

European Narratives

Twenty International Students
Tell Their Own Stories
of Europe



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Edited by Greg Bond

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FOREWORD

In recent years, Europe – or, more specifically, the European Union – has been facing difficult times, or a string of “crises,” each adding to Europe’s burden: from the aftermath of the financial “crisis,” to the refugee “crisis,” to the Brexit “crisis,” to an increase in anti-European sentiment and right-wing populism. It may all be summed up as a question of legitimation and it is not over yet. The attraction of Europe to so many people outside Europe is undisputed, while within Europe the challenges seem to be bigger than ever. Through focusing on the challenges, Europeans are forgetting what Europe has achieved. This book is a reminder and it asks readers to see Europe from a different perspective – that of young people from all over the world studying in Europe.

Today, critics and supporters of Europe alike are saying that the Union – or the continent – lacks a unifying narrative. National states have their own myths that go to creating identity – founding myths, myths of war and empire, myths of ethnicity, and even myths of loss; Europe has none – so they say. For some this means Europe makes no sense, while other pro-Europeans argue that Europe does not need any such narrative. Europe is a pragmatic problem-solving alliance, and we are better off with it than without it. Nothing more and nothing less. The erstwhile founding myth (avoiding war in Europe, peace) is old – the Second World War ended seventy years ago and the generation that remembers will soon be gone. This cannot be sufficient as a myth to sustain a vision of a future Europe.

This book is an answer to those who call for a new narrative. It argues through diverse narratives that we certainly do need a story of Europe, but that is not one story but many, each linked through a unifying set of values and ways of life. This book is an answer in narratives, in sometimes very personal stories, told by twenty students writing about their own lives, beyond ideology, but with remarkable perception and insight into contemporary and historical Europe. The guiding principles when writing these stories were: tell us something personal about what Europe means for you. Let us know why you wanted to come to Europe or to leave one European country for another? How did you feel when you got there? How did it change you? What makes Europe Europe?

These students come from a wide range of countries – France, Cameroon, Colombia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Kazakhstan, and Russia, and they have equally diverse family histories that also take us in the stories they write to the generations of their parents and grandparents in Belarus, Bosnia, Canada, Greece, Jordan, Moldavia, Palestine, the Soviet Union, Syria, South Korea, Ukraine and Yugoslavia. In their stories about their own lives as students in a global world, readers will visit (in addition to the countries already mentioned) Austria, Bulgaria, England, Finland, Ireland, Norway, Poland, Spain, The Netherlands, Sweden and the USA. This geographical diversity is matched by a diversity in story-telling – from stories about the students’ parents to stories about their own lives, to very creative miniatures and episodes about defining moments in a process of understanding what it really means to be European – or not to be European, then to come to Europe, and to discover a new world. Then to ask yourself how you now see “home,” what “home” now is, and who you really are or want to be. The stories are full of passion and energy; they are as bright and fresh as the stories of young people writing about their personal growth can be expected to be. They are humorous and deadly serious, and some of them will move you to tears. They are stories about how travel, leaving home and arriving somewhere else changes people, about how meeting people in new cultures and places leads to self-reflection, and about how this involves a deep questioning of values and stereotypes. They are stories about falling in love. These are views from inside and outside Europe, and they answer the question as to what Europe is. It is a set of values and a way of life that we have become complacent about in Europe and that we take too much for granted. It is a place where people want and have long wanted to live – for good reasons – not a few of the authors’ parents are immigrants to Europe. It is a place which is not perfect and is able to talk about not being perfect – some of these authors describe how Europe has opened their eyes to the power of dialogue, critique and debate. It is a place that offers opportunities – in education, in terms of mobility and freedoms. It is a place for people to encounter and be challenged by, then to live with and embrace difference – as a number of these stories show. In expanding their horizons and writing about their experiences, these young authors take nothing for granted. There is no complacency and a lot of astonishing self-awareness in these texts.

The authors are or were all students on the European Management master’s programme at Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau, near Berlin, Germany. This is a business administration programme with a specific

European focus and an international group of students. This book is the result of a story-telling project in the module “European Identities” that I teach there. Here we spend two semesters asking ourselves what Europe is, where it has come from, and where it should be going. We look at definitions and images of Europe over the centuries, read what the experts have to say, we follow the media. We engage in debate and discussion. We ask ourselves questions about values. Tired of conventional exams, the students and I decided to write this book instead.

The book has three parts. It begins with a short first chapter in which the students’ parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts are quoted saying what they think of Europe. Part two contains the twenty stories written by these students. Part three consists of a short statement from each author on his or her dreams, hopes and fears for Europe thirty years from now – when they will more or less the age of their parents, and of the editor of this book.

I thank the Friends and Supporters of Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau for their support in financing the publication of this book. I thank the authors warmly for agreeing to enter into this experiment and for writing such wonderful stories.

Greg Bond, July 2017

PART ONE

Europe in Quotations: What Our Parents and Grandparents and Our Aunts and Uncles Say about Europe

"I never thought that one day I would live in Europe."

Izudina Habibović, born 1971 in Zvornik, Yugoslavia (Bosnia), lives in Berlin, Germany

"Europe is where civilisation comes from."

Edward Ahn, born 1965 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, lives in Seoul, South Korea

"Europe is exotic for us, while we are exotic for them. While the people in such a closed country like Uzbekistan are just trying to survive, Europe is developing more and more, they are creating incredible things. I think it is something every citizen of the EU should think about and appreciate."

Laura Ahn, born 1967 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, lives in Saint Petersburg, Russia

"We are so disappointed in the European Union since it ruined our country, Hungary. Our agriculture was so strong until the EU totally destroyed it. In return we get EU support, but who knows for how long?"

László Listár, born 1963 in Moha, Hungary, lives in Székesfehérvár, Hungary

"Europe for me is a hope for democracy in Russia. If Russian gas will stop being the main European value, then Russia will be able to get democracy and Europe – safety."

Boris Korneichuk, born 1959 in Saint Petersburg, lives in Saint Petersburg

"I consider myself more a German citizen. Citizenship of the European Union is just a fact of life and does not replace nationality. For me it is hard to identify with Europe. I can't even speak English."

Lisbeth Thomas, born 1922 in Gleiwitz, Silesia, lives in Schlotheim, Germany

"For me Europe means first of all to have the possibility to visit countries within the Schengen area without having the feeling of crossing borders. In addition since we are not getting younger it's good to have stable healthcare and to be able to go to the doctor without paying money. I really feel happy that I don't have to worry about medical issues, especially here in Germany."

Kerstin Hekal, born July 1961 in Berlin, Germany, lives in Berlin

"I think people should be prouder and more grateful for the opportunity and chance to live in a safe and peaceful union. Having the right to live here lets me wake up in the morning without worrying about tomorrow. People should use their chances here!"

Bilal Hekal, born 1959 in Ramallah, Palestine, lives in Berlin, Germany

"The euro has, for sure, decreased our purchasing power. For example, a couple of years ago, I could buy a coffee and a croissant for myself almost every day for breakfast. With the euro, it's not possible anymore, it has become so expensive. This is the concrete European Union. The referendum of 2005 in France about the European Constitution? What was it about exactly? Honestly, I do not remember."

Cécile Mazabrard, born 1965 in Saint-Agrève, France, lives in Saint-Agrève

"Yes, I believe that Europe is good and can bring a lot to its members, notably in terms of trade. I also think it is good for us personally because it is good for my daughter and she benefits from it through her Erasmus experiences. However, I am a little fed up that I do not see more advances nowadays. There are a lot of events, summits and talks organised by or for the European Union but it feels like the European politicians do not have a clear and common position and cannot resolve problems."

Thierry Mazabrard, born 1968 in Saint-Agrève, France, lives in Saint-Agrève

"In Europe everything is created for people."

Valentina Belikova, born 1946 in Magdeburg, Germany, lives in Saint Petersburg, Russia

"I grew up in the USSR. I knew nothing about Europe at that time. It was closed for Soviet people and it was forbidden for us to go there. We could only grab some information from the media but it was bad propaganda from our government. They educated me up with the spirit of patriotism. I didn't think about Europe in that time because of that."

Oleg Kravchenko, born 1965 in Leningrad, Soviet Union, lives in Saint Petersburg, Russia

"I grew up in the USSR. I didn't know anything about Europe at that time except bad propaganda in the media. We only had the opportunity to travel inside the USSR. I was in Lithuania and Latvia at that time. It was part of USSR but I could feel difference from my home city, Leningrad. These places were cleaner and had more European spirit. This is all I can remember about Europe at that time."

Yulia Kravchenko, born 1968 in Leningrad, Soviet Union, lives in Saint Petersburg, Russia

"Europe has changed a lot since I started consciously experiencing it back in the days when we still lived in the GDR. The furthest we could travel was Hungary and even there we felt second-class. Nowadays Europe is about freedom – freedom of travel, freedom of trade, freedom to find complete expression. That everyone can go everywhere and do everything they want is the greatest gift we got, but it also scares me sometimes."

Inis Otto, born 1963 in Berlin, Germany, lives in Berlin

"Europe was more of a cryptic picture when they founded the European Coal and Steel Community. We were still figuring out the aftermath of the Second World War and couldn't see a united Europe, let alone the European Union we have nowadays. I spent my whole life in East Berlin, but was allowed to travel a lot due to my job. So to me, Europe is less about freedom of travel and more about keeping peace and having a stable economy – at least I hope we can still reach stability."

Reinhard Henkel, born 1932 in Berlin, Germany, lives in Berlin

"Europe is a developed continent with successful companies and public universities. Because of my daughter who has spent three years living in different countries in Europe, I understand Europe is organized, well structured, clean, enjoys low levels of corruption, and taxes are invested back into people's welfare. What we heard here in Colombia is that the transport system works wonderfully and is beautiful. In terms of justice I like the fact that the law is implemented, and the bad guys are punished. In other words Europe's social justice could be a great model to follow for Colombia; I guess also because Europeans are honest, respectful and more civilised. It is always interesting for me but also frightening how many languages there are in Europe. If one day I go and visit this continent I will be afraid because I don't speak any other languages except Spanish. I found it quite sad what's been happening recently"

with the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels. It makes me sad that people are destroying the peace and calm in Europe. On the other hand I have heard how difficult it is to be integrated into European societies. They do not open the door to foreigners in the same kind and warm way as we do it here in South America. Something to highlight is also the beautiful architecture and lively nature that Europe has."

María Cecilia Africano Alvarado, born 1963 in Sogamoso, Colombia, lives in Bogota, Colombia

"Europe has so much to offer for its citizens. Parents are able to raise their children in peace, there is free healthcare and education for everyone, not forgetting many other freedoms which other countries can only dream of. Yet, even after living in Germany for thirty years and being grateful for all the opportunities we have, it has never completely become my home. There is something missing, a feeling which cannot be explained."

Samar Djouchadar, born 1968 in Damascus, Syria, lives in Brandenburg, Germany

"Europe is an opening towards others, where political and economic matters need a lot of joint reflection, between help and sharing."

Giuseppe De Nuccio, born 1965 in Copertino, Italy, lives in Lille, France

"In order to feel like a man in Europe one only needs to be born, while in Russia one needs to be either rich or a public face."

Marina Ehrhardt, born 1966 in Moldovitchi, Belarus, lives in Frankfurt (Oder), Germany

"Use the opportunities we never had!"

Erika Wenzel, born 1944 in Posen, Germany (today Poznań, Poland), lives in Salzwedel, Germany

"Have all these Euro-critics gone nuts? Don't they know what we have been through?"

Lothar Herold, born 1943 in Hirschberg, Germany (today Jelenia Góra, Poland), lives in Salzwedel, Germany

"Not everything was bad in the old days."

Ulrike Herold, born 1945 in Leipzig, Germany, lives in Salzwedel, Germany

"I think Europe today has changed a lot from what I experienced as a child. I can briefly speak about Europe from my perspective as a child born and raised in West Germany. I see positive changes in Germany and Europe today as compared to the past. Today, I enjoy the level of integration and diversity specifically in Berlin and other major European cities. Neukölln in Berlin, the vibrant neighbourhood where I reside, is a great example with a multicultural touch with people from around Europe and the world. Witnessing the reunification of Germany, the creation of the Eurozone with a single currency, and a single market without barriers has made me proud of Europe today. Such endeavours initiated with the aim of crafting a united Europe have changed my views for the betterment of tomorrow in respect of integrity, solidarity and commonality. The Europe of today signifies resilience learned from our past."

Barbara Kupke, born 1952 in Berlin, Germany, lives in Berlin

"I think Europe is more than just a single market with a political endeavour for economic integration. These factors have narrowed down Europe in the media simply to an organisation of countries, the EU. I know it gets below and above this abbreviation. Europe has always stood for liberalism, civil rights and equality. Also, contemporary Europe fascinates me, with its arts, museums and architecture. Europe in the past has shaped the world through its ideologies even in times of great colonialism, imperialism and war. Even though the continent is often regarded as a simple site of attraction with exotic getaways for vacations today, my thoughts about Europe are more about its historical importance to the world. The fall of the Berlin Wall is an example, a significant moment not only shaping the continent but the world as well. After twenty-eight years of separation, such actions portrayed reconciliation and togetherness towards the West and the East, but more importantly, peace."

