favorable exchange rate. Just over the Hungarian border, a ticket agent said our tickets were invalid— our tickets were some kind of special fare only valid for the scheduled time, so we were effectively ticketless. Twenty minutes, three ticket agents, and two calculators later, we had spilled out a mix of small forint and euro bills and coins all over our tray table. When the agents finally accepted the pile of payment and swept it away, Scottie exclaimed, “Well girls, looks like we won’t be spending tonight in a Hungarian jail!” The agent who had been translating for us said, “Yes, you are lucky.”
Fishing cottage along the Danube
In addition to my work supporting research on stateliness, I have also been working on a legal survey of family reunification cases before the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). These claims are made under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and they are heard in Strasbourg, France. There are two other international human rights courts, the African Court on Human and People's Rights and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. (In case you're wondering, no, the US is not a participant in the latter.)

While working on this project, I came across an appalling case that is infamous among those who work on asylum issues. A woman, Pulchérie Mubilanzila Mayeka, fled the Democratic Republic of Congo and was granted asylum in Canada. In 2002, her brother sought to bring the woman’s five-year-old daughter, Tabitha, who had not seen her mother in two years, to Canada. En route via Brussels, Tabitha was detained because she lacked proper documentation, and she was subsequently held in detention in an immigration facility with adults. After two months of detention, she was deported back to the Democratic Republic of Congo without notice being given to her mother, in Canada, and without any appeal of the decision considered. Her mother only learned of the deportation when she called a phone number she had been given for contacting her daughter at the detention center. Once deported, the five-year-old child was stranded at the airport in a country where she had no remaining relatives and no one to meet her. Being stranded in an airport would be a traumatizing experience for any child of this age, but given that this followed two months in an adult detention facility and that she was returned to the country that her mother had been forced to flee, the actions of the Belgium immigration officers were particularly egregious.

The Belgian and Canadian Prime Ministers quickly intervened and guaranteed the child’s return to her mother in Canada, and following the reunion, the girl’s mother was able to seek retribution in the European Court of Human Rights. While trying to learn more about the circumstances surrounding the judgment, I found this great article that explains the goals of the ECtHR in the context of this case, and I strongly recommend the article: "The most hopeful courtroom in the world" (Ode).

To read the case, see *Mubilanzila Mayeka and Kaniki Mitunga v. Belgium*. 
Last night was the Long Night of Museums, a local festival where all the city's museums are open from 6.00pm - 2.00am. For 1300HUF ($5.83) you get a wristband that gets you into all of the museums and unlimited public transport. The festival is held to coincide with the summer solstice (which is tomorrow), hence the name-- it's held on the longest night of the year (or the closest Saturday to it). Each museum hosts a number of events onsite-- dance, films, classical music, lectures, rock shows, and more. This festival is basically the best idea ever, and every city needs one of their own.

Okay, well, according to Wikipedia, 120 cities in Europe already have one of their own. Time for this idea to jump the pond!

I started my post-secondary education with the goal of a career in museum work. I learned (well, studied) Italian, majored in anthropology, worked as a student conservator, and volunteered at several museums. Eventually, I got a job at a museum-themed magnet school, which led to a shift in focus towards social justice work, but I still hold museums in the highest regard as a source of entertainment and public education. One thing that often frustrates me, however, is that the high cost of admission (such as nearly $20 for the MoMa, MFA, and the Met) makes museums inaccessible to many people, thus, in my mind, defeating the entire point of their existence. Student discounts, free passes through public libraries, and special hours of
free admission help to address this problem while keeping museums solvent, but I feel like this festival was the best idea towards this goal that I've ever seen. I don't think there was a person on the streets of Budapest last night who wasn't donning an admission wristband. And the streets, and the many museums that line them in Budapest, were far busier than I've ever known them.

