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Person to Person in Germany

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Interviewee: Nina Steinhilber

Age: 25

By: Savannah Fellers

As I fumbled through clothing racks, I didn't realize I was about to meet one of my best German friends. Not looking where I was going, I bumped into the store attendant, only to instinctively remark, "Entschuldigung!" Surprised to hear an apology from a stranger, Nina quickly introduced herself, explaining how great it was to be acknowledged by someone she didn't know. After living in Australia for four years, she had become accustomed to greeting strangers. Therefore, coming back to her hometown was somewhat of an adjustment. Being a relatively open and outgoing person, I was also relieved to run into such a genuine individual. It was refreshing for the both of us to speak to each other informally and comfortably. This is where we became friends. Since that day, we have made a habit of hanging out every week. From getting our hair cut together to making vegan dinners at her dad's house, we have learned about each other's cultures while having a blast.

To me, Nina's perspective is particularly valuable. Rather than being influenced mainly by one country, her way of living is shaped by two very different cultures. Although she grew up in Germany, Nina's experience in Australia changed her. The values and social interactions in Germany are vastly different from those in Australia. Thus, living with conflicting ideas about life forced her to come up with her own definition of right and wrong. Realizing not one culture is better than the other, she integrated her favorite behaviors and habits into her own life. Nina thinks that the best thing about meeting people from other countries is improving herself. She advises me to "learn from the good sides of other people and how they live their lives and how they think about certain things. If I like the way they think, I want to try to do it myself". Now, I would call her Germanian.

When talking with Nina about Germany values, she began by saying that German culture is "all about success- who you are and what you are". Germany is very work-focused, which is especially true in the South. Noting this trend, the other small peculiarities about German culture start to make sense. For example, when people answer the phone in Germany, they answer by using their title and last name. In this way, it is very professional. However, Nina, having experienced the open and friendly Australian culture where it is common for a store attendant to call customers "honey" or "sweetie", answers the phone using her first name. This is an example of her compromising between the very impersonal, formal nature of German business and the family-like treatment in Australia. She believes that in answering with her first name, it makes her customers much more comfortable.

People experience this same disconnected when encountering people on the street. It is not common for people to start conversations or even make eye contact with strangers, although old people will often smile at you. However, the tendency to be closed-off toward strangers doesn't mean that they are unfriendly, as some people may assume. They are just accustomed to treating strangers as strangers, not friends or potential acquaintances. Again, this attitude spills over into their language. Unlike English, German has both a formal and informal pronoun for you. It is accepted that Germans address young people with the informal pronoun "du" and

people who are older than them with “Sie”, although members of the family are referred to as “du”. It is also commonplace to address employees of a store as “Sie”, “I can’t go into a bakery and say ‘du’”. This concept of choosing between “du” and “Sie” is a matter of showing respect and, in some cases, maintaining disconnected, professional relationships. Nevertheless, saying “du” can “make people feel more comfortable and relaxed”, as people feel that you are approaching them as you would approach a friend. Nina, someone who appreciates the openness of other cultures, sometimes uses “du” in her shop. In fact, it is very untrue to believe that Germans are an unfriendly people. Rather, addressing strangers in a very formal way (or not at all) is just a custom that they are used to.

The misunderstanding of German culture is truly disappointing for its people. A lot of times, the media is “against Germany and Germans”. Oftentimes, Germans are painted as cold-hearted, boring, and reserved people. Nina says that “in about every second movie, it’s about Germans. They make fun of Germans or it’s about Hitler”. For example, one of Nina’s favorite romantic comedies mentions the unfriendly German stereotype. When the main character is talking about how she doesn’t like predictable movie endings and translates something into German, her friend replies, “you know German, well now I know why you don’t like fun things”. Although the effects of the holocaust are still very present, the people of Germany are not proud of the past. Additionally, it is unfair for the young people to feel guilty for something that they were not involved in. The Germans I know are enthusiastic, passionate, spontaneous, and lovers of life. They are not the heartless robots we hear about in the movies. Because of the media, people who don’t live in Germany cannot see the positive and innovative aspects of Germany. Instead, they “think about Lederhosen, Oktoberfest, beer, and Hitler. That’s it”. In fact, “there are a lot of good things” about Germany. They have a phenomenal car industry, advanced medicine, and are very earth-friendly. For instance, it is normal for people to separate their trash. Instead of plopping everything into one basket, they separate out the plastics, glass, biodegradable materials, paper, etc. Sadly, people who don’t have an interest in Germany wouldn’t know this.

After discussing the German stereotype, I was curious to see what Nina thought of America. Nina has never been to the United States, so all she knows comes from either the media or people she has met. She said, “all I think about when I think of America is movie stars. It’s where everyone comes from or where everyone goes if they want to become famous”. She also added, “there are a lot of states. There’s a big fuss over America – maybe because they are one of the leaders and they have a lot of money”. I found both answers really interesting. In particular, I was intrigued by the obsession with American movies and Hollywood. Even though it seems silly that the movie industry would be one of the first things to come to mind when thinking about the US, I do believe Americans really value entertainment. If you think about it, we are always looking to divert our attention. Americans are in search of things that are just a little more exciting than the present, whether these are comedies, social media sites, or YouTube videos. Realizing this, I feel like we, as members of an entertainment-focused culture, forget about what really matters because we are so busy entertaining ourselves. Why do we have to be entertained all of the time?

This, precisely, is the value of studying abroad. The value of studying abroad is not merely seeing new places, meeting people, or discovering a newfound independence. The value of studying abroad is gaining perspective. As Nina would say, “maybe you didn’t realize all your life that you’re doing it the wrong way or not the best way”. We grow up accepting norms, but it is until we question them that we become adults. Living in a different culture allows people to think critically about their own environment and well as others’ in order to form their own unique set of values.