Embe Moliki, born 1953 in Limbe, Cameroon, lives in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, USA

"Classicism was born in Europe. And still today, if you are searching for a classical suit, a classical car or classical music, you come to Europe."

Goran Novakovic, born 1963 in Doboje, Yugoslavia (Bosnia), lives in Erding, Germany

"For me Europe is a really good and qualitative system of education with highly skilled and modern experts. That's why my daughter studies in one of the countries of European Union. It will be a really good start for her career. Especially, Germany provides opportunities and good perspectives for development in all spheres."

Tatyana Litvinenko, born 1970 in Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine, lives in Saint Petersburg, Russia

"For me Europe is a union of different countries with different social, cultural and economic conditions, united by the purpose of the improvement of the life of the citizens within this union. Undoubtedly managed by the countries taking leading positions – such as Britain, France and Germany."

Mikhail Bikmetov, born 1969 in Kentau, Kazakhstan, lives in Saint Petersburg, Russia

"Europe was the best way to avoid new armed conflicts. A rapprochement between countries was unavoidable at that time. Nowadays, despite the problems Europe is facing, we must continue to work on it."

Georges Nicolas, born 1915 in Les Abrets, France, lives in Les Abrets

"Europe was a beautiful project. However, the countries are really too different from each other, even among the core countries. This process, as every large historical change, is very slow, taking steps forwards and backwards."

Jeanine Nicolas, born 1935 in Ugine, France, lives in Annecy, France

"Europe is an example of globalisation, though respecting different cultures and languages."

Karyn Weston, born 1965 in Brantford Ontario, Canada, lives in Tübingen, Germany

"Europe means a place of freedom after years of war. It means the freedom to travel and free trade."

Klaus Schmid, born 1961 in Stuttgart, Germany, lives in Böblingen, Germany

"Europe is the birthplace and home to my four grandchildren. After many visits, I see Europe as a continent that has undergone almost unbelievable change in my lifetime, mostly positive, but still work in progress. There might be challenges along the way but the European Union must survive for peace and stability. This of course is only a perspective from a grandmother in Canada."

Rosina Weston, born 1938 in Paisley, Scotland, lives in Vancouver, Canada

"Europe is important to me as a Canadian because our country was initially colonized by the French (Champlain). Europe is important to me as a proud father and grandparent having a daughter who has raised her children in Germany. Europe has been a tremendous inspiration to me, having travelled with my wife to various parts of Europe, including Germany, France, Switzerland, Austria and Italy, getting to know the culture and admiring the geography of all these countries. Europe is extremely important to our country for entering into a free trade agreement which is a significant benefit to Canada."

Gary Weston, born 1937 in Brampton Ontario, Canada, lives in Vancouver, Canada

"Europe is my home turf. Here are my roots, this is where I come from. I feel I am a European, not a German. The diversity of Europe is unique and I'm proud to be part of it!"

Oliver Nowak, born 1968 in Sindelfingen, Germany, lives in Tübingen, Germany

"Europe is about incompetence, bureaucracy, unwelcomed immigration, foreign influence, a failed currency, the rise of fascism, second-rate politicians, high youth unemployment and southern European brain-drain."

Anonymous, born 1960 in Stuttgart, Germany, lives in Stuttgart, Germany

PART TWO

European Narratives:
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BEYOND BORDERS

Dear friend,

The time has now come: I will write my personal biography – an absolute necessity when saying goodbye to the Belorussian nationality – and my whole conscious life is rustling like a light wind through my little blonde head. Yes, I'm a citizen of the Republic of Belarus and soon my status will change with the colour of my passport. How do I feel about it? Like a child who wants to finish the necessary main course and rapidly move over to the dessert. But how did it all begin? Let me paint the picture for you. A quarter of a century ago I had the good fortune to welcome this world personally. This occurred in the central maternity hospital in the city of Brest in 1991, USSR.

Brest – the geographical westernmost point and the beginning of the largest state in the world. This was on the border to Poland at the time. What else can be said, if the statistics state: The size of Russia today could be filled with 48 Germanys, 70 Englands and 38,921,379 Vaticans! USSR – only four letters but what a whopping great big country. The length of the line from Brest to the far eastern endpoint of the former USSR is 10,050 km. This continuous line would stretch through forests, meadows, steppes, mountains, rivers and seas. Through two great continents, Europe and Asia, to the ending point of this mighty power and the Kuril Archipelago. Off the coast of Japan, somewhere I have never been. This lyrical-geographical digression has distracted you from my main thoughts, pardon!

Well, I burst into life in 1991 and not me and no one else had any idea that we were standing on the threshold of great events that would change our lives and divide them into before and after. I emerged into this world not only at the border of the USSR and Poland but also at a border in time, that moment when all of the member republics of the Soviet Union would gain a new status. There was a whole array of changes looming – political, economic, geographical, and human. For some reason my whole life has been accompanied by borderlands – perhaps this is due to the position of the stars, as my mother would say. If you follow my story you will understand what I mean.

Of course I don't remember the first three years of my existence but there was a lot to get done. My first teeth emerged, and I abandoned pampers

for underpants, I learned how to eat by myself, I gave up milk for mashed food, and I acquired a solid stock of vocabulary which was quite enough to communicate with the outside world. For family reasons I had to spend the next forty months of my childhood in Chelyabinsk. Brest to Chelyabinsk, some 3,000 km, merely four hours' flight, and then I am drowning in the warm embrace of my grandma and grandpa. Here it is, a carefree childhood. I had only rights and no obligations and I was as spoiled as can only be done by the best grandparents. The great change in my life certainly amused me, but the look of the Urals was quite alarming. "Oh Urals – the supporting verge of powers," in the words of the poet Aleksandr Tvardovsky. (Well, and I have always thought that the Urals were actually in need of support). According to the indigenous people, better the rich northern Caucasus than the poor southern Urals.

However, those distant 1990s were a particularly difficult time for those who were worried about the sleazy and sloppy transition from socialism to liberalism. In the second half of 1991 the Soviet Union started to disintegrate. All of the fifteen republics demanded a divorce. So did my mum from my dad. That marked a beginning of a new life transition. I was young and protected, and had no desire to experience the hardships of the new life for my family. I grew up in love, and I was already making my own plan for life. Life was in full swing. My relatives decided that I was a wunderkind and gave me away for English classes when I was only three years old! After a year they understood that I inclined, like almost all children, to more prosaic pursuits, but with a very creative approach.

Somehow I was lucky with my grandma and grandpa, nice neighbours, devoted friends and decent teachers in the kindergarten. It was fun and easy, free from cares, as things should be for all children. In some way, my mother was less fortunate, and she decided that she could not live in the given circumstances, where violence and dictatorship reigned, so she said. Even back in her schooldays she had gained this conviction, and after the separation from my dad she finally actively started to implement her plans. Her goal: a radical move to the West.

Luckily, the new politics meant open borders. It became possible for those who really wanted it to reshape their own geographies. That's when my life was predefined. Until then I had beheld four seasons, one after the other, changing sandals to fell boots, growing my braids, playing with my girlfriends in the sandbox, and just observing grandmothers on the bench

actively discussing what their neighbours had been doing as if they were going to get paid for it. In the evenings, after 7 pm, it was better not to go out into the streets, as criminal gangs would begin as if on schedule. Next morning you could see burned-out stalls, cars and shops. It was certainly not boring. Children had to grow up quickly. As my mother says, maybe this was down to bio-magnetic fields. The city was, after all, located exactly on the border of two great continents – Europe and Asia. It was already my second border zone, the Eurasian!

While I was trying to comprehend the science of survival in the Urals, my mum was taking part in an aid campaign for children who had been exposed to the catastrophe in Chernobyl. Doctors were needed, and they were invited from Germany. This was all incredibly simple; after the borders of the Soviet Republics had gone, there were plenty of aid organisations operating. My mother volunteered to help find sponsors for surgical treatment or an indispensable therapy. This was how she met her first Germans. Then she travelled with her old friends to Bavaria to work harvesting pears and apples, and income she earned was transferred to a foundation for children from Chernobyl.

Now my mum was making her first Western contacts. This did not include the Polish, as “chicken is not quite a bird, Poland is not quite abroad.” My mum always says that being Polish is a profession. A dreamtime for everyone who had and wanted to sell something. Sold was everything and everywhere. The tax system – to put it mildly – was pretty undeveloped. It was not even in the embryo stage. As a result: rampant speculation. Thanks to this, people living in the border region did not feel all the burdens of the crisis. Both sides of the border were teeming with cars and buses, pedestrians were not catered for. What massive queues! Not measurable in kilometres, only in time. To get across might last up to a week, and if it took only three days then this was not even considered a queue. But there were always enough enterprising people who were able to earn some money. They were simply selling a place in front of the line for 350 German marks! A price that was always negotiable. On the Polish side everything was the same. The motto of the era was: “Strike iron while Gorbachev is hot.” The Polish provided us with jeans and Turkish sweaters while we supplied them with vodka, cigarettes, televisions and gold. Everyone was very happy in the border towns.

After my mother’s charitable journeys, the family had pretty well no financial resources left. Instead we had all kinds of lovely and kind friends and

contacts. Sabina and her family became part of our lives. For me, they were cleaner and more generous than Jesus himself. Where does the comparison come from? We met this impressive family through the New Apostolic Church. Sabina and her family are deeply religious and live according to the laws of God but at the same time they are very open and cheerful people. With the help of our hands and feet we spoke in three languages – Russian, German and English. The desire to communicate worked wonders.

We met every summer on the shores of the Baltic Sea, somewhere on the Polish beaches, and in the evenings we made fruit salads and sang psalms from the church hymnal. My favourite was “Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht.” As a three-year-old child, I did not understand the German lyrics but I very much liked the melody. My first words in the German language were “sadich badich,” which was my version of the German “ich liebe dich” – I love you. I repeated these words at the end of every long telephone conversation we had during the rest of the year, while we were waiting to meet again the next summer. At a first glance this seems like just personal communication, but it left a visible imprint in the social life of Brest, where through the participation of my family a New Apostolic Church Community was founded.

As I grew older, I came to understand more and more of what they were talking about, and I started getting answers to many questions, like why are we born if we need to die. Realising all the essence of life to the extent which my young mind was able, I entirely and fully entrusted my fate to the lord God and His direct executive, my mother.

By the way, looking back from today at my own life, I wonder why the Urals are such a white spot on any tourist map. What a pity! The deep soils of the Urals contain pretty well the entire periodic table – which is why the region has both heavy industry and great natural beauty to offer. There is a fairy-tale mystery there. It is not just foreign tourists who are missing out. Most Russians have no idea how astonishing and beguiling the scenery can be and what surprises it can bring. What about history? Genghis Khan himself repeatedly smashed his marquee in these places. It is necessary to attract investors in order to open up all of the tourism potential – that’s just a pragmatic retreat from the lyric, so to say my professional inclinations.

So the paperwork for the move abroad began. Although the Soviet times had begun to sink into oblivion, the system remained the same. As Russians used to say: “With a paper – you’re a person, if you don’t have one – you’re just a bug.” While all these documents were being collected and processed,

we felt like bugs. Everything was screened through a bureaucratic sieve made by the post-Soviet area of the Belorussian Republic. When you go through something like this, it seems that there is nothing impossible in life anymore. Well, in life everything ends, both good and bad, as my mother says. Now, not for vacation, and not for a couple or three months, but for a permanent place of residence, imagine me and my mother flying in an Alfa Romeo into a new reality and I am wanting to shout out into the world: "Sadich badich." Here I see outside the window images of Polish landscapes flashing, I am trying to read the shop window signs, which I do not understand. At the end of our journey, I have developed a persistent belief that all residents of Poland were born to go to the hairdresser, to the night club, and to smoke and to die, since these signs were the most common.

I was not surprised that the final destination of our trip was once again located in the border zone. Frankfurt an der Oder is separated by the bridge of friendship with the Polish city Słubice. All is as usual; where there is a border, there I am at home. Karma, as my mum might say, but this is what I have now come to believe. Germany welcomed me sincerely even though February was in front of the door. Everything was as I expected. We had a comfortable freshly-renovated apartment, my room with a bunch of mascots and even a proverbial glass table. I still cannot understand why I wanted to have that, it seems to be some kind of nonsense, which I now understand. Back then in Russia, glass tables were something belonging to futuristic scenarios.

So I had a table to do my homework, so I could now take a new step forward – and start school. First grade was the first major step in the long journey of my education. As you may have realised, my first class began at the end of February. The headmaster gave me only two weeks to adapt and integrate. In case the requirements are not fulfilled – down to kindergarten! At the age of seven – preposterous! Russians do not surrender. In the first three days I surprised everyone by knowing the alphabet by heart, being able to read and counting to a hundred. The major challenge was that I didn't understand anything I was told. But this problem was easily solved through processes of communication within two weeks. Bingo.

So I graduated from the first, then the second and third grade, day after day, year after year has flown by. Childhood ended, puberty thundered in, and youth opened the door to adulthood. It is possible to glimpse through it, but not yet open or enter it, although it is good to enjoy the freedom in

the meantime. Freedom from parental control and freedom to make mistakes and receive the first blows of fate, but at this age nothing seems so tragic, as everything can be relived, digested and forgotten. My mum says that smart people learn from the mistakes of others and fools from their own. Well, I achieve this with varying success. I think if I were always smart, I will have nothing to remember in old age.

