



Emily

from

Mississauga

to

Poland

“All of it is the Point”

Had you asked me last October about my plans for this year, there would have been many things I would have told you. Things like school, volunteering, and a job. Things that we strive for. The typical life plan, typical goals; business as usual. Travel, at least in the sense of my current life, was not part of that plan.

That was, at least, until I started applying for the Rotary Youth Exchange program. From then on, my life was forever changed by the promise of travel. Not only travel, but the promise of the type adventure that sticks with you, molds you, makes you into the type of person that you are meant to be. Needless to say, I was hooked.

Fast forward to today, November 2016, and I’m sitting in my bedroom. I live just outside of Sopot, in Northern Poland. It’s part of what’s called the Trójmiasto, or Tricity, which includes the two larger cities Gdynia and Gdansk. Together, they form the second largest metropolitan area in the country. It’s not where my original plan would have led me; but something much, much better.

The 17th of August 2016, also known as my departure date, could not come soon enough. I spent all of July and the first part of August buzzing with excitement. Had you offered me the chance to fly out the day after school ended, I would have taken it in a heartbeat. But I now cherish the extra two months that I had with my family and friends, and I feel that I am better prepared because of them.

So here I am, just five days shy of the three-month mark. These past months have felt like a lifetime and the blink of an eye, all at the same time. It’s a very strange feeling, because part of me feels like I just got here yesterday, and another part feels as though I’ve been here for years. That has been certainly aided by how lovely and

welcoming my host family is, and how at home they've made me feel. I very much feel like a member of the family, and I am so grateful to them for that.

Thanks to Rotary events within Poland, I've already had the opportunity to visit two other cities outside of my adopted home. Bydgoszcz and Torun, have respectively hosted our language camp and orientation meeting. Both are old cities, as are most in Poland, and thus have a lot of really interesting history. Torun, in fact, is the birth place of Mikolaj Kopernik, or as he's known in English, Nicolaus Copernicus. We had the opportunity to explore both beautiful cities. Two weeks from now, I will be going with some of the other exchange students in my area to bustling Warsaw, the capital city. In December, all 60 exchange students will meet once again in Wroclaw, one of the cultural capitals of Europe, to celebrate Christmas together.

Finding myself among history has been a sort of running theme through out my time in Poland. Because of its placement, Poland has always been in the middle of history. As a history buff, it's absolutely fascinating. As a person, it's inspiring in a way. Poland is a country that has survived despite being a battleground for almost every major war in Europe and not existing on the world map for over a hundred and twenty years.

This complicated history, however, makes Polish people extremely proud of their history and culture, which, as an exchange student is great. Whenever people find out that I'm a Canadian student learning Polish, the first thing they tend to do is get excited. The second is wish me good luck. Poles have told me several times that Polish is one of the hardest languages in the world to learn, because of cases and subtle differences in the pronunciation of different letters. I can definitely see why that is. The difficulty has certainly sparked something in the competitive, ambitious side of me though, and because of this, I can see myself making progress, albeit small and slow. My friends and family have been so patient and helpful in helping with my Polish; I know that I would have not retained as much as I have without them to practice on.

School has also been a great help in learning Polish. I have a Polish tutor once a week with one of the teachers from my school, along side my larger classes twice a week with the other exchange students in my area—although, that's not all its been good for. School has allowed me to meet amazing people I would have never met otherwise. They've been so kind and warm, and they always try to include me in what they are doing as a class—though I may not understand what is happening—and I've always felt very integrated into the group. I even often hear them chiding each other in Polish to speak in English so that I'm included in the conversation. I remind them often to speak to me in Polish as much as possible, but they often forget because they don't want to exclude me from the conversation, try as I may to keep up.

Unlike in Canada, classes are sorted into streams, such as Humanities, Math, Bio-Chem, etc. as opposed to individual class selections. The classes within those streams are fixed, so everyone in the same stream and grade level has the same schedule. This

makes it so that classes become very close, and mine is no exception. We feel like a little family. Classes are also a lot shorter here (45 minutes, almost half of the time of my classes in Canada), and school ends quite a bit earlier here: between 1:30 and 2:30, depending on the day. This, along with the fact that I take public transportation to and from school, has left me with more free time after school, as well as more flexibility and control over when I can come home. I now spend more time with my friends, either other exchange students or my classmates, especially in Old Town Gdansk (which is hands-down my favourite part of the Tricity, along with the Baltic Sea) and our local malls.

Sometimes, when we are deciding about whether or not to go on exchange and applying, we hear amazing stories of the high points of exchange: visiting ancient ruins, skiing in the Alps, seeing the Galapagos. And while yes, these are things that happen, and they're thrilling and wonderful, we often forget the fact that this is not a vacation; this is a life. There are fun days and lazy days, days where you explore and days where you only leave your house for school, the good and the bad and the mundane, all of it. It's what makes an exchange different from a trip, and life changing. Every day, all of it, is the point. To live another life, to see another culture, another point of view, and to be more compassionate for it.

Though still at the beginning of my exchange, I can certainly feel myself changing for the better. I am becoming more independent, responsible, confident, mature, as well as just overall having a lot of personal growth and coming into my own. I will often have days where I will do something, and think to myself: "Huh. Something has definitely fallen into place somewhere up here. I wouldn't have done that before." And that, it what I think exchange is all about: forming and maturing into people that will help build a better future by understanding more about the world. I have made so many friendships with so many people from all around the world, and I wouldn't trade any of them for anything.

I would like to take a minute to thank Rotary, as well as my sponsor club of Mississauga and my host club of Sopot for all of their continuous support during my exchange. This would not be possible without them, and I could never thank them enough for it.

And to all for those who are currently considering going on exchange (yes, I know you're reading this, because I read all of the previous ones too): Do it. Going on exchange is the best decision I've ever made, and I haven't regretted it for a second. It's a leap of faith, but its one you'll be glad you made.

Do widzenia i na razie!

Emily