

*An Exchange Student Experience*

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During my senior year of high school in 1977, I was facing the difficult task of deciding between the University of Cincinnati, Miami University (at nearby Oxford, Ohio), and Ohio State University. The University of Cincinnati was where my mother was working as a secretary, Miami University was where several classmates had decided to apply, and Ohio State was where my sister was studying. I had briefly considered Cincinnati's Xavier University since one of my uncles, the first four-year degree holder in the family, had graduated from there. But given its lack of a football team, I hadn't given it serious consideration. This, in a nutshell, was the context or worldview upon which I was basing my college choices, not to mention other important decisions. Fortunately, this limited worldview was also about to be challenged and then transformed by an unanticipated opportunity.

As it turned out, my future plans were drastically altered by a fortuitous seating arrangement. Our homeroom alphabetical seating chart had placed me next to Ulf Bredinger, a foreign exchange student from Hudiksvall, Sweden. While our initial conversations centered around high school sports – he was curious about the mortality rate among high school football players and I was curious why he, unlike previous exchange students, wasn't the star of our soccer team – our subsequent conversations turned to politics, history, and international affairs. It was soon painfully clear to me that my background in these latter topics fell far short of his understanding, a theme to which I will return later in this essay. By the end of the school year, I had met Ulf's father during his visit to the US and was subsequently invited to stay with the Bredinger family and to attend the local gymnasium<sup>1</sup> school in Hudiksvall.

I arrived at Stockholm's Arlanda airport in August of 1977, my first time in Europe and second time in a jet. To say that I was unprepared for what lay ahead would be a polite understatement. I still recall learning how to say “yes and no” in Swedish during the 200 mile drive from Stockholm to Hudiksvall. It was one month before the start of school and I had just acquired my first two Swedish words. If I were to continue picking up a few words every day, I'd surely be able to speak Swedish well enough to get by – right? Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately – I'm still not sure to this day), I had no idea at that time of what it would take to actually learn a foreign language.

In addition to the challenge of language, immersion in a different culture can be disorienting. Hudiksvall is a relatively small town of roughly 35,000 inhabitants located on the east coast of Sweden's Gulf of Bothnia, the northernmost extension of the Baltic Sea. There were two national Swedish-language television stations (both of which were usually off-the-air by 9:30 pm) and one local Swedish-language newspaper. My adoptive family was Swedish, my classmates and friends were Swedish, and my teachers were Swedish – with the exception of a Finnish teacher who taught Swedish language classes. I ate Swedish food (pickled herring and blood pudding), wore Swedish-style wooden clogs, and celebrated Swedish festivals. My only communication with family and friends back home in the non-Swedish world was by way of an occasional hand-written letter. Personal computers, the Internet, and iPhones existed only in the world of science

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<sup>1</sup> The Swedish gymnasium includes one additional academic year beyond the US high school senior year.

fiction. Although I didn't realize it at the time, this near total immersion in all things Swedish would turn out to be a crucial aspect of my overseas experience. It enabled me to see and feel the world from a truly different perspective – and this, for me, is the most profound personal transformation of the study-abroad experience.

But before I knew how things would eventually unfold, I still had quite a few challenges to face and adjustments to make. I soon learned that it wasn't only Ulf who possessed a broader, deeper worldview than my own. With the welcome exceptions of English and gym class, I was far behind my Swedish classmates in most other subjects including history, geography, politics, foreign languages, and world affairs. Classroom discussions of upcoming German and French elections were based on student understanding of German and French history, geography, political and economic systems. Many of my classmates obtained current information from reading German and French newspapers. At first, I took the consoling view that Swedish students should know more about German and French events since these countries lie in their neck of the woods. On second thought, however, this line of reasoning suggested that I might lead future classroom discussions related to Canadian or Mexican issues. I knew, of course, that my knowledge of these two US border countries would be exhausted before I reached the end of my first complete sentence. My alternatives were to begin a serious self-study program or to simply accept my knowledge deficit.

My experiences during the first 2-3 months in Sweden had made it abundantly clear that a mature worldview had to begin with the building of a broader and deeper knowledge base. I began to study European geography, social, political, and economic history, and then branched out into other areas of the world. I also began to turn the corner on spoken and written Swedish with the use of whole sentences in place of short phrases. With hindsight, I can now see what a significant turning point this period was for my future academic development and aspirations. I had learned to take personal ownership of my education. I had also developed life-long interests in history, international relations, languages, and travel. In the long run, there is a big difference between studying a topic because of an impending exam and studying a topic because of an intrinsic interest. The experiences of living in another society and knowing people from other cultures facilitate the discovery of one's intrinsic interests.

After traveling around Europe by train during the summer of 1978, I returned to the US and enrolled at Ohio State University as an International Relations major. My experiences in Sweden had had a profound influence on my personal and intellectual development. Paradoxically, I felt that I had a better idea of what it meant to be an American after understanding what it meant to not be an American. I continued to study history, languages, and international political economy while planning for my next substantive experience abroad. That experience would take place in Bogota, Colombia after two years of Spanish classes – but that's another story.

A few years ago, I was reading a section of Montesquieu's<sup>2</sup> epistolary novel, the *Persian Letters*, originally published in 1721. In one of the dialogues, a Frenchman encounters a Persian and says, "Oh! Monsieur is Persian? That's most extraordinary! How can someone be Persian?" This deceptively straightforward question – "how can someone be Persian?" – astutely captures our initial incomprehension when confronted with the unfamiliar, the foreign. The Frenchman is in essence saying that he cannot imagine himself ever being a Persian. And he is right, in my view, to think that it is no simple matter for a

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<sup>2</sup> Or, more formally, Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu to his less intimate acquaintances.

Frenchman to experience the world as a Persian experiences the world. That said, the best hope for this Frenchman (or American or anyone else) to see the world as a Persian sees the world is to live among the Persians, learn the Persian (Farsi) language, read Persian literature, eat Persian food. I will always be grateful to the Bredinger family for giving me the opportunity to see the world as a Swede sees the world. I sincerely hope that as many Lehigh students as possible are able to find similar opportunities.