Year by year I went through all the stages of my evolution from an eastern European child to a western European high-school graduate. The number one topic of last year at school was the prom dress. I wonder whether boys have the same stress at the end of the school. I guess not. It was only when travelling to see my grandmother on summer vacation that I remembered my roots. With every year, everything became more unfamiliar and incomprehensible on the eastern border. I was drawn to an old-fashioned furnished 1980s apartment, to the smell of fresh baking that I remembered from childhood, to the radio with Russian chansons, and to my beloved and loving grandmother.

Whenever I wasn't back with my grandmother, it was my pleasure to travel through the West. Paradoxically, the best parties I have ever experienced were in Sweden, a country where alcohol restriction prevails. Great Britain (I always tried in vain to find a small Britain on a map) struck me with royal traditions, where every corner seems to be saturated with the spirit of Henry the Eighth. If I were an autograph freak, then I would have gathered the best collection in Italy, because there I had the good fortune to contemplate international stars in "wild nature." Oh for Spain, which gave me an unforgettable first love, God forbid, hopefully not the last. Then of course France. Oh la la! It has become a second home for me, it was love at first sight. I wanted to put on a beret and then raise it to praise the charm and ease of the French lifestyle and mentality. But in Germany – I'm home. I love its order and predictability, its ability to work and thoroughness. This is my declaration of love, to you, Germany.

Finally my big prom night arrived, and it wearied us with solemn speeches and oldies music. But this seems to be quite normal for provincial schools. Besides, heels dumped us down entirely. The evening was rescued by the discotheque and after greeting the sunrise on the roof of the car of my classmate, we roamed home amicably. The dawn of a new life. What next? Next, I decided to look down into myself and strike out for Hamburg. The island of dreams was waiting for me there. Oh my grand plans for beauty and

art, all in one – le monde de la mode. A dream island called Mega Model, a modelling agency that gave me the opportunity to touch my dreams through an internship. For a whole year this team became a real family for me. But what do I really want? I still cannot figure it out. Why? Well, that's a piece of cake, as my mother used to say. It's better to be a good manager than a bad designer, since a good manager can make a star out of a bad designer. In general, I realise when writing these memoirs that I'm a very obedient daughter, always remembering what my mother has said. Now I'm already in the middle of my master's studies and I'm doing what I'm doing. What will happen next, I do not know. In the worst case I always have my mother to ask how the stars stand up there.

So my dear friend, I say goodbye to you and wish you always a lucky star.

Sincerely yours,

Alesia

PS. Certainly, when this book sees the light of day, I already will be joining the ranks of German citizens. Well, I'm not yet a German and not a Belorussian either, as usual I am in my border state, actually like all of us: between north and south, between school and work, between child and parent, between Europe and Asia, between heaven and earth, between yesterday and tomorrow. Tomorrow continues our biographies.

FIVE YEARS LIVING THE EUROPEAN DREAM

Europe was nothing but a large iron curtain to my parents. For them being able to travel to Hamburg, Rome, Paris or New York was as realistic and tangible as for us a flight to Mars today. That Europe ceased to exist in the year I was born and will hopefully never ever come back.

During the past five years of my life I have travelled to thirty different countries, from Hong Kong to Peru, and have lived for at least two months in no fewer than six. During this odyssey of self-discovery my mind, my character and my attitude towards life have fundamentally changed. I can proudly say that so far I have not followed my brain anywhere; it was my heart instead that was leading me on my odyssey. As happy as I am about having taken that journey I must admit that having a German passport has made my life a lot easier. The following is the story of my odyssey that started right after high school and is continuing until this very day where I am living in Berlin. It's a story about cultural shocks, breath-taking moments in nature, eye-opening conversations, troublesome situations and a tragic love. It is strange enough that I had to travel a million miles and talk to two thousand people just to discover myself. Not until we are lost do we begin to find ourselves, and I got lost a million times.

Everything began in the summer of 2011 when I received my high school diploma. After having spent twenty years in the same city at the same place, I felt trapped and had an unbelievably strong desire to break out and to just escape somewhere far away. My first two options were Moscow and Buenos Aires, but they were discounted due to my having family there. Obviously it wasn't pure curiosity that led my way, but rather a girl, a Polish girl. My heart told me to move to Warsaw and to give it a shot and thanks to the EU and a practically border-free Europe the effort I faced in moving to Warsaw was exactly the same if I would have moved to some other city in Germany. Ironically enough the reason I moved to Poland introduced me upon my arrival to her new boyfriend who happened to be a (now former) friend of mine. Luckily, I decided to stay anyway.

But I am not writing an autobiography here. I haven't done anything important in my life yet that somebody would read about. What I am going to write about is how my time in Poland changed my ways of thinking. Before

moving moved to Poland to live, I had never been there even once before. The first thing I realised was my stereotypes. Some of these got confirmed, others were not, and apparently there are also stereotypes about Germans held by other nations. I do not really elaborate on these stereotypes as I consider them generally to be quite counter-productive. However, I found out that the Poles cannot be reduced to a love of vodka. What a surprise! In Poland I had something like a second family, my good friend's family. Until today they call me their son and I was invited to stay with them free of charge for months. However, being a German living in Poland was not always easy. Although the Second World War ended approximately seventy years ago it still influenced my life there quite a lot. I was born fifty years after the war and I thought I was no representative of that culture anymore. However, it turned out I was. In that context there are a million memories left in my mind, good ones as well as bad ones, but one in particular I would like to share here. My good friend's grandfather, who was born in 1935, once invited the entire family to a family dinner. Because I happened to be living with my friend at the same time I was invited as well. I had no expectations towards that dinner and simply was surprised about the unexpected invitation. When we arrived at his place there was a long table full of the best food you could find in a Polish village. There was a long table with many chairs. Traditionally the host, the grandfather, was seated at the head end of that table. When we were asked to sit down he insisted on me sitting right next to him. And even though I did not speak a word of Polish back in those days the grandfather talked to me the entire night, also offering me his best cognac. He talked about his memories of Germans, about Hitler, the war, German Christmas songs he remembered – as he was forced to learn them – and the fact that he hadn't met a single German since. I was the first.

During my three years in Poland I taught myself Polish to a quite acceptable level and happened to meet the grandfather at several family parties. Every time we talked more and more. It seemed like the more my language developed the more he was smiling every time we met. Two years ago he died, but the story was not over yet. After he died his son, my friend's father, told me something about his father. He told me that his father was amazed about me and my willingness to learn more about the Polish people and culture. My friend's father is fluent in German as he lived in Germany for many years, a decision his father was never proud of. However, the father told me that just before his father died he opened his heart and his mind. He saw that the world his son and grandson grew up in is not the same as the

world he grew up in. Before he died he lost his prejudices about Germans and was so happy to see that his grandson's best friend was a German. Seeing two young adults who did not see so much trouble in history, borders or other differences restored his faith in the world, that faith he had lost during the Second World War. It touched my heart when I got to know about this change in his mind a year after his death.

I was invited as a stranger and left as a son. Even though the girl dumped me upon my arrival I have never regretted having moved there. It was the first "ice breaker," and it was the first big step I had to take in order to be ready to travel more. This is the first step most of us are too afraid to take. We would rather not risk failure. I was now in perfect condition, ready and very eager to take more steps in my life and to see where they would lead me to.

During my time in Warsaw I found myself a new good friend. His name is Mike and he was from Belarus. Because we got along so well and found out that we have so many things in common he invited me over to Minsk to spend the summer with him and his family. It didn't take long for me to decide. I gave up my flat in Warsaw, collected some cash and moved to Minsk for two months. Whereas I had had strong doubts as to whether it was good or bad to move to Poland I now had no doubts at all. It was already my second step. The average Western or Central European does not know much about Belarus, or White Russia, as I used to wrongly call it, and I was no exception. I was expecting this former Soviet Republic to be a dirt poor country, with frustrated citizens, and a place where almost everyone and everything could be bribed. Again I was led by my stereotypes.

The first thing I noticed was that the streets were unbelievably clean. It turned out that Belarus is one of the cleanest and safest countries for tourists in this world. Well, I came there to improve my Russian and to get to know my new best friend's life and family. Again, as a stranger coming Belarus for the very first time, I was invited to stay at my friend's house for the entire summer. No money was wanted from me and I was expected not to offer anything. The hospitality these people offered to a complete stranger just astonished me. Moreover, I was invited to see their country house, eat their food, meet their grandparents, go to the sauna with them. This hospitality was something I had never experienced before so far. And again it was language that made my life easier and more beautiful. The more I managed to improve my Russian the more people talked to me, smiled at me and wanted to spend time with me. As Belarus does not have too many tourists in general I was

already a kind of exotic fruit there. People were so impressed and at the same time surprised that I spent so much time, money and effort in getting to know their culture, language and country. Up until today I am called a son in this family as well. Even though I left Poland and Belarus several years ago, I still meet both families on a regular basis and they are equally interested in knowing what is going on in my life.

The more people I met in Belarus and Poland, and the more people I talked to the more my own perception of Germany and of what Europe means changed. Most obviously my language changed. After I came back from Belarus my mother told me that I was speaking German with Russian intonation. During my four years abroad I have had the chance to experience so much. For me exactly this is the European dream. The more I travelled the more I enlarged my horizon and the fewer stereotypes I had left over. Every single corner of Europe is different and influenced by a different cultural background. Getting to know this diversity of Europe and of the world made me understand the importance of traveling. If more people would take such chances and just overcome their fear of moving abroad for some time Europe would be a much better place with many fewer people having stereotypes about other nations. I strongly believe that the European dream is about openness, liberty and a common living together.

During the course of my studies in Poland I actually took the chance and went on an Erasmus exchange semester to Finland. When I was planning my trip to Finland I was simply expecting to have a great and funny time up in the high north. How could I possibly imagine that the day of my arrival would change my entire life? That very day I arrived in Finland I met a person who was to become my future ex-girlfriend. In spite of all our cultural and linguistic differences we stayed together for not less than three years, constantly traveling between Istanbul, Leipzig, Warsaw and Malmö. Even though this Erasmus love does not have the happy end everyone might hope for, it was an incredible experience. Being with a girl from another country taught me so many things about intercultural communication and most importantly the different ways of love. To cut this long and still quite painful story short I want to say that I would not be the person I am today if I had not followed the call of my heart. Initially to Poland, then to Belarus, then to Turkey. Who knows where it will be in the future. Erasmus is Europe for me. I stopped talking to Turks, Poles or Swedes and instead started talking to individuals regardless of their nationality. Throughout my odyssey, I detached myself from the idea of a nation state. What remains important is the cultural background a person

has in his heart. We are who we want to be.

Seven years ago I was a narrow-minded and frustrated small person who thought in stereotypes and was on the best way to become a right-wing voter. My trips and more importantly all the people I met on the way freed my mind. I became happier and more satisfied with who I am and with what my lifestyle represents. This is what the dream has been for me.

THE BEST DECISION MY PARENTS EVER MADE

This story begins a long time ago – at least from my perspective. It is the year 1990 in Europe. It is a story about love, about adventures and about life-changing moments. It's not mainly about the places you go, it's about the people you meet.

Twenty-four-year old Karyn and her best friend from Vancouver in Canada had finished their university degrees and were ready to leave home and explore the world before working in full-time jobs. They decided to go an adventurous backpacking journey through Europe and booked a ticket to London.

At the same time, Klaus, a German engineer, and his friends set off on their own road trip through Europe. Their journey began in Stuttgart and their final destination was Crete, a beautiful island in Greece.

Karyn and her friend travelled to more than ten countries in Europe and the last country they wanted to explore was Greece. On their journey they learned a lot about Europe and its many cultures and met people who changed their perspectives on life. People who told them about what happened during the Second World War, about the collapse of communism and about German unification. These were stories that so far they only knew from books. 1990 was a time when Germany regained its "new" federal states and when Europeans became closer neighbours. On their trip, they learned so much more than in school and they were very grateful for the experience they had. For them, it was soon time to fly back home and share all of this with their family and friends. They were now on the island of Crete, enjoying their last days at the beach. Karyn was sitting on the beach, enjoying the sun and watching some German guys playing football. She thought about how football is widely accepted all around Europe and most people know how to play it. For her, football was a very European game.

Reflecting on her journey through Europe, the places she went and the people she met, she also felt sad to be leaving this beautiful place and going back: back to Vancouver, back to reality. But on the other hand, she was looking forward to seeing her family and her friends, to sleeping in her own bed and no longer in a tent, and especially to speaking English and to

everyone understanding what she said. Dealing with all those languages in Europe was not always easy for Karyn and her friend and they often had to resort to gestures to make themselves understood.

As Karyn was reflecting on her journey, suddenly a football rolled towards her. One of the German guys had kicked the ball too hard and Klaus was running up to get it. He came up to Karyn and said how sorry he was that the ball almost hit her. She did not understand a word because he was speaking German. She said she could not understand what he was saying. In his broken English, Klaus then tried to apologise and asked her where she was from. After they had talked like this for a short while, Klaus's friends began shouting that they wanted to continue playing and he should stop hitting on pretty girls at the beach. Before he continued playing with his friends, Klaus invited Karyn to the campfire at the beach that evening. This was the beginning of a crazy and unpredictable love story. A love story across two continents.