I started the night at the Ethnography Museum, where I caught some Indonesian dancing and an exhibit that explored the way people view Finland. From there, I crossed the Danube to Buda, and wove in and out of the many museums on Castle Hill. At the Hungarian National Gallery, the castle's facade served as the canvas in a light painting contest that started at 10pm. I wrapped up my evening in Pest at the Museum of Fine Arts, where a rock concert was held in the marbled halls. If I hadn't had started my day yesterday with a day trip to Szendentre, an artists village in the Danube Bend, I'd have been made it through to the very end of the long
night of museums. I'm no longer as young as the ticket agent who offered me an under-18 wristband thought!

Model from a fashion show on dress in 2030

Concert at the Museum of Fine Arts in Hero's Square
This past week, I've been a rather delinquent blogger. Three reasons: (1) nothing earth-shatteringly new at work, (2) nothing outside of work that could compare to Museum Night, and (3) I've been watching the World Cup somewhat compulsively. Now I no longer have two of those three excuses. Since USA, the UK, and Mexico are out, I'd only be watching because it's pervasive in Europe and because soccer players are the most attractive athletes, bar none (which means I will still watch a bit, of course). And as for nothing as interesting as Museum Night, while that still may be hard to top, Connection Day was still noteworthy.

How much would you pay to see Rod Stewart, live in concert, celebrating the anniversary of the removal of Soviet troops from Hungary? I don't know what my upper limit would be, but zero forints and a 20-minute walk from home definitely fell below it. And as much as I enjoyed the aged yet spry Brit rocker dancing to a not-as-hysterical-as-you'd-guess rendition of “Do Ya Think I'm Sexy?”, it did strike me as a somewhat odd way to celebrate the end of Communist rule.

Last week, I picked up a copy of Arthur Phillip’s Prague at Tree Hugger Dan's, a used English book shop and free-trade coffee café. The book tells the fictional exploits of a group of young American expats in Budapest in 1990 (who all suspected that their compatriots in Prague had made the wiser choice). As I read it on a train back from Bratislava on Sunday, I found the following dialogue, set in a Hungarian English class, posed one answer to the oddity of the previous night's concert:

“It is a simple question, yes? Does he think it is true, he saved us from Russians by liking to watch MTV?”
Istvánn, a young politician from one of the new parties, who would six years hence become minister of the interior, responded, “It is Marx upside down, and I think, yes, he may be right. Capitalism provided for people better than Communism, and with strong TV signals everybody knewed it.”

“We all knew it.”

Alternatively, perhaps Rod Stewart just has universal appeal.
Briefly mentioned Sunday’s return to Bratislava, Slovakia, in the previous post, and I thought I’d share a few photos from my excursion to Devin Castle.
This past weekend was the Fourth of July. Even though in Budapest, it still felt very much like a holiday to me, though Memorial Day hadn’t. Maybe because that holiday was my first day of work, but more likely, because Memorial Day is kind of Independence Day’s awkward kid brother.

The summer I spent in India, I celebrated the Fourth of July at the American Embassy, and it was an experience I’ll never forget. Once I got through the most intense security check of my life, I entered this field where the embassy staff had built a life-size model of an American fair out of some Bruce Springsteen song. It was a recreation of the America out of Norman Rockwell paintings— an Iowa farming town’s celebration in the middle of India. I felt as a Puritan would if he were to time travel to a Halloween in today’s Salem, Massachusetts. Beef had been flown in for hamburgers, as had real American diet coke. That summer, there had been a great scandal about coke or pepsi or one of those. Indian officials had run quality control tests and reportedly found that the soft drinks these multinational corporations were selling in India contained insecticide. The soft drink company insisted that the same soda concentrate was shipped everywhere and that the problem must be with the water used in the Indian bottling plants. I imagine that the truth of the matter was that soda, even in its purest form, is essentially carbonated insecticide. Anyway, diet coke outside of America never tastes quite right, insecticide or not, so I was really pleased that the embassy flew the real stuff in, obviously understanding the needs of American citizens abroad.

Most of the people at the celebration were with the state department, but there was a very large contingent from my college, as well as a sizeable population of Marines. This inevitably led to a tug of war competition between the college students and the Marines. Now, Marines are tough as nails, everyone knows this, but I have to hand it to them— they dominated our group of pasty, sandal-clad, liberal arts students with such grace, actually making it appear for a good fifteen seconds that at their five to our eight, we had some semblance of a chance.

