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To Look Austrian

Sierra Lemon
Linfield College

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Recommended Citation

Lemon, Sierra, "To Look Austrian" (2016). *2016-17 Field Notes*. Essay. Submission 11.
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Sierra Lemon

Vienna, Austria

October 18, 2016

To Look Austrian

When I cumulatively look at the European lifestyle versus the American lifestyle, I see people who are not really so different; in fact, society functions in a very similar manner. For this assignment, I interviewed my host mom, and her lifestyle is really not too different from someone like my own mom—coincidentally, they both work in human resources, they both enjoy cooking, and they both have an open and caring mindset. Seeing such similarities between life here and life at home is actually in itself surprising; as I was preparing to go abroad for the first time in my life, I could not predict how different lifestyles would be on a different continent.

Obviously there are many cultural differences between any country and even states or provinces, but to see that daily life here really is not so different from daily life back home is an unexpected surprise. One habit that I really admire in my family, though, is that they are able to communicate with several different languages. My host family's main language is German of course, but my host mom also speaks fluently English and Farsi; she understands Turkish and can communicate the basics in French and Italian as well. This language ability is common in Austria, and while I admire this ability greatly, it is seen as nothing special by my host mom. Now more than ever, I wish foreign language education had greater emphasis and support in the United States.

From the start, it has been easy to connect with my host family because they are a kind and open-minded family. We have had a range of discussions from politics to ethical decisions to what constitutes being humorous. From this interview, I think that one of the biggest takeaways that I have learned is that my family often faces a double standard in Austrian society. My host family

and my host mom are a mixed family of minority descent. Because of their appearance, they are often not regarded as Viennese and sometimes face stigmas or deal with ignorant people. In my opinion, especially in my hometown, Portland, I do not think that my host family would be forced to deal with such ignorance. Looking back at life in America, many peoples are integrated together and often intermingle together without the idea of one or the other being foreign. Here, it is often assumed that if you do not look like an Austrian, then you are not an Austrian. Even while I have been here, I have also faced interesting situations, as according to my appearance, I do not look like I belong here. It is just interesting to see such an open and accepting family have to deal with, from time to time, the inability of others to see past physical differences.

In addition to this comparison, what has also been interesting to learn is the acceptance of a governmental policy that would never be allowed in the USA. In particular, my host mom, like others, gives up about half of every paycheck in order to pay for social services, which include retirement funds, public health care, and education. She and others willingly give up a great deal of money in order to contribute to the betterment of society and the growth of the next generation. In current American society, there are no social programs that work on the scale that programs here provide, which include free health care and education, including higher education, for everyone. From this perspective, America looks like a selfish nation because these opportunities are either not available or available for a select few. I think many Americans would be unwilling to give up half of their paychecks, as many already feel that their taxes are extremely high. I do not say this negatively because how money should be distributed and contributed to society is a great cultural difference between Austria (and most of Europe) and the United States; additionally, a nation of 8 million people faces different issues than a nation of 350 million people. This is simply a comparison.

I think that I have a special experience here in Vienna, Austria because I am living with a family that faces issues that a typical Austrian family would not. I think that this has strengthened my connection with them because we are able to talk openly about many topics, including the differences and issues in Austrian and American society. From my host family and my host mom, I am learning more every day about new perspectives and looking at the world through others' eyes. Yes, the United States is often in the news here, especially with the upcoming election, but the United States is not the center of the world, nor is it the best country in the world. There are a lot of things that need to be improved in American society, and living in a European one has made this even clearer. Of course, every nation, including Austria, faces its own issues. For example, while many consider immigration to be an issue in the United States, Austria is one of the many European countries facing a refugee crisis as millions flood into Europe fleeing Syria, Iraq, and other politically troubled nations. I think that living in Europe and learning about the issues that Austrian society, and in particular, the issues that my host family and host mom face, has played a great part in gaining a more informed perspective on the world. It makes me wonder how much my perspective would change if I visited a nation more unlike the United States, and I hope to be able to continue traveling and learning after my time as an exchange student in Austria ends.