

Susan Hill
Ambassadorial Scholar 2009-2010
From District 6420 to District 1911
First Report

As I write this First Report to the Rotary Foundation, I am struggling to produce a single, concise statement that can fully describe my experience of these past two months in Budapest. I have certainly experienced ups and downs, highs and lows, moments of excitement and moments of frustration. Like the abroad experiences of many others, life has been at times quite a struggle and at other times a revelation. In my opinion, this double-sided nature of the immersion process is precisely what makes it such an important learning experience. Moving to a completely new place offers challenges, and in turn, opportunities to learn, adapt, and to ultimately see the world with new eyes. I am pleased to say that the experience of these past two months has begun to do just that: to fundamentally change the way I view the world and my role in it.

Concerning my preparation for this trip, as anyone who has traveled abroad to a new place knows, there is only so much preparing one can do. You can study the language and research the area, but, regardless, when you arrive, inevitably new and unforeseen situations will arise. Before I left, I nonetheless attempted to learn some basic Hungarian during the summer, and that basic knowledge of pronunciation and grammar has really helped me advanced more quickly in my language classes. I also prepared my presentation prior to my trip and practiced it with the chairperson of Ambassadorial Scholarships in my district, Rotarian George Bass. He provided critique, and I made a few important changes before giving the presentation to my sponsor Rotary club. I also had several opportunities to ask questions and meet with my sponsor counselor, PDG Fred Luckenbill, during the summer to discuss different aspects of the scholarship as well as preparation for my departure. In addition, perhaps the most important aspect of my preparation that led to the overall success of my arrival was my consistent contact with my host counselor in Hungary, Rotarian Gabor Szendrey. We e-mailed and exchanged information throughout the summer, and he was able to pick me up from the airport and assist me with various initial tasks in Hungary. I cannot overstate how important this was for my own comfort and confidence before and after my arrival in Budapest. Without his help, I can imagine the transition would have been much more difficult. Overall, in large part because of the assistance of these various individuals designated to help me, by the time I left the United States, I felt quite confident and prepared to start my scholarship.

Upon arriving in Budapest in September, some of my first impressions of the city did not really distinguish it from other major world cities I've visited. It was huge. It was busy. It was full of many, many people speaking a language I didn't understand. Perhaps what really distinguished Budapest from the other cities I've been to, however, was its impressive history and overwhelming beauty. When I took my first real look at Budapest, standing atop Gellert Hill, I could not recall any view I had ever seen before which was quite as impressive. In addition, the history of the city was all around me, in the endless busts and statues of Hungarian heroes gracing every corner of the city, in the pock-marked facades of the older Austro-Hungarian buildings leaning above narrow streets, in the broad squares and avenues which have stood since the years of horse-drawn carriages and buggies. Everywhere I walked throughout Budapest, I felt like I was truly walking through history.

During my time here, the place that has really served as my home is Central European University, my study institution in Budapest. I am taking Hungarian language courses at the university as well as two courses shared by the History and Social Anthropology departments which focus on the culture and history of Eastern Europe. The first of these courses, Social Change Under Communism, in just two months has significantly expanded and improved my knowledge of Russian history and the history of the Soviet Union. In particular, I have benefitted from the experiences and observations of my classmates, many of whom are from former Eastern Bloc countries and thus have more direct experiences of Soviet Russian rule than I do. Listening to their stories and observations has been both humbling and interesting. I have gained knowledge from this class that I never could in a typical American school.

The second course I am taking is Comparative Perspectives: Secularism and Religion in Islam and Eastern Christianity. This class in particular has expanded my knowledge on Eastern Christianity as it is practiced in Europe. We have engaged in round tables, class discussions, and lectures on topics such as the relationship between Islam and modern secularism, the banning of religious symbols in classrooms, and the nation-state and Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe. Again, the diverse backgrounds of the students and the instructors have been an especially unique and interesting part of my studies so far. Overall, I am confident the material covered in my classes at CEU will prove to be quite relevant to my ultimate academic goal for this scholarship: to learn more about Eastern and Central European culture and history.