Though you’d not see it coming from the way I’ve been approaching it, the point here is that I just couldn’t seek out Fourth of July celebrations at the American Embassy, as it would just pale in comparison. So instead, without the fair and fireworks, I took the alternative Americana approach— I took a road trip. Well, to be precise, it was a bus trip. Despite my guidebook’s lies that there are two buses between Budapest and Prague weekly, I had the inside scoop from locals— Student Agency’s twice-daily buses are the way to get to Prague. For $40, I got a round-trip ride (7.5 hours each way) to Prague on an air-conditioned bus (yes! AC exists somewhere in Central Europe!) that flew by given the free hot drinks on board and the endless supply of Friends episodes with Czech subtitles.

Things I had been told about Prague:
“My favorite place in Europe!”
“Like Disneyland, but with more tourists.”
“It’s an amazing city— I often return in my dreams.”
“Um, why are you going to Prague instead of to Croatia?”

In sum, I’d say everyone was right.

But I’m writing this not to discuss Prague travels— no, I think my fiancé has exhausted the sheer possibilities for puns there (“Are you excited to Czech it out? Did you double-Czech your
hotel reservation?), but I’m not giving him more material to work with in case I’m wrong. Instead, I’ve been thinking lately about perceptions of Americans in Central Europe, and the Fourth of July is as good of a time as any to ramble on the subject.

But as I've already written so much off-topic, I’m going to split this in two parts. To be continued...
On my first day of work, I went out to lunch with my coworkers. They asked where I lived, I gave the address, and I said it was only a twenty-minute walk. “You walk?” asked one. “The Americans I knew here would take cabs everywhere, I think they thought it was dangerous.” I do think that Americans are trained to be hyper-cautious abroad, to carry cash in money belts in European cities when they’d never think to do such a thing in American cities where they’re much more likely to be robbed. Don’t know who is actually this cautious, though, despite the best attempts of guidebooks to make you think a scam is around every corner. Still, one impression of Americans: we think people are out to get us.

Several people I’ve met in Hungary have assured me that it’s safe to drink the water. It had never occurred to me that it wouldn’t be safe to drink the water— when tap water contains amoebas and the like, such a reputation usually precedes itself. Yet, when ordering at a spotless restaurant here, an American friend of mine did request, “Tap water— wait, it’s safe to drink that here, right?” Americans: we’re all germaphobes.

The only time a perception of my nationality has bothered me in any way was during a Hungarian lesson. I had signed up with the idea that I’d learn basic phrases and feel slightly less embarrassed. (Americans: we only speak English.) The tutor had prepared a dialogue she thought would be helpful for me as an American— ordering at McDonalds. Certainly don’t need to pay good forints to have someone tell me to throw a “mc” in front of “chicken paprikash.” More than anything, I was annoyed by the generic laziness of her stereotype— doesn’t she know that the kind of Americans who spend a summer in Europe are the kind of Americans that go out of their way to avoid McDonalds and any fast food chains, even though they secretly love McDonalds breakfast sandwiches?

The several weeks I was in Hungary, it rained entirely too much, which was bad for my mood as much as anyone else’s. One seemingly rainless day, I went out with coworkers for lunch, and on the way back, it started raining. Everyone grumbled about how terrible it was. Looking for the silver lining, I reasoned, “Well, it’s a light rain, and at least the sun is still shining!” I got a round of cocked eyebrows in response, “Americans! Always so optimistic! Look, if you want to get along with everyone here, you need to admit that this weather is terrible.” Begrudgingly I did— but I felt pressured to add as an addendum the fact that better weather was in the forecast.

For the most part, in Budapest, people don’t notice, or likely, don’t care enough to comment that I’m American. Countless times I’ve had people ask me questions in Hungarian, which is oddly nice, until I realize they expect me to respond. But in traveling, I’ve had people preemptively assume I’m going to be rude, or, alternatively, tell me how friendly Americans all are. Just like any such generalizations, perceptions of Americans depend largely on individual experiences, and I find myself trying to be more polite over here than I am at home, as I feel like I’m personally responsible for disaffirming the idea of the ugly American. But I can’t deny, and wouldn’t want to hide, the many things about myself that seem so markedly foreign over here— my love for iced coffee, my extensive knowledge of celebrity gossip, my automatic scowl at smoke, and my instance that, yes Gabor, tomorrow there’ll be sun.