Karyn decided to postpone her flight for another month and spend time with Klaus in Germany. Klaus introduced her to his parents, showed her many great places in Germany and hoped she would never leave. But Karyn's travel visa expired and she had a job waiting for her in Vancouver. She could not imagine a future in Germany, because she did not speak the language and would not find a job. And after travelling for so long, she missed her family and friends back home. Karyn decided to fly back to Canada and Klaus would visit her soon after.

After Karyn left, Klaus worked very hard to save the money for a flight to Vancouver and he also studied English every day. Then a few months later, they finally saw each other again in Canada. They were still happily in love. But Klaus could not stay long because he had an important job waiting for him back home. He had to take over his father's company. They were both very sad and could not imagine a life without each other, so they decided to try a long-distance relationship and see each other twice a year.

Klaus took over the company and was very busy managing the business. Karyn liked her job in Vancouver and quickly got promoted as a manager. Both being so busy in their daily routine helped them not to think about each other all the time. Suddenly Karyn started feeling ill and had to see a doctor. She found out that she was pregnant. Her life was turned upside-down and she did not know what to do. She had to tell Klaus but did not want to tell him on the phone. She wanted to tell him in person that he would soon be a father. She booked a flight to Stuttgart and surprised him. When she told

him he was overwhelmed with happiness and asked her if she would marry him. Within a month they got married in Germany and soon after Karyn gave birth to a baby girl.

They moved into a nice house in a cute little village near Stuttgart and were both very happy. Karyn was offered a job at a university to teach business English and Klaus was successfully running his business. A few years later, Karyn and Klaus were proud parents of four healthy children. They taught them both German and English, and they travelled the world together as family and were not only at home in Germany but also in Canada.

This was the story of how my parents met and how one moment changed their lives. The baby girl born twenty-five years ago was myself. I am half-German, half-Canadian, I have two citizenships and am the holder of two passports. Being brought up by parents with different backgrounds and languages, with different cultures and values makes me who I am today. The story of my parents is the first story I associate with what Europe means to me personally. Europe to me means love, travel and adventures.

Of course my mom's decision to live in Germany for the rest of her life was not always easy for her. She missed her family and her friends in Vancouver. She missed Canada's nature: the mountains, the ocean and the beautiful lakes. It was hard for her to integrate into Germany because of cultural differences and the language barrier. She was the only foreigner in our neighbourhood and it was difficult for her to meet new friends. But she stayed for love and for her children.

My parents made the choice to live and raise their children in Germany basically because they believed the German education system was better than in Canada and because education was for free. Because my mom studied in Canada she knew how high the study fees are. She was paying back her own loan until she was forty. My parents decided they did not want the same for their children and this was one of the reasons why they chose to live in Germany and not Canada. My siblings and I all had the opportunity to live and study abroad without paying study fees. In fact, we got financial support from the European Union as we joined the Erasmus – European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students – programme. I studied in the United Kingdom and my brother in The Netherlands and we both enjoyed this experience very much. During this time I grew personally. It not only fostered my learning and understanding of one new culture, but of many cultures, as I met students from all over the world. The people I call my best friends live all

over the world and I met most of them during my studies abroad. We don't see each other very often, but when we do then it feels just like yesterday. My studies abroad have opened up so many opportunities for me and I was able to visit friends in many European countries such as Denmark, Spain, France, Austria and some non-European countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, the United States and Australia. It is always a great experience visiting my friends all around the world, learning about their culture and exploring places I would never have discovered as a tourist.

My German passport has made it possible for me to live in countries such as Australia, Singapore and the United Kingdom without going through difficult visa requirements. For me a European passport is a symbol of open borders, freedom and security. With all its stamps, my passport tells a story – a story of my personal identity.

Having the opportunity to choose between nationalities is great for travelling. For instance, when I travel to the United States, I choose not to travel as a European. I rather travel as a Canadian to avoid the long wait at the American custom controls. Since 9/11 you can wait for hours to get through American border control if you are not American or Canadian. Europeans have to apply for an ESTA – Electronic System for Travel Authorisation, get their picture taken and have their fingerprints scanned before entering the United States of America. Thanks to my Canadian citizenship I am very happy I can avoid strict border controls and just enter the USA by showing my passport. A great advantage of having two nationalities, especially because we travel to the US every year.

Thanks to my parents I have the freedom to choose my nationality. Through them I know that home is not a place, it's a feeling. Thanks to them I can call myself European and Canadian. Their love story opened the doors to so many possibilities. In my years I have been lucky to travel to more than forty countries and live on four continents. This is all because my parents found love in Europe.

Europe to me is the best decision my parents ever made!

A BERLIN AFFAIR

As my first “serious” experience in Europe I consider my exchange semester in Berlin. Living in Russia I was learning German for more than ten years and was lucky to get a chance to stay in Germany for a year by studying in Berlin as an exchange student and I appreciate it and wonder about European as well as German mentalities.

It is important to mention how relatively easy it is to access education in Germany, while the quality stays at a high level. There are a lot of funds providing scholarships for international students, normally there are no study fees, there is a large number of language courses and additional subjects offered by the universities, and study programmes are far more diverse in comparison with my country. Another surprising thing to notice is students’ ages, which normally vary from eighteen to thirty or even older, while in Russia almost everyone enters university at the same age, and exceptions are usually considered weird. For me one of the best characteristics of German universities is their high level of internationalisation. There is a large share of international students, which makes studying more effective in terms of creating new ideas or considering issues from completely different points of view. So in general I think people in Europe are freer and more flexible in terms of education: free to enter study programmes, to move to other countries for study purposes, to get a second or a third degree if they think they need it, to get sponsorship for studying abroad so as to gain greater knowledge and experience. So Europe gave me opportunity to get better education.

During my studies I was living in a huge student dorm with young people from all over the world and I never felt lonely – rather a part of something big – a community united by a common story. To get my room I needed to pass through a couple of long corridors. I could smell exotic spices, hear unknown music coming from someone’s room, loud talking in foreign languages, an incredible guitar player. I think there was no nationality I could not find in my dorm. Living in such a place showed me how different we may seem to be on the one hand, but how similar and excited by the same ideas on the other.

For me Europe is a unique mixture of order and chaos, tradition and diversity. Since I first came to Berlin, I felt like I can never leave the city and

cannot go back to my country. Berlin makes me want to come back again and again. For me Berlin is a great example of a European megalopolis – a unique place in terms of technological development, architecture, and facilities. This is a city of the future. In terms of spirit and atmosphere it is close to what I imagine the great cities in the USA might have been like in the 1960s – very artistic. For me, Berlin is like a time machine working in a both directions. The city is a kaleidoscope of events, people and cultures. As a big music fan, I found an enormous amount of places where I can discover new flows in the big music universe. In Berlin people feel so free to come and share their music with an audience, and to create music bands. I was also surprised by a huge amount of national specialities I can discover without leaving the city – here you can find a Brazilian film festival, a Japanese market, and American, East Asian, or Indian restaurants managed by foreigners.

Considering people in Berlin I think most of them don't have any typical "German mentality," which I associate with rationality, an orientation to tradition and restraint. They have their own very international mindset which makes it easy to get in contact with them. It never seemed so easy to me to meet new people, but the European soul still remains an open question in many ways. I think that Europeans find it important to stay polite, friendly and open-minded in their everyday dealings with other people, but becoming friends, getting closer to them and understanding their personality is another, bigger and probably more difficult matter. Of course it would be worth it. I think in Russia people are much more closed-up in terms of meeting new people, keeping in contact without the intention to become a close friend, doing small talk and being consciously friendly. This behaviour is not common in Russia, which of course makes us feel more genuine on the one hand, but also makes getting in contact with people more difficult.

One of my travel experiences was a trip to Amsterdam. For me it was special because it was my first experience of staying with locals instead of in hostels. When I first heard about couch-surfing, it sounded crazy to me. Stay with people you have no idea about? I couldn't even imagine such an idea existing in my country. It was the first time I had a strong feeling that in Europe everything is working completely differently, so you need to follow different rules if you stay here. With a lot of questions in my mind I decided to try. Our host was a really nice Dutch guy, an IT student. He gave us two rooms in his house as well as the keys and said we could feel free. So a strange idea suddenly turned into a promising one, while I still do not think that is entirely positive. The idea actually has the potential to turn your house

or even your life into chaos, but if everyone participating cooperates and follows the rules – which I see as a very European way of behaving – it will become so easy to help each other, making our trips more interesting, more insightful and personal, and cheaper. Besides that the idea makes us more rational, responsible and attentive, and of course asks us to reconsider our own values in terms of trusting people. So after that I travelled a lot around Europe and my trips in general became more diverse. Due to the ability to stay with friends I met in Berlin, the whole world started to look so close and reachable. So one of the typical European qualities which I discovered and have no doubt about is of course hospitality.

So for me Europe is still a place to discover, free and gorgeous. People in Europe are very free in terms of education, travel and choosing ways of life. The only thing you need is to be open and ready for the new beginnings which being generous offers to us.

WHERE CIVILISATION COMES FROM

My story is the story of Korean girl who was born in Uzbekistan, studied in Russia and currently lives in Germany.

“Europe is for your future,” my parents once said, when I was seven years old. I was about to attend the German grammar school in Tashkent in Uzbekistan, the city where I was born. This was the only school there that taught German as a foreign language. Mostly, when people in my country talk about Europe, they imagine Germany. It was the same for me. I started to get used to the language and culture of Germany. After finishing nine years in state schools, I decided to move to Saint Petersburg.

When I was eight years old, I had been living without my parents in this northern capital of Russia with my uncle’s wife. That time my parents did not have the possibility to stay in Uzbekistan with me because of their many business trips to Korea, and so they sent me to Saint Petersburg. My uncle’s wife told me that Russia, especially Saint Petersburg, is already Europe, but then I could not agree, because Russia was still out of my perception of Europe. Europe is something different, where nobody can speak Russian, I thought. I was eight years old.

My first experience of going abroad was a three-week exchange trip to Dresden, in my tenth year in a Russian school. The trip was really exciting for me, I was preparing for that the whole semester and could not believe that finally my dream would come true. I was going to Europe, to the heart of European Union. To Germany. To the country where I had wished to be since I had been seven years old.

Firstly, I would like to say that it was not that easy to get a visa. I was sixteen and needed to deal with a lot of bureaucracy. I was not able to leave Russia and Uzbekistan without special permission from my parents and a government permit. Actually, today I still cannot leave my country without government permission, which makes your life a bit complicated. But anyway I dealt with it and flew to Germany.

When I arrived at Schönefeld airport in Berlin, I took a deep breath. I wanted to really feel the air of the new country. Then we drove to Dresden by bus with the whole group of pupils and it seemed like the longest trip in

the world. I was waiting for several hours to see where I would be staying and studying.

I lived with a German family. They were very kind and open-hearted. Actually, I was expecting something like that. That the family in Germany would be like my own family. We were communicating a lot via the Internet before I came to them and they were also excited about me. I was the first foreign child they hosted. I had heard a lot of stereotypes about Germans as well, that they are unemotional, callous, punctual and strict. I want to disagree with these stereotypes, everything depends on individuals. Some of them may be unemotional and some may be the exact opposite. Surely, there is some truth about mentality and culture, but never judge people before communicating with them.

What I really remember from this short time in Dresden is that people smiled. People smiled at others even when they didn't know them at all. Perfect strangers were smiling at me while I was walking through the city. Possibly it was because my face showed how happy I was at this time and people simply thought that I was crazy. I did not pay any attention to myself, I was just enjoying everything. Later I could not live in Russia or in Uzbekistan without comparing everything to Dresden. Earlier, when I had moved to Saint Petersburg from Tashkent, the capital of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the whole time I was comparing these two countries, and after living in Germany I started to compare even more. I compared the infrastructure, the people, the environment. Everything was completely different. I started to dream about Europe more and more. I decided that my future education had to connect with Europe somehow. I didn't matter where exactly, but I wanted to get more from European countries. The thing is, despite that fact that all European countries are somehow different, they have a common structure and system, which I find an attractive advantage.

My next experience was during my bachelor's degree in Russia. I decided to do an exchange semester in Germany, in Wildau, where the University of Applied Sciences Wildau is located. And again I was faced with a lot of difficulties. I could not speak English. I thought that the German skills I had would be sufficient, but no. There were a lot of international students who could not speak German at all and sometimes we had to communicate somehow. I began trying to talk, and I guess it was funny to listen to me, but at least I tried. I started getting to know other cultures and people. What I did not expect from this semester abroad was to find friends, because I

thought the language barriers and cultural differences would be too great. But it became really interesting and exciting to talk with foreign friends and listen to their advice or stories from their perspectives. Absurdly, people from the whole of Europe and from beyond all found each other in this one small German city. They were Turkish, Brazilian, Italian, Russian, Belgian, Dutch and Spanish people all connected by one university. It was one of the best experiences I ever had. And it might be a reason why I am here again but now doing my master's degree. Luckily, my university is situated so close to Berlin, that students think that we study and live in Berlin. So to get to the heart of Germany from our small city is not that hard and we take this opportunity and visit Berlin really often.

