

Spring 2010

## Spring 2010, UNH study abroad in Budapest: Reflections on the "permanent possessions" of the foreign experience

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## UNH STUDY ABROAD IN BUDAPEST: REFLECTIONS ON THE "PERMANENT POSSESSIONS" OF THE FOREIGN EXPERIENCE

by Bruce Elmslie, Professor of Economics



*L. to r: Class of 2011 hospitality management majors Sarah Sceery and Ellen Reardon in Budapest*

Late in his life, Charles Darwin reflected on his theory of the origin of species. For Darwin, the final piece of the theoretical puzzle came from his reading of Thomas Robert Malthus' *Principles of Population*. In his autobiography, Darwin wrote the following: "its main principles remained with me as a permanent possession, and twenty years later gave me the long-sought clue to the effective agent in the evolution of organic species."

I have been thinking a lot recently about this idea of attaining "permanent possessions" that can fundamentally alter our thinking and our overall character. The economist and philosopher John Stuart Mill seemed to take it for granted that the educational experience necessarily resulted in their ubiquity, but I often fear that precious few of them are being attained by our students, and worse, fewer yet are even sought. Then I think about our

UNH students gaining powerful new insights and living new dreams by studying abroad all across our world. In these students, I see the notion of "permanent possessions" taking root and growing strong.

For each of the past six years the Whittemore School has sent about 20 students to study during the fall semester at Corvinus University in Budapest, Hungary, one of the most beautiful cities in all of Europe. I interact with these students in the spring semester before their trip and meet them in Budapest as they arrive. The curious mixture of excitement, exhaustion, terror and naivety that engulfs most of them when they first arrive is remarkable. But more remarkable is the change I see in them when they return to UNH. Their stories have a worldly quality to them, they speak in a more secure voice, and they possess a new level of self confidence that can only come from conquering old fears and exceeding one's own expectations.



*Business administration major Matt Lalim '10 while visiting in neighboring Slovakia*

What accounts for this change? It is difficult to say. In Hungary, students live in a country that is undergoing rapid change as it is still emerging from its time behind the iron curtain. Its minimum wage is around \$360 per month and many Hungarians earn even less. Many buildings in Budapest still bear the scars of World War II and the 1956 Revolution against Soviet domination. Yet, our students live in luxury; they experience a clean and vibrant city that has all of the offerings and trappings of any great metropolitan area. They party and they recover. They travel to Auschwitz in Poland to see first-hand the extent of man's inhumanity to man. They find their way to the sunsets and beaches of the magnificent Croatian coast and they learn the intricacies of the Roma Problem. Some seem to live as nomads posing as students, traveling to Paris for the lights and Amsterdam for the coffee. They learn how to communicate without language and interact with fellow students from all over the world. They take classes at a university that ranks among the best in Europe. For four months, they are asked to make their own way yet ultimately they find their way back home armed with an understanding of the world that can only come from experiencing it.

What are these "permanent possessions" and how do we gain them? As it was with Darwin, such treasure comes with experience and the passage of time. These are the intangibles that all educators ultimately hope to produce but seldom know whether or not they succeed. With our returning Budapest students, I may not be able to see the possessions gained, but as with gravity's pull of a pendulum, I can see their results.

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