There’s a shop hidden off a side street near my place where they sell a huge range of gourmet food. Well, no, that’s not true— some of it you wouldn’t call gourmet because it isn’t highbrow. Instead, it’s more like a food museum of what people around the world consume. There’s fine Belgian chocolate, white truffle oil, smoked salmon, whipped mascarpone, fresh figs, and range
of wines, fruit labmic, and liquors. There are also jars of premade curry sauce, sriracha, tagine mixes (think Moroccan hamburger helper), and macaroni and cheese. The food regions aren’t labeled as such, but the products are quietly sorted by region. The American aisle is simply fantastic— the aforementioned mac and cheese, French’s mustard, ramen noodles, brownie mix, organic soups, rainbow-colored marshmallows, and black beans. It’s kind of a catch-all for everything that doesn’t fit somewhere else in the store. And that’s my favorite perspective of them all.
Photos from Prague
Tuesday, July 13, 2010, 07:23 PM

Prague Castle

The Astronomical Clock
Stefanik Observatory
The past several weeks have gone so quickly, but this week has felt like three weeks already—and it’s only Wednesday. The temperatures here are well over ninety now, and it would seem that the clocks have grown as lethargic as I have in the heat. Yesterday, in the days between when I left work and when I went to bed, I did laundry here for the last time—a chore I will not much miss. Despite the fact that my landlord is working on his PhD in mechanical engineering, he hasn’t the slightest idea how the washer works. After spending a good deal of time with the manual, my best guess is that it isn’t properly hooked up to a water source. The first time I did laundry here, the machine ran for 120 minutes (the manual, as far as I could interpret, assured me this was normal), then, at the end of a cycle lasting as long as most feature films, I opened the washer to find dry, dirty clothes, evenly coated in detergent after two hours of spin cycle. After much experimentation, I was able to reduce the length of the spin cycle to 20 minutes, so I hand washed my clothes and then used the spin cycle to wring them out so they’d dry more quickly on the drying rack my landlord had provided. (It is incredibly humid in my apartment, so without this mechanical ringing, I suspect my first load of laundry from May might be dry in time for my departure.) Turns out the washer was also not correctly hooked up to drain, either, so the wash water rushed out like a tide, cutting short my moment of triumph for figuring out the spin cycle. When I told my landlord, he smacked his forehead, then took a pipe from the back of the washer and placed it in the toilet bowl. Of course. Anyway, after seven weeks of laundry days involving a bathtub, washing machine, toilet, mop, and drying rack, I’m feeling more than a little homesick for the conveniences of home.

That being said, having my time run short here has made me think of the things I have not yet done. I still haven’t made it to Margaret Island, which lies between Buda and Pest in the middle of the Danube. I’ve not had a taste of Hungary’s famous unicum, nor sat down in front of a plate of chicken paprikash (in my defense, despite being the most familiar Hungarian dish abroad, it actually isn’t that easy to find here). In my travel planning, I opted for Prague over Lake Ballaton, Eger over Pecs, financial solvency over additional trips. Yesterday, I was finally able to cross the Central Market off my list, stopping by the three-story market building along the Danube before its 6pm closing time in order to pick up some sweet and hot paprika to bring home. The market was an odd mix of tourist stop and functional market place—Hungarians were buying fruit and vegetables there, but I’d bet a pretty forint that no Budapest native has bought her paprika there since the fall of iron curtain. Still, I didn’t let that stop me from overpaying for parika—if I can’t find my chicken paprikash here, I’ll make some at home for friends and serve it with whatever amount of Tokaji wine I’m able to get through customs. It’s been a great summer here, but I am really looking forward to the bit of time I have before class to catch up with people back in Atlanta and Athens.