Usually while I am sitting in an S-Bahn train enjoying the views of Berlin I try to imagine how I could describe the capital of Germany in just one word. I still have not been able to find a suitable one. Berlin is a city of freedom and safety that has influenced me a lot. It has changed my perspective and I can say I have changed my vision of Europe and of Europeans. I do not believe in stereotypes anymore and I am more and more interested in other nations. The next situation where I got to know other cultures was in Russia, strangely enough, when my university welcomed a group of Italians from Milan for a summer school of design. Since I liked to get to know different cultures, my closest friends and I decided to grasp this opportunity and we became tutors for international students. I had fourteen students to look after. We spent almost all our free time together, talking and simply having fun. We only had one month together but we became so close to each other and now I could not imagine my life without them although we are living in two different countries you need visas to get to. I could not imagine that people with another mother tongue can understand me so well. And it is not only because of language borders, it is also about other mentalities, culture, and the environment which influences our personality during our whole life.

Since I have been living in Germany I feel I can forget about borders for a while, which I really appreciate. You see, I am from one of the most closed countries in the world, where you cannot leave the country without a special permission from the government, then the whole procedure is watched by a military department and afterwards your family is under surveillance. The government tries to get to know the reasons why want to leave Uzbekistan, how long you plan to be in other countries, and a lot more besides.

And when I personally think about Europe, I cannot say something short. Maybe every person should visit to get those emotions and feelings which I am still getting. It is only when we compare things, countries, conditions, people, situations or our feelings that we can appreciate them. So I would urge you to consider what Europe actually gives you.

A FINNISH BEACON

Six years ago I was studying in Finland in summer language school. It was my first education experience in Europe.

When I was eight years old I visited Finland for the first time. I was in the capital of Finland – Helsinki. At first sight I did not like Finland. People seemed very sad and closed up. My impression of the city was the same: a grey city, identical houses. I couldn't imagine that one day I would study in this country for three months.

One year later, I visited Finland again. This time it was the small town of Lappeenranta on the border with Russia. I went there for the weekend with my family and it seemed to me that I was in a ghost town. Except for the sellers in the shops I did not see a single person. It looked like this city was not alive. It was a city only for tourists, who came to buy Finnish fish, caviar and other things. I was extremely surprised. I certainly understand today that it is impossible to compare the very big city of Saint Petersburg, where I was born, with the small town of Lappeenranta. But when I was nine years old, I could not understand why one city could be so alive, and the other so dead. After my second time in Finland I was sure that I would never return to this country.

Five years later, I got an offer to study in an international camp in Finland. Considering my previous experience, I didn't want to go there, but my parents were sure that it was a perfect opportunity for me to improve my foreign language skills and to live in Europe independently for three months. Thanks to my parents I went to this camp. On the first day I met a lot of foreign students and saw another side of Finland. Among the students there were Finnish students too. They were very cheerful, positive guys. In addition, I met my professors. I had three professors from Finland. They taught us English language.

One professor, whose name was Mr. Snelmann, taught English grammar. These lectures were really useful for me. Mr. Virtanen gave us an opportunity to communicate with native speakers. He invited students from the United Kingdom and we talked with them. It was so difficult for me because at that time my English was really bad but I tried to do my best. The third professor, Mr. Topelyus, helped us to get involved in the culture of Finland. We had a

lot of excursions to museums, exhibitions and theatres. The first days of my stay in Finland were really perfect. I was really impressed by all the people and the teachers.

The three months passed by in this way. Every day I was in the perfect mood, talked with a lot of people. I still keep in touch with some of them. We had a lot of amazing excursions with Mr. Topelyus, and there was one that I still remember well. It was an excursion to Bengtskär beacon – the highest lighthouse in Finland. It was built by order of the Russian emperor and it played an important role during the Second World War. Bengtskär is located on a small rocky island with no vegetation. This place seemed to me like a magic place. There I felt like I was cut off from the rest of the world. You can only get there only by ferry. When I was there I fundamentally changed my opinion of Europe. I saw that Europe can be beautiful and I understood that in Europe I could feel my own self quietly and free. There were students from France, Germany and Norway. I communicated with them a little bit and I noticed that Europeans can be very friendly, open-minded and really nice. Until that moment I didn't think much about Europeans. One French girl talked to me for an hour and she told me a lot about culture, traditions and people. At the end of our discussion she invited me to her home town, Marseille. I couldn't believe my ears. In Russia I had talked with a lot of people and nobody told me to come over, even though we lived in the same city. During this excursion I really fell in love with Europe and Europeans. I am very grateful to my parents – they decided to send me to this international camp in Finland. It was really my Europe and it was the beginning of my love affair with Europe.

Today I'm studying in Germany. I had no doubts that I would come back to Europe after my education in Finland. Now I have already visited a lot of European countries such as Italy, France, Germany, Estonia, Sweden, Switzerland. My dream was to study in Europe. I found a suitable study programme in Portugal, and I told the international office at my university in Saint Petersburg that next semester I would study in Portugal, and I shared this perfect news with all my friends. I forgot one important thing, I forgot to talk with my father . . .

You have already understood that my father didn't like my idea. My father said to me: "You will study in Germany or you will stay in Russia." I cried for nearly two days and then I made the decision that I would go to Germany. Now I understand that I was so stupid, that my father wanted the best for

me and therefore he preferred Germany to Portugal. The level of education in Germany is very high. I see it. I feel it. I really like Russia, especially Saint Petersburg, but I studied there for five years at university and generally all my classes were based only on theory. Sometimes we had some case studies, but they were very seldom. Now, I'm writing a story for a book . . . Unbelievable . . . Just feel the difference!

Some words about my future goals. I'd like to return to Europe again after I finish my studies. I don't know exactly in which country. Europe is a place where you can meet a lot of friends of different nationalities and different cultures. You can travel throughout Europe without different visas. If you travel from Russia to Europe, you need to receive a Schengen visa and it's not for free. In Germany, I can buy a ticket to Belgium for twenty Euro and tomorrow I will be there. I was shocked when I realised that I could travel without difficulties and for a small sum of money. This is an incredible advantage for a person who has lived her whole life in Russia and can't travel so easily.

Traveling is just one reason. I really like the level of life in Germany, the relation of the state to the people, the good salaries. If I stay in Russia I will find work very easily, I already have a flat and all conveniences. If I stay in Germany, I will have nothing here. I haven't got a flat or a job and I do not know business German. I can't ask my father to help me with my job. I will be alone here. It will be a challenge for me. But once, thanks to my father, I tried and I want to try once again.

FROM CAMEROON TO EUROPE

When I was a youngster growing up in Cameroon, little did I dream of having the opportunity to talk about my life in a distant place far away from home. Much less of having the opportunity to talk about my experiences of and my struggle to excel in life. Getting older gives you the possibility to reflect and tell a story about your life. But my story would be so different if I hadn't been fortunate enough to be raised as I was, to have travelled to other countries, met different people and experienced different cultures. Now I am in my mid-thirties, and I can hardly call myself a historian because I know there is still much to experience in Europe, the place I now call home. I want to tell you my story of my hopes and achievements. The story is not meant to go from sorrowful moments to a joyful ending. But it is a story that tells how fortunate and grateful I am to have had the opportunity to freely shape and decide on my future, and make choices about my life. This was not something that was clearly meant for me when I was growing up.

I was born and raised in Cameroon and up to my late teens I received a rigorous school education. I didn't attend a missionary school, the kind of school that frequently had European guest teachers and lecturers, but strict discipline was part of the daily routine of public schools too. Be on time, stay within bounds on campus and leave school at the designated time at the end of the day. I came to think that discipline in education and a strict upbringing at home were normal. Most of the teachers were sure that this was the best way to educate young people. It wasn't unusual or strange to be smacked for tardiness in school, nor was it abnormal for your parents to take part in the school disciplinary council, or for you to be punished for failing your exams. I remember my parents discussing their personal experiences during their own schooling, which I found were no different from mine. If I complained, there were short answers with no compassion: "We didn't experience anything better, even though we went to European missionary schools," my father would usually say. This approach trickled down through time and change wasn't about to come. Apart from studying economics, biology, chemistry, physics, mathematics and European history, I guess I was also experiencing first-hand mentoring on how Europeans were seen to be educated. I finally graduated with high-school A-level Certificates of Education. This international accreditation initiated by the British education

system in Cameroon gave me the chance to further my education locally and internationally as well. I consider myself lucky to have had some European education that made me ready for the world.

At the age of twenty-one, I came to Germany to further my education. Well, fourteen years later I am still doing just that. Now, you might wonder how a four-year study plan became such a stretch. Germany was not just any far-away location which I had no previous knowledge about. Choosing to study in Germany gave me the chance of becoming more acquainted with a culture I had studied in my history classes in school. It was understanding a culture that had influenced Cameroon as the first colonial power. A colonial power that historically had shaped and designed treaties with the locals (tribal chiefs) to create a land called Cameroon today. It was about learning to speak a language that my great-grandparents and grandparents partially spoke. My quest for more understanding and knowledge of Europe, and more specifically Germany, could not be toppled by any other fancy international programs such as some of my peers had chosen for their own educational odysseys.

It would be wrong if I should claim that all my expectations were quickly met. Once in Germany (Berlin), I came to understand how difficult integrating into a new culture and learning a new language could be. After a semester or two, I realised the complexity of understanding a diverse culture which had been shaped through its own history. Through countless regional conflicts up to the foundation of the German Empire in the nineteenth century. The First and the Second World Wars which reshaped Europe's geography. This piece of land smaller than Cameroon all of a sudden became very diverse with its Saxons, Franks, Bavarians, and others. The differences were also heard in the various dialects spoken. But there was a sense of a single community, as I could tell from watching television programmes or participating in discussions about Germany or Europe in general. It became obvious that human rights, democracy and the rule of law were a common ground for all individuals.

I had to learn both the culture and language by interacting. I became acquainted with some German friends and families. I lacked knowledge about the history of Germany and of Europe, and I enjoyed their attempts to explain some historical sites around Berlin. The more places I became acquainted with, the more I admired Berlin. I admired the historical buildings such as the Reichstag glass dome and the Berlin Cathedral. I just loved these historical buildings, and there less explanation was required. I could imagine

the hard work, time and dedication that went into these buildings. Most of the time I could only respond by shaking my head, since I barely understood what people were trying to say. But somehow, I could grasp their pride and anxiety. It was their history, their values and definitely their *Stolz*, their pride, as some old Germans will say, lamenting on their difficult past. I was studying hard at this time and finding it challenging, but I did use my breaks to escape from libraries, student cafés and isolation in the dormitory to explore this European city.

A short trip to Paris gave me another experience of Europe. This was different. I spoke the language perfectly, was able to talk about Louis XIV, elaborate on Napoleon from cradle to his exile, and lecture on the Bastille and the French Revolution. My interests were not different from what I expected from Germany. What is the culture made of? What is the daily life of a French person like? What are their values? These questions occupied my thoughts during the nine-hour drive from Berlin. Once there, I came to realise there were differences. Apart from language, I knew the people might be different. I found people in Paris more outspoken and taking life at a slower pace as compared to the rather reserved and strictly time-orientated Germans. I presume their past had shaped them too. I also knew that finding some similarities wouldn't be difficult. Once again, architecture caught my interest. A visit to the Notre Dame made me consider the architectural similarities in Berlin. Even though this time my tour guide wasn't a friend, he performed his duty with great authenticity and passion. He was explaining the past as if the future of that country solely depended on Centre Pompidou (national museum of modern art), Sacre-Coeur (dedicated to the sacred heart of Jesus), Arc de Triomphe (commemorating the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars) or the Palais du Louvre (museum and palace of Phillip II). My guide lectured about the great contribution of those places to the France and the Europe of today. I came to realise that the similarities I was in search of did not concern the Franks as a Germanic people in France, nor was it all about European architectural styles in Europe's history. It was the preservation of values. Just like in Germany, the French had designed their values on secularity, rationality and democracy. And this was what I was searching for. Europe was becoming much more interesting than I ever expected. Slowly but surely, I was making myself comfortable. It felt like home.

Making Germany a home away from home wasn't my aim when I departed Cameroon in 2002. But that is what was happening to me. Those days of constant battle with a notion and various reasons to leave were all

toppled when I met my wife. I was no longer a tourist with a guide, and I later came to understand that I needed a personal guide. My wife's patience and perseverance helped me to deal with culture shocks, which with time softened. My wife explained this complex society, and she showed me that Germany was and is more than just the former colonial power I had learned about in school. Germany for her was about fascism, communism and finally national reunification. And with that, she pointed out how differently people have reacted to and learned from the past. Friends in Cameroon had questioned if all Germans were racist. I had often thought about this when I received rejections from administrations or some university personnel. For a while, this could have been a plausible answer. But it would have contradicted my love life. If every German were somehow racist, then I guess my wife and her family must be immigrants and foreigners. But they are not. Their roots go back to Prussia. They are German through and through.

I had no doubts about getting married in a distance place to someone whom I dearly love. I could tell I was complete. I love Berlin and I found love in that city. We travelled a lot around Europe. The Europe which the literature of the past I had read made look like a lot of different peoples in different countries and cities – Lisbon, London, Brussels or Amsterdam. But this was wrong. The Europe which I experienced from our spontaneous travels was based on cosmopolitan cities and a lifestyle with a truly international flavour. There was hardly a destination without its own unique and distinct personality. My wife made some comparisons with distance places like Baltimore, New York or Los Angeles, which we also visited. On a journey to Paris, she commented on how fast we reached our destination, as compared to a flight from Baltimore to Los Angeles two years ago. I guess she was addressing the interconnectivity of Europe, where distance is less of a problem. I guess just like some friends in the past and the tourist guide who showed me around Paris, she was in a sense expressing her gratitude, anxiety and enthusiasm at being a European. Without doubt I have come to feel the same today. I am a European.

I am in no doubt that I will never lose my love for Berlin, Germany and Europe in general. I might never fully understand this continent, but I do know for certain that stereotypes about Europe are in vain. There is an ever-changing atmosphere. Daily surprises and challenges make my ongoing experience in Germany and Europe what they are.

MY UNITED EUROPE

Do you know that feeling when you are looking at old photographs and asking yourself: “How could I have looked like that? How could I have worn that? How could I have had that haircut?” Have you ever experienced this same feeling but concerning significant changes inside of yourself? I have. My name is Ekaterina Korneichuk. I am from Saint Petersburg, Russia, and my story is about how Europe changed my life.

My Old Europe

I have been living in Berlin for eight months. If five years ago someone had told me that I would be living in Germany I would never have believed them. Since I was eight years old after each summer holidays I used to listen to the stories of my friends about journeys with their families in different countries, while I was spending every summer in Moldova where my family has a small house. Probably at that time we could not afford to go abroad for a vacation. Here you might ask me: “But Moldova is abroad, isn’t it?” Well, in fact it is. But I didn’t feel like I was abroad because it was my second home. My family is not used to travelling, and it always seemed to be something unachievable. I accepted that and was content with the stories and pictures of foreign countries which my friends told and showed me.

In summer 2010 my parents got me a ticket to the most famous childrens camp in Crimea, at Artek. It was the first time in my life that I saw the sea and also the first time I went abroad and to a place where I knew no one. After the sea, the biggest impression on me was made by the people I met there. Almost all the staff members were Ukrainian and all of them were unbelievably kind and friendly. They started to talk to me as soon as I arrived. Half of the children in my group were also Ukrainian but they spoke Russian and we never had any misunderstandings or problems. There was no division among nationalities and I even remember that we were always saying that Ukrainian people are our brothers and sisters. The next year we returned and afterwards I had even more Ukrainian friends and wonderful memories of Ukraine.

In 2012 I received an opportunity to go to Bulgaria for ten days with my best friend. It was my first trip to Europe. In 2013 we went there again, but I can hardly call that travelling because we all we saw was the sea, the beach

and our hotel. These trips were not enough for me. The second one was like a wake-up call telling me I need to see much more. So during my third year as a bachelor's student in Saint Petersburg I decided to find a job so I could save some money to travel. I met a lot of people the same age as me, many of them drowning in daily routines: "work – home – party." No studies, no interests, no aims. I worked for a year and at the same time I was studying at the university and also attending dancing workshops three times a week. My schedule was so busy I could barely find time to sleep. Life was so interesting.

During that year I visited seven European countries. The first was Italy. Like in Bulgaria I spent time in hotels and with other tourists. I couldn't really see much of Europe, but I do consider my first trip to Italy as my first real acquaintance with Europe. Walking the streets in Rome I definitely could feel a huge difference between Italy and Russia, but at the time I didn't think deeply about that. I could not answer the question: "What exactly was different?" The reason for that was my way of thinking at that time. When you are torn between university, work and a dancing team all of that is so much that it builds borders in your mind. You are always in a rush and you don't have time to think about anything else. Imagine that you are sitting in a box with a tiny hole. You are looking through it and you think that you see the whole world, but what about everything that is on the left, on the right, behind and above? I was just concentrating on my everyday life without thinking a lot about the entire world.

With each new country I went to, I became more and more convinced that there was something about Europe that was attracting me. Each time I came back home I missed Europe and couldn't wait for a new journey. I also couldn't believe my eyes when I met Russian people who had never been abroad and actually didn't really want to travel. I could not believe that just a couple of years ago I was the same as them.

My Unhappy Russia

To be honest, "me before Europe" was not interested in politics and was not aware of what's going on in the world. However, in 2014, at the same time as I was travelling, something significant happened in Russia. The territory of Crimea was annexed by Russia. People around me were talking about that all the time, even the teachers at the university. This topic immediately touched me, first of all because I knew that the place I used to love so much in my childhood would never be the same. That place used to have Ukrainian culture and traditions and what would happen now? I did not want to believe

that such a close relationship between our peoples was ruined and I felt very frustrated watching the splashes of negativity and anger towards Ukrainian people.

My family name is Ukrainian and my father is half-Ukrainian. We have a lot of relatives in Ukraine. This was our problem too, and we could look at it from both sides. In order to understand what exactly happened between Russia and Ukraine and why, I decided to ask my father to explain me the situation. Of course, such a complex issue can't become clear after one conversation so I kept talking to my dad about that more and more and very soon I found out that his view differed completely from almost everything I heard from my teachers or friends. My father is a professor of economics and he is interested in politics, however, he didn't want to discuss that with me until I started to express my own interest. I remember very well that during our conversations about the events in Ukraine my dad often referred to the European media, saying that they are independent and tell the truth.

The vast majority of Russian people was influenced by the Russian media and therefore expressed joy and approval of the annexation of Crimea. This was unacceptable for my family. That's how I became aware of "propaganda" and consequently I started to feel mistrust towards the government and its actions. I felt disappointed each time I found out that some of my friends were supporting the government and were convinced that "Crimea is ours," which meant for me that we were on opposite sides.

The political situation was becoming worse and worse. The more I knew the more I felt a desire to move abroad. Some people who dared to show a disapproval of the government lost their jobs. The leader of the Russian opposition was shot near the Kremlin in February 2015 and my dad kept saying that something like that wouldn't happen in Europe. Then I finally started to realise what the significant difference was between Russia and the European countries I had visited. It was freedom, freedom in every sphere of life: from politics to private life. Homosexual couples are not afraid of holding each other's hands or hugging each other in public transport, it's also possible to see a woman of forty or fifty with purple hair, and, what is more important, people are capable of criticising the government and they don't need to worry about the consequences. No one will judge them because this freedom is one of the most important European values. Maybe the absence of borders in Europe is the reason why these people have fewer borders in their minds than people from elsewhere?

At the beginning of my last year in my bachelor's studies I was thinking myself a lot about the future. I kept thinking: "According to my values, my future may not be in Russia, and is Europe my place to be?" My family was more very much in favour of my wish to leave and we decided that I needed to find a master's programme in Europe. I wanted to go to Germany for several reasons. I was studying German language at school and the teacher made me like this country although I had never been there before. My best friend did an Erasmus exchange in Germany and that's how I got to know that country even better. Another reason was that Germany is famous for a high quality of education and that education there is free. To cut a long story short, after a whole year of hopes and anticipation I was accepted by the Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau, near Berlin. My dream came true and I moved to Berlin.

My New Europe

What impressed me? If I explain it precisely, I am afraid my story will last almost forever, so let me focus on just a few points. There was something that touched me more than anything else. I noticed that wherever I go – to a café, to a restaurant, to a shopping centre, or even to such events as the Oktoberfest – I could see old people everywhere and that was simply amazing for me. Let me tell you why. I was happy for those people and at the same time felt sorry for old people in Russia, because if you go to the kind of places I just mentioned in Russia you would probably never or almost never see retired people there. Our grandmothers and grandfathers spend their free time on the benches near their houses or in the best case in parks. Why? The average pension in Russia in 2015 was approximately € 167 per month, whereas in Germany it was around € 1,200 in 2012. The prices in the supermarkets are almost the same in the two countries today, so as you can say that old people in Russia simply cannot afford to go to a café or to shopping centres. Their main activity is comparing the prices in different supermarkets in order to save some money. Sad indeed. Of course, in the best case those people can rely on children who are capable of providing financial support, but, unfortunately, it is a rare case. And what if the person doesn't have children? It sounds insane for you to live on € 167 per month, doesn't it? However, my grandparents are doing that and I feel very sorry about that. In my childhood I didn't pay attention to that, I didn't find it abnormal. It was only when I came to Europe and saw happy old people enjoying their lives with everyone else that I realised how far we are from Europe and how differently such values as freedom and humanity are treated. Why doesn't

it work in Russia like it does in Germany? Why is the government of such a wealthy country as Russia filling their pockets and spending a fortune on military purposes instead of taking care of ordinary people? Well, all those thoughts made me feel even more disappointed about my country.

You can travel a lot, but moving to live abroad is a completely different experience, and you can never know what to expect. Combining moving abroad with education was my best decision, as that was the way I discovered a new world. My studies at a German university became the main source of my internal changes. During the first weeks I was shocked because the process of education had nothing in common with my studies in my bachelor's in Russia. The teachers asked us to discuss issues, to reflect, and even to find answers to questions that European politicians today are hardly dealing with. Besides, we talk openly about governments without fear of being judged. The teachers are always telling us that we need to be critical, to find the reasons behind or links between certain events, to think of different messages. Do you think we are being taught to do that in Russia? Well, at least for my bachelor's the answer is a big NO. And none of my Russian friends have heard of that either. Here in Germany we always talk about news, about important events which are happening in the world. I was impressed by the level of awareness among the students. My way of thinking was shaped by this new way of education and my strong desire to know and to understand as many things about today's world as it possible. When I came to Germany I had no European background and I wished to change that.

Since I have been living in Berlin, I communicate with my parents, especially with my dad, even more than I used to do before. As soon as I got out of my little box and started to be interested in politics and everything that's going on in the world, we had many topics to discuss and my dad is my main teacher who is always helping me to understand things I was not aware of before. He is extremely happy to see how I am becoming more and more open-minded and how I am growing in a new environment full of intellectuals. He is happy that I am finding new values here.

Living in Berlin made me understand the value of living in a democratic society. I am happy to live in Europe, here I enjoy the freedom. However, sometimes I miss my city because despite everything I love it, and it is sad to realise that I don't want to live there anymore. I simply can't, because of the lack of freedom, because of other values, and the government's actions and people's reactions, most of whom don't care or don't understand what's

going on in their country. That's how your home stops being your home, but the most important thing for me which makes the final result positive is my priceless European experience which has given me an opportunity to open my eyes and to see the world, helped me to compare Russia and Europe and realise what is unacceptable regarding my country and how actually the things should work regarding Europe. The way I see the world has changed completely.

I know that the majority of my relatives living in Ukraine and Moldova don't have a chance to move to Europe and to enjoy the same life I do now. I know that they are also not happy about the current situations in their countries and they see Europe as a place where people are happier. That's why I hope that in the future those countries and one day, probably, even Russia will experience significant changes and become as democratic and free as Europe today. I want my relatives and all other citizens to feel those changes and to become happy in their own countries. I dream that my old Europe, my new Europe and even my unhappy Russia one day will together become my united Europe under the same values. If it happens, then I will become very proud of my country.

Meanwhile, everything is changing inside my head and consequently my identity can't remain the same. Who am I now? Russian? Not only. Russian with Ukrainian and Moldavian roots? That is also already not enough to describe me. European? Where should I hide my roots then? To define myself today I will borrow a quote from Diogenes and tell you: "I am a citizen of the world," the democratic world.

LEAVING HUNGARY

On 1 May 2004 Hungary joined the European Union. At this time I was fourteen years old, so I remember how excited everyone was. I was a member of the school choir and, in honour of the EU accession, we learnt the European anthem (both in Hungarian and in German). It was a great pleasure that our choir was chosen with some others from different parts of the country to go to the capital city to Heroes Square to sing the anthem to the celebrating Hungarian citizens. We got folders in red, white or green (depending on where we stood on the stage) to give the impression of the Hungarian flag. Thousands of people assembled together to be a part of this historic event, which was an impressive community experience. It was an amazing day for all of us.

I clearly remember that we discussed EU enlargement with our history teacher almost every week. He said several times that it was a huge opportunity for Hungary because of the free flow of labour, goods, services and capital. What was more important for us – he stressed it many times – was that we could easily continue our studies abroad, however hard that was for us to imagine at the time.

Many Hungarians believed that after the regime change in 1990 this was the next right step in Hungary's history. Without borders and passport control it would be much easier to move between the member countries, to study or apply for a job abroad or settle down somewhere else. The EU would provide us with many tenders, giving us the opportunity to gain financial support in all fields from agriculture and industry to education, health and social services.

However, nowadays most of the Hungarians are disappointed in the EU promises. On the one hand, due to the open borders, many more illegal things are coming into our country, not to mention human trafficking. Secondly, the changes in finance and markets have led to the bankruptcy of many small agricultural businesses. Our agriculture has been dramatically reduced since EU accession. Thirdly, many foreign companies are coming to Hungary just because of tax relief. Owing to the open borders, they can easily repatriate their capital and as soon as the tax exemption expires they leave our country. Furthermore, it is quite difficult to gain project funding,

as many people in Hungary have no idea how to write a project application or if they do, they don't have the necessary funds. There is a chance to ask professionals to write it, but in return you have to give them a significant part of the money gained.

In spite of these facts, I still believe that EU accession was a great idea, as this integration provides us a lot of opportunities, protection and social security. If our government is not able to take advantage of these possibilities, it is not the EU's fault. Without the "free movement of people" maybe I would not be where I am today.

One year ago I would not have believed that I could live in Germany. My brother moved here four years ago because of his studies. He suggested to me that I should do a master's programme in Germany as it is a great opportunity to get to know a new culture, new people and to experience a totally different education system, not to mention to improve my English and to learn the German language. He and my parents encouraged and supported me a lot to come and study here. However, I will always remember my grandfather's story. When he was sixteen years old – in 1945 – German soldiers took him to Germany – to Kiel – and put him in prison for no reason, and only some years later let him go. Owing to the bad conditions in the prison he got pneumonia, which he has suffered from all his life. Because of this, and what they had gone through during the Second World War, my grandparents are not so happy with the idea that my brother and I are living in Germany. I completely understand them, but our generation is so different and people have changed a lot since then, which they don't really understand. At the beginning, I was afraid of coming here, because it is said that Germans are rigid, unfriendly and keep their distance. Now I have to admit that since I have been here my perspective has changed a lot. In every situation when I needed help, people were unbelievably kind and helpful to me, so all my prejudices have disappeared.

I have lived in Germany for nine months, and this has been enough to see how much Hungary is lagging behind. At home I was influenced by our media, I could see only one side of the coin. But when I started to study here and got to know a lot of international people and we were talking, it helped me to understand the different views of different countries or cultures. It is amazing how the world has opened up to me and how much my opinions have changed since. Now I feel more European than ever!

Let me take the refugee crisis as an example. In Hungary all you can feel is anger and hate. Most people are uninformed, all they can hear is one political point of view, and not the whole truth. I have talked to a lot of people here, which helped me to understand the different aspects. I am not influenced only by our media anymore.

At home I thought we were really Europeans because we are members of the EU. I thought how modern and developed Hungary is, as I could see the EU flag everywhere and the media are saying all the time that Hungary is doing better than earlier. But now, as I can see how things are going in Germany, I can see the huge differences. I have realised how far Hungary is from EU standards. Our prices are following the developed EU countries' prices, but the salaries are much lower. The standard of living is lagging behind the EU average. There is a chance that when my generation retire we will not have pensions. Our government says that we should save now for our old age because the government cannot guarantee that we will have pensions. This cannot happen in Germany because the government takes care of citizens. In Hungary the government can do whatever it wants, often ignoring EU rules, which sooner or later might lead to tougher restrictions or even to exclusion from the European Union. Hungary must change its policy, otherwise the future consequences will be unpredictable.

In spite of these facts my Hungarian identity is still so strong. I like Hungary, it's a beautiful country with nice people, I just don't want to live or work there anymore. I have experienced another way of living and met enlightened and modern-minded people with completely different attitudes and perceptions.

THIS EUROPEAN FEELING

I was born in France, my parents are Italian and I'm currently studying in Germany. My name is Giovanni and this is my story.

I've always lived in France, I travelled several times through Europe and I visited most of the countries around my home country (the UK, Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium). And as I'm Italian – it's my double nationality with French – I spend at least one month per year somewhere in Italy. Being Italian and French at the same time is quite a privilege, two different countries with two different histories, but both are in Europe and they evolved together pretty much in the same way – if we refer to the European construct. In my opinion, it's amazing because I can see things from different angles. Since I was a kid, I had this "European feeling" which was growing inside of me. I went to French school but I was spending my holidays in Italy, so I could learn Italian by myself, speaking it with my family was also a good exercise. I started to learn English when I was very young and Spanish in high school. I started to learn German a few months ago, and thanks to some friends, Russian, "just for fun," let's say. Languages have always been important to me as a tool of communication but also to discover and to learn new things.

My first journey outside Europe was unbelievable. I visited the United States two times: once I went to the west coast, a one-month trip with my family, and the second time to the east coast, for less than two weeks. Those trips were the farthest ones outside Europe I did. It was the only time when I was able to see something different than Europe, in terms of culture (since I live in Western Europe and I've never been to Eastern Europe, where the culture is different, I guess), and of lifestyle, but also in terms of infrastructure (buildings, streets, public transport, etc.). Of course the US is totally different to Europe, not only in the way people are thinking and behaving but also how they perceive the world and especially Europe itself. For them everything in Europe is small because in the US everything is big: the cars, the streets and I could also see the impact of fast food on some people. Scale and distance are something that we Europeans do not think about much. Maybe travelling a hundred kilometres to go somewhere by car is considered a long way in Europe, but for Americans it's seen as close by, since the big cities are further away from each other. Here in Europe we don't have this problem, if we want to travel by car or by plane, many big cities can be reached in less than three

hours. The main European low-cost airlines like Ryanair and EasyJet are proof of this – their range of destinations is large and the average flight time is just ninety minutes.

On the other hand, I could feel a European atmosphere in big cities such as New York or San Francisco. This was noticeable because there are different districts with different people, and sometimes a lot of Europeans, and also because we Europeans are trying to adopt the “American way of life” (in movies, with fast food, etc.), while the Americans are trying to adopt a “European way of living,” but with a US touch. Take typical European shops or famous districts like “little Italy” – when you order an espresso in the US, you receive a huge cup instead of the very small original Italian one. The last thing I want to say about this “outside” experience is that we can’t realise how places and countries in Europe are similar to each other before going somewhere totally different. Travelling within the EU may give us the impression that countries are different (and of course they are), but you will immediately notice that in comparison with the USA European countries are not so different to make them completely different cultures, by that I mean non-European cultures. In fact, similarities among European countries are much more present than we can imagine. I will always remember those trips as my first discovering of the outside world, which already happened six years ago.

Let’s focus on Europe and me. I live in Lille, in the north of France, two hours from Paris by car, where I study European Management (currently in my first year of a master’s). I went to elementary school, to high school and I did my bachelor’s there, so I have stayed in that city almost all my life. Before university, I didn’t have the opportunity to meet people from “outside Europe.” Since then, I have had the pleasure to get closer and to meet amazing people from different parts of the globe, some of them are my classmates, and some others are my close friends. For example, it was a very interesting experience to meet people from China or from the Middle East. You can share a lot and learn a lot from them, about traditions, local people and life in those countries. One of my friends who is from The United Arab Emirates told me everything about his city, Dubai. He could see the transition of this city from a desert to one of the wealthiest cities in the world. Sharing this kind of experience with someone from a specific country is priceless. If you don’t travel a lot, people you meet will make you travel in your mind. That’s how I feel every time I’m speaking with people from abroad. My studies enable me to meet people from around the world and it’s important

for me to understand them because I want to learn something about their countries and also to bring my knowledge into the conversation. Indeed, European Management is mainly Europe, but today Europe also means the world due to the business relationships between companies and also from a political point of view.

Last January, I had another great opportunity to extend my knowledge about the European Union and also to meet people “from the outside.” I went to Brussels for several days with my university, in order to participate to the 2016 EU SUNY Model. It’s a simulation of the decision-making processes within European institutions where students have a targeted role they have to represent. It is organised by the State University of New York every year, and my university is the first French one to take part in this simulation. The three days I spent there were amazing, from the opening ceremony to the final day. I learned a lot, and thanks to American students, I saw a different approach to Europe and to current issues. It’s all about cultural differences, and this means different approaches to a problem (and in that case, we were dealing with European issues such as the Greece crisis or the recent immigration). The purpose of this simulation was to learn more about the institutions and Europe, but what I enjoyed the most was working with people from an American university. In fact, there were not only Americans but students from all around the world, because some of them were in exchange with the American university and that’s why they were able to be there those three days. It was one of my best experiences ever in meeting new people, and I’m really satisfied when I see that in my Facebook friends I have many more “outsiders” than people from my own country.

I guess the biggest experience of my life yet is what I’m living right now. In European universities, students can apply to the Erasmus programme. There may be a partnership with their home university and a foreign one. I was thinking about that since my bachelor’s, but for me it was not that easy to leave because I was not well informed about what exactly the Erasmus programme was and the possibilities and opportunities offered to me. It seems to me that at least two students out of five go abroad during their studies. Unfortunately, the last year of my bachelor’s was approaching and I still didn’t have a clear idea of what I wanted to do or where should I go. I knew that I had to do something, firstly because studying abroad is an opportunity that happens once in a lifetime, and secondly because it is a great experience to live in a different country when you are a student. The other problem which was bothering me focused on the difficulty of studying

abroad in the master's programme since you only have two years and within those two years you have at least six months of internship and you have to write a thesis. Those were the issues I was facing at that time.

Everything changed in September 2015. It was the first day of studies and there was an introduction to the new semester, the teachers and the courses. We were told that we had the opportunity to apply for the summer semester mobility in Germany. Well, I didn't think twice. I jumped on board. It was worth waiting to see if I would be selected, because if I was I would receive a double degree from both the German and French universities. As you are reading these lines right now, you've already understood that I was chosen to go there. My German experience has been much more than I could ever have expected and until now, I'm asking myself almost every day how I would have done if I had had to stay in France, that is to say with my routine life. My German university is the University of Applied Sciences Wildau, which is near Berlin. So this is a very good way for me to discover a new capital city. Yes, I've visited several capitals before but it was never for more than three days. When you are planning to go abroad to study, then I would recommend going to the heart of the country you will live in. Berlin is a wonderful city, with so many different people, and foreigners everywhere. The last time I was here was seven years ago with my high school, and I could never imagine that I would live near Berlin one day. But Berlin is not the only thing which has made me think about myself. I'm here mainly for studies and I need to talk about that.

Studying in Wildau is completely different than studying in France. I guess that the way of teaching is the main reason for this. Whereas in France we learn theory, here classes are much more practical and I can see that in almost every course. I was really impressed, in a good way, when I attended my first class in the module called "European Identities" where all the students were gathered in a circle in order to discuss current European topics or issues, and this is really amazing because I've always dreamt about this way of teaching and I had to go somewhere else to see something like this. I'm really happy about that. On the other hand, I think the relationships between teachers and students are different here. In Germany, teachers are really involved with the students and they are offering them great opportunities to achieve the maximum they can, that is to say to support them all the time. This project of writing a book in the framework of course is the best illustration I can give. I don't think you would see something like that in France. Maybe French universities are too serious. Here you can learn and have fun at the same

time and you may get the same or even better results. In fact, when you see students leading the course rather than the teacher, this is how you assimilate information much better.

My German experience is not over yet, but close to the end – unfortunately. I have learned a lot, and I have absolutely no regrets. If one day I have the opportunity to do this again I will jump with my eyes closed. I highly recommend everyone to go abroad to study. Yes, one more thing, this German dream brought me much more than I could ever have expected six months ago, and as I'm writing these final lines, I'm holding the hand of an amazing person, an angel who fell from the Russian skies: my girlfriend – guess what, I think my German experience is just the beginning!

CAPPUCCINO AND LOVE

It was a sunny summer morning in 1988. Gabriela went to her favourite Italian café in Munich. She ordered a cappuccino like she always did, without knowing that this day was going to be a special one. Next to the café was a Yugoslavian restaurant, where she knew the owner. He was waving to her to wish a good morning like he always did. Then, she saw a tall person standing next to him – he had dark hair, blue eyes and Slavic features. This guy had the stature of a soldier and looked very secretive. He was looking back to Gabriela and began to smile in a very friendly way. She became shy, but she wasn't able to keep her eyes away from this stranger.

The atmosphere became quickly more relaxed, when Mileva, a friend of Gabriela's, came by. She shouted out: "Good morning Gabriela, how are you?" and at the same time, she gave this stranger a kiss on his cheek. She obviously knew him. Gabriela was somehow embarrassed and answered, "Good morning Mileva!" Mileva came up to her with the dark man and introduced him: "This is Goran, he has just arrived from Yugoslavia." Goran added in broken German: "Hello, I am Goran and what's your name?"

By 1988 there were several hundred thousand immigrants from the Balkans living in Germany. After the Second World War the German government had requested almost three million guest workers from abroad to rebuild the country. In 1968, the German government negotiated its last guest workers' agreement with Yugoslavia. Five years later, Germany decided to stop all of its requests for foreign guest workers. Within these five years, nearly half a million Yugoslavian workers had arrived. Most of them had integrated very quickly into their new home and left it only to visit relatives and friends or for holidays. All the Yugoslavs Gabriela already knew were in Germany because of this history of immigration and all of them spoke fluent German. But Goran was the first Yugoslav she met who still seemed to be a real Yugoslav.

Goran was twenty-two when he decided to leave his country. He had still not finished university, and to the great shock of his mother he left. He was ready to explore the world. First, he worked as a travel guide in southern Yugoslavia, but then he travelled to Italy. Very soon, he continued with his journey to Western Europe and after a short detour to Paris he reached Germany. He had always been fascinated by German culture, and

by the Germans' determination and their economic power. Goran knew Germany just from books, movies and its tourists who had travelled to the Mediterranean Sea. But when Goran arrived he knew that someday he would live a German life. For him this meant: a nice house, a nice car in the front yard and wearing a suit for work.

