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Adjusting to Austrian Life

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Natalie Michaelis

Vienna, Austria

November 3, 2018

Adjusting to Austrian Life

I interviewed Sabrina Podlaha, my German conversation partner, on October 24th, 2018. To make this interview more interesting, I decided to integrate it within my German conversation time, which means I asked my questions in German and Sabrina responded in kind, though we did use English to help clarify some points. At the time of the interview, most of what we discussed was not so surprising as I had been living with those things for several months already. They were weird for me when I first arrived, though, and sometimes make me miss how things are done in the US. First is the city itself. While others may have grown up in the downtown of a city, I did not. Due to this, I had to get used to tall buildings all lined up next to one another with space only being left for roads, for the most case. In the city, one lives in an apartment, which is usually rented, though it can be owned. Sabrina has an interesting case where she neither rents nor owns, yet lives in two places. Her boyfriend owns a flat where she can stay or she can stay at her mother's house, which is outside of the city. This in itself sort of surprised me because in my experience in the US, people are more likely to move out and stay out of their parents' home, only returning for holidays. In the city, it is not common for a person to own a house, first because they often are not there, especially the closer you get to the city center (only apartments or businesses) and second because they are expensive. Another part of city life I had to become accustomed to was using public transportation. Sabrina told me in this interview that public transportation is for the most part used for school and/or work. I can attest to this as I use the Strassenbahn (tram) every school day. Cars, while used some for everyday transportation by some, often are relegated to vacation vehicles for most, or at least they are for Sabrina. From what I've seen and experienced, actually, a person could quite easily live without a car as long as that person is content with depending on public transportation and her own two feet. Sabrina doesn't own a car, and gets around just fine, yet she also has the possibility of using a car

because she knows people from whom she can borrow one, like her mom. One does have to pay for public transport; however, there are various discounts, like a semester pass, that make up for it, and are likely cheaper than paying for gas, though I am not certain. One other part of life here in Vienna that impressed me was how environmentally aware they are (or seem to be). This point actually connects back to my previous point since public transportation reduces the amount of cars (and pollution) there is in the city and also has their trams and underground running on electric power. Beyond public transportation, though, is the separating of waste into organic (compost), paper, glass/plastics, metals, and residual. This, I have found, is most common in personal homes, not necessarily having separate bins for public use, yet it gives the impression that the city is more environmentally aware. Sabrina made a comment about separating waste that stood out to me. She said she had grown up doing it (that is, separating waste), and it had become a habit for her. I guess I do not see so much environmental awareness in the areas I live at in the US, though I will say that Linfield does a pretty good job. In determining whether Sabrina and my preferences, tastes, values, and outlook were similar or different, it was hard to think up questions that would answer these topics. However, there were a few things that we discussed. In an attempt to discuss this topic, I came up with this broad-range question: what is important to you? Some basics of what she told me are that it is important for her to be independent, that she does not want to be required to rely on someone else; to be aware and participate, politically; to keep an open mind about people despite what they look like on the outside; and, in general, to work and make this place better for those who come after her. I would agree with Sabrina on these counts, especially the last one. On one of our study trips, we went to the little town of Traunfeld outside of Vienna. In this town, Hermann, the director of AAIE, has a friend who is a farmer, and while we were there he showed us his fields. He also made this comment of always working to make the soil and land better for the next generation than it was for the previous, and one can see the evidence of this in the bountiful fields that surround this town. One other topic we spoke on was religion. For me, religion and my faith are really important and I would like to think they are a big part of who I define myself as. For Sabrina, religion is not so important, though it does play a part in her life. What I found interesting was religion for her can be kind of seasonal – more important during fall

and winter, specifically during the holiday time, than in summer. I did also ask her about her childhood, and through our conversation, I got the sense that family is important to her, which is the same for me. This interview gave me a sense of how similar we are in that we are both humans who care for similar people and things and are dealing with similar issues and worries. I was never taught anything else, but it is good to experience it first hand, in a place that is a world away from home. I enjoyed the experience of the interview as well. As it was very informal, it was not good practice for, say, a job interview, but I had fun with thinking up questions, translating them to German and then asking them. Sabrina and I had a really good conversation based on the questions I asked. I guess one of the perceptions I had about Austria did change – that it is more environmentally minded in the US. However, Sabrina, when I asked her about it, seemed to say that it is not as good as it looks. I would also say that I do not see the overall positive impact the US has on the environment, yet I would still lean toward Austria doing a little bit better job than the US. Overall, I really enjoyed the experience and gained a lot of insights from it.