

Sajda

As I stared into space attempting to recall a particular situation in my life where I had to overcome a barrier, Mark Twain's quote "travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness" darted into my mind. I had always been a firm believer of the fact that it is only after experiencing other people's cultures that one can fully eradicate any unjust labels that he or she held about them. My decision to study abroad for a summer arose after I realized that it was only by implementing my belief that I could truly learn whether or not traveling could actually combat prejudice.

I recalled being inside a wooden suburban house, and helping my host mother preparing dinner. The aroma of turkey schnitzel, a Viennese steak, and München pretzels wafted through the house. My host sister was vacuuming the living room and shrieking along to the *High School Musical* song *Work This Out*. I snickered at the irony of the situation; here I was in Germany striving to immerse myself in a new culture only to be stalked by Disney's Zac Efron.

At dinner that night, my host family announced that I was to attend the all-girls school Edith-Stein-Gymnasium with my host sisters starting the next day. A fusion of joy and anxiety overtook me. Although my entire being glowed from the prospect of meeting new people, it simultaneously recoiled from the notion of not being accepted by them.

As I sat in a dimly lit classroom the next day, I remembered my friend asking "Aren't Germans racist? You know they had the Holocaust..." At that time, I had dismissed her query as an ignorant one. However, my first day at Edith Stein led me to speculate about the truth behind her statement. I had arrived to Edith-Stein expecting a certain degree of acceptance and had imagined myself being surrounded by inquisitive bodies that were eager to learn about American culture. Instead, I fell victim to wary glances and cold-shoulders.

During my first days at the school, I loathed the girls' condescending attitudes and began to suspect that their patronizing behavior was due to the color of my skin. When the girls refused to initiate communication, the thought "it's because I'm black" manifested itself. As a minority, I was raised to believe that it is human nature to be the slightest bit prejudice during certain situations. Much to my embarrassment, I later learned from my host sisters that most of the girls did not approach me because they believed that they could not communicate

with an American. Regardless of the reasons for my initial notions about the girls, I decided to begin to approach them in class. Surprisingly, the girls were eager to learn about my background and quickly befriended me. Towards the end of my stay in Germany, I found myself immersed in the culture of classmates whom I thought, just weeks earlier, reviled me. At one point we went to the 850<sup>th</sup> München Day Parade and frolicked in our gaudy Bavarian dresses. As we kicked up our feet to perform a German dance, we morphed into a blur of spinning colors that captivated all who watched. With intertwined hands we formed an everlasting wall of united cultures.

I did not fully appreciate my experience in Germany until a certain instance occurred once I returned to the United States. Upon learning that I was taking four Advanced Placement Classes, a girl at my school had the audacity to remark “wait, you’re black. You’re not supposed to be smart.” Before my home stay in Germany, I would have approached the situation with a perverse method and would have refused to speak to the girl for a few days. However, my stay in Germany taught me that it is only by learning about a different culture or race that one can eliminate any stereotypes that he or she might hold. Thus, I was able to explain rationally to the girl that she was wrong, and should consider changing her mindset. My experience in Germany taught me that overcoming prejudice is possible if people were willing to learn about different cultures. Moreover, it taught me how to reform my own judgments about other people and how to help them alter their own.