However, he still had to understand that it is not that easy to start a new life in a new country. That's why he tried to find some help with the challenges of arrival and moved to Munich, where he had some Yugoslav contacts – people his parents knew. They had very successfully established their own restaurant and served Mediterranean food. He had basic German skills, and very special charm and good looks, so they immediately offered him a job as a waiter. This job helped Goran to improve his German and to make some good money. But it was not to be the last big change in his life . . .

Goran and Gabriela fell in love. This was not the first time in their lives, for both of them. However, it was the first time in their lives that they fell in love with a person from another country. Goran and Gabriela were young, only 25 and 23 years old, but they knew that a relationship between two people from different countries can bring a lot of challenges. Goran and Gabriela decided to rise to these challenges.

Goran was not only fascinated by the Germans. He was fascinated by Gabriela. This was the most exciting experience they had ever had, and every day it was becoming more exciting. Goran had no residence permit and there was only one way for him to get it. He had to marry Gabriela.

Gabriela was surprised when her parents welcomed Goran very warmly and supported the young couple in their plans to marry. It took three months until Goran and Gabriela were married, although not everybody was so easily convinced. Especially for Goran's mother, it was unthinkable that her son was not coming back home again. And Gabriela's closest friends were wondering if she was making the best decision by getting married so young.

After a quick wedding, the couple travelled to Goran's home country to see his family and friends. Gabriela was very nervous because she had never been to the Balkans before. She neither knew the language nor what to expect from the environment. Until then, Yugoslavia had been the mysterious country her husband and some friends were from. But she knew that the people were very warm, traditional and that they would serve a lot of good food. Why traditional? Because every Yugoslav that Gabriela knew listened

to Yugoslavian folk music and that was mostly about romance, family affairs and daily life.

The young couple started their journey by car in the late evening, to arrive in the early morning. Their route took them across Austria and Slovenia and they finally arrived in Doboj, a well-known city in today's Bosnia-Herzegovina. Goran's parents were living in a four-room-apartment in the sixth floor of a huge apartment building. Although everything was new for Gabriela she immediately felt comfortable.

In those days the citizens of Doboj were not used to using English or to welcoming Western European guests. That's why everybody was really excited to get to know Gabriela from Germany and the young couple had to make a lot of visits. Goran made every effort to translate for her and they had a lot of fun, because the people she got to know were very down-to-earth and humorous.

After their visit to Doboj, Goran showed Gabriela the Adriatic Sea from the most beautiful coast of what is today Montenegro. They enjoyed their time so much and knew that getting married was the right decision. Then, back in Germany, it took just nine months and a baby was born. Goran and Gabriela were beside themselves with joy, and so were their parents. It was time for Goran parents' first visit to Germany to see their granddaughter.

When they arrived, they were really excited to get to know the Germans and their country. Until then, they just knew Germany from the history of the Second World War. They discovered that their son was living in a very peaceful and beautiful environment. The flat where Gabriela and Goran were living was in a small apartment building surrounded by modern infrastructure, but still with a lot of trees, flower beds and freshly painted buildings. Goran's parents were immediately invited to the house of his parents-in-law and they spent a great first dinner together, despite having no common language. Maybe the bottle of Slivovitz that Goran's parents brought helped.

At this time, nobody could anticipate what would happen to Yugoslavia, just some months later. It was 1991. A war broke out between Yugoslavia's constituent republics. The world was shocked by cruel pictures. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the war lasted from 1992 to 1995 and claimed the lives of 100,000 people. During this time 350,000 Yugoslavian refugees came to Germany. Among them were Goran's younger brother Robert and an old friend Anisa. Robert and Anisa went to Stuttgart and settled down

independently from each other. Fortunately, all of Goran's family and friends had survived the war, but a lot of them moved to other countries and some of them even stayed abroad in their new lives.

But how did the story go on?

Well, everything that happened after this very fabulous story might seem to be very normal for today's standards in Europe. After a marriage of ten years, Gabriela and Goran decided to go separate ways again and they divorced. Nowadays, both of them are living in new marriages. Goran even has a second daughter with his new wife from Croatia. But, when Goran is remembering this time with Gabriela, he has always these shining eyes and still calls Gabriela the love of his life. Gabriela likes to remember this exciting and overwhelming time in her life too. After the war Goran's mother decided to live in Germany. She left her husband in Doboje, but she still visited him twice a year, before he died.

One day, Robert and Anisa met each other by chance in Stuttgart. Nowadays, they are married, have a thirteen-year-old son and settled down very happily in Berlin. In the meantime, Goran's and Gabriela's daughter is twenty-six years old and is living her own European love story, which is still challenging, sometimes.

HOW I MET WONDERFUL IRISH PEOPLE

First Encounter

“It was a good flight and the food was very delicious!” I exclaimed.

“Yes! I feel the same! I think we need to take a picture here at Dublin Airport!” said Pr. Braveheart.¹

“I’m filming! I think we need to an introduction for our movie!”

Everyone was laughing at that moment. Our group stopped near the window with the view of the runway and the planes. There were five of us and we all had nicknames. Pr. H.H. – it is me. Pr. Braveheart is our boss and she organised this trip. Pr. Leopold and Pr. Fox are our colleagues and friends. And there is one more person – Inna. She is Pr. Braveheart’s best friend. We all had our own expectations for this trip and we had been inspired by this country before coming there. Our plan was to travel all through the south of Ireland by car. Pr. Braveheart started to talk:

“Hello my dears! A warm welcome to you from green Ireland! We have just landed here in Dublin. Here it is late in the evening. We are tired after the flight but really happy to be here! Now we need to get to our hotel near the airport. See you there!”

I stopped the video and switched off the camera. After this I could freely turn around in the airport to feel the atmosphere. I was full of expectations and feelings about our week! We took our luggage and left the terminal. We decided to take a taxi. Our hotel was not so far from the airport. To my surprise they had big cars for five people.

“Good evening,” said Pr. Braveheart to the driver. “We need to get to our hotel at this address.”

“No problem! We will be there in twenty-five minutes, I guess,” answered the driver. “Where are you from and what are you going to do here?”

“We are from Russia, Saint Petersburg. We are working in the children’s camp called Great Change. We are here to make a film about Ireland. We want to get to know the culture of this country.”

¹ Pr. – means Professor in Russia.

The driver was really surprised to hear this information.

“It’s really interesting! And how long will you stay here?” he asked.

“We will stay here for one week. We are going to travel through the south of Ireland by car. We want to look at many places, nature, and meet people of course! And how do you feel about the English people and England?”

The driver immediately exclaimed, without any doubt: “I hate them!”

This was how our trip started. I was really surprised by what the driver said. I didn’t expect that Irish people were in such confrontation with England. We never asked this question again. It was my first impression of people living in Ireland. They are patriots and they are very communicative.

Second Encounter

“I will go to the supermarket to buy a SIM card for my phone.”

“OK, Pr. Braveheart! Pr. Leopold and I will wait for you here and check the way to the castle.”

“Good! We will be fast!”

Pr. Leopold and I were standing in front of a supermarket. It was in the centre of Dublin near Trinity College. I was searching for the way to our next point, using a paper map. Suddenly I heard the voice. It was not one of my friends. I turned around and saw grandmother. She was standing near me. I think she was eighty or more. She was looking at me then looked at the map in my hands and she asked: “Do you need some help?”

“No, thank you very much!” I answered, “We are waiting for our friends to come out of the supermarket and then we will go to Dublin Castle.”

“You need to go down the street and you will find it!”

“Thank you very much!”

I closed my map and put it in my backpack. Grandmother got on a bus and rode away while Pr. Leopold and I were standing with smiles on our shocked faces. We were really surprised by this old lady. I had been living in Russia for twenty-two years and I had never experienced anything like this. Grandmother came up to us and offered to help. For me it was unbelievable. My love for Ireland became stronger.

Third Encounter

We were going down the street. We had our luggage with us. We were searching for a car rental company. I was looking at the map in my hands. It seemed we were going the right way. An old man and his dog were walking on the other side of the road a few metres ahead. This man was approximately seventy years old.

"You are going in a wrong direction!" the old man exclaimed.

All of us were really surprised. Why had he said that?

"We are searching for a car rental," said Pr. Braveheart

"I guessed that you are searching for a hotel or a car, but in the direction you are going now there are only houses," he answered. "So you need to go down the street and then turn left and then several yards ahead on your right side you will see a car rental company," the old man added.

"Thank you very much!" I said to him.

We turned around and went down the street, as he said. All the way we were talking about this man. And I felt as if I had just met Sherlock Holmes.

Fourth Encounter

The textile mill was one of the places we wanted to see in Ireland. We knew where it was situated but we weren't sure about the opening and working hours. We were twenty minutes too late when we arrived there.

"Come on, we are here and we need to visit this mill. If we don't do it right now we can never do it again," argued Pr. Braveheart.

"Of course you are right!" we all agreed. We decided to try our Irish luck. Pr. Braveheart knocked at the door.

"Hi!" We heard the voice of a woman from behind the door.

"Hello! We are a group of tourists from Saint Petersburg. We are working in a children's camp and making a film for children about Ireland. We know that you are already closed but we really want to have a chance of seeing your textile mill! What can we do?" asked Pr. Braveheart to the closed door.

The door opened and the woman appeared in front of us.

"I love children so much! Our mill is closed but I really appreciate your idea about making a film for children about Ireland! So I will give you a personal

tour for free, and my colleague will open our souvenir shop for you after it.”

“Thank you a lot! Our children will be very happy to see how you are making textiles here,” I thanked our future guide to the world of textiles.

We spent one hour and thirty minutes on the tour and in the souvenir shop. The people were so kind. They gave us their own time on us and didn't ask us for any money (except the money that we spent on souvenirs). I was really impressed by their gesture. We were all impressed.

Fifth Encounter

We arrived in the town where we were going to spend the night. We found the parking space for our car. The next big challenge was to find the hotel that we had booked.

“I think our hotel is somewhere in that direction,” I assumed.

“I think we can ask people to help us with this problem,” said Pr. Braveheart.

We decided to go to a bar we saw nearby. It was a typical Irish bar. There were several men who were sitting at the bar and on the chairs. They were drinking beer and were watching a football match. Pr. Braveheart went up to the barman and asked him how we could find our hotel.

“You need to leave the pub and then turn left. At the next crossroads you need to turn left again and cross the road. Go straight along the street and in three minutes you will see your hotel on your right hand,” the barman explained.

A man who was sitting at the bar on the left of Pr. Braveheart turned to her and said: “I can take you to the place you want to go.”

“We would be happy if it's not difficult for you,” she answered.

This man left the football match and his beer, walked out with us and took us to the hotel and then went back to the bar. He did it for strangers he had just seen for the first time in his life. It touched my heart.

These are only several encounters which we had in seven days in Ireland. I fell in love with the Irish people. Ireland became a country of my dreams. People living there have a brilliant nature. This trip was two years ago. It was my first trip where I was not like a tourist. I was a person who wanted to investigate culture and meet people. Now I'm studying in Germany for one year. I came back to Europe because I believe that people across Europe look like the people of Ireland. Europe for me is people who are open and friendly!

I'LL BE MISSING YOU

It was a bright warm day in September, the wind wafted gently through the trees and I could finally breathe again. It felt like the sky was the limit. I was walking through the streets of Berlin, enjoying every car that passed me, each tenement house I walked by and all the hipsters I came across. This feeling of satisfaction spread through my whole body. I could sense it in my toes, in my stomach, I could even feel it on my tongue. This was my time to become happy, to find the meaning of my life.

Earlier that year I had to suffer two losses, or at least I considered them as losses at the time. The most important people in my life left me to study in Amsterdam and London. They knew exactly what they wanted to do after school and went for it. I stayed home and was wondering if there were just too many possibilities or if I was not able to figure out what I wanted. Months passed by and I bounced my way from one job to the next. None of them came into question for a long-term profession, but I was sure I had to keep trying in order to find out what I wanted and, much more importantly, what I didn't want. All the jobs ultimately just served the purpose of generating money, which I spent on party after party to repress all the feelings I had. After school we are supposed to go to university, start vocational training or at least do something that brings us forward, but this something was nearly impossible for me to figure out. And the two people in my world who could shake me up, tell me to stop shilly-shallying and to start getting it together, were hundreds of miles away. I was lost.

That sunny day in September brought enlightenment. The streets of Berlin were my inspiration, the vibe I needed to feel in order to clear my head and get a different perspective. Suddenly everything came together and the only logical consequence after this state of trance was to change the scenery. So I booked a flight to Spain, packed my bags and went off to visit my aunts. Years ago they moved to Nerja, one of these beautiful Spanish towns in Andalusia, right on the coast of the Alboran Sea. It was always their dream to open a restaurant in Spain, which they did. I admired this courage. That was the kind of spirit I needed in order to find my own way. Since I didn't buy a return ticket, it felt like I had all the time in the world to calm down, to free my mind and to reach clarity. During the daytime I grabbed my aunts' dog, with its small, white fuzzy head, and we had long walks along

the beach. I talked to him a lot and he was a great listener. In the evenings I worked at the restaurant and met