I have had the opportunity to visit several important museums and landmarks in Budapest during the past two months, but my personal favorite is the Terror Haza, located on Andrássy ut, the most beautiful thoroughfare of the city. This museum was created inside the former headquarters of the Communist and Fascist regimes in Hungary, as a testament to the crimes against humanity that were committed there during the years of Fascist and Communist terror rule. As a new visitor to Budapest, I thought it was very important to understand some of the dark passages of Hungarian history in order to more clearly understand its culture and its people. I also thought it was important to stand witness to the atrocities that were committed against the Hungarian people during the 20th century. By viewing the museum, I was able to more fully understand the terror, torture, and hysteria that accompanied these two regimes in Hungary.

Another Hungarian landmark that left an indelible impression on my memory was the Memorial for the 1956 Revolution in Városliget Park. The landmark, a huge sculpture consisting of numerous rusted columns positioned vertically at a 56 degree angle from the ground, growing taller as they merge together, eventually forms one single shining peak which symbolizes the power of many people working together. I visited this memorial the day after the national holiday of remembrance for the revolution, and the monument was covered in flags and flowers. I thought the monument was an artful interpretation of the collective memory of the 1956 revolution that is so clearly evident in the atmosphere of the city and the culture of its residents.

Concerning my involvement with the local Rotary groups in Budapest, I am proud to say that I have visited many Rotary and Rotaract clubs in the area and have met many interesting people doing great things in the community. Much of my work so far with Rotary has involved giving presentations, networking, and getting acquainted with local people. My typical week in Budapest usually involves attending two to three Rotary events. The specific nature of these events has varied from weekly meetings to Halloween parties to informal nights out with club members. I have visited six different organizations in the area, two Rotary clubs and four Rotaract clubs. I now attend the Budapest-City Rotaract club meetings weekly and have also visited the Duna Rotaract, Budavar Rotaract, and Margitsziget Rotary Club multiple times. I am

currently working with the City-Rotaract on a Christmas Art Auction which will be held in December to benefit a local kindergarten. In this specific project, I have helped draft English-language public relations materials to distribute to artist groups at my university and have also recruited several artists that I am acquainted with in the area to participate. In addition, I am planning on selling mulled wine with the Margitsziget Rotary Club in one of the main city squares to raise money during the Christmas season. I look forward to becoming involved in more projects throughout the year as opportunities arise.

Undoubtedly, my work with Rotary has provided some of the main opportunities for me to meet local Hungarians and learn about Hungarian culture first-hand. These interactions have been enormously positive and have allowed me to not only share information about myself and my culture to interested people, but to learn about their individual histories and lives as well. I have really enjoyed answering questions about US culture and discussing current global events with members of clubs throughout Budapest. In the coming months, I look forward to expanding my Rotary-related travels to clubs outside of the Budapest area, in other major cities in Hungary.

I would like to close my report by again thanking the Foundation for the opportunity it has provided me with this year abroad, particularly in such a time of economic struggle. I know that without the support of thousands of Rotarians throughout the world this would not be possible. In the months to come, I hope I can make their investment worthwhile.



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Monthly Tutors' Meeting**

Friday, November 20, 2009 at 2:00 p.m.

at the

**Butterworth Center
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For a presentation on

Building Phonemic Awareness

Led By

Connie Snell, R.I. Schools Title I Literacy Coordinator

Phonemic awareness or understanding the individual letter sounds within a given word is the first of five key elements for learning to read. Though it is what the earliest readers are supposed to learn, it can be one component that eludes struggling readers of all ages. Understanding the principles and methods for relating these building blocks can be crucial to a tutor's success with a struggling reader. This presentation will be vital to tutors working with students of all ages who are learning to read or need help with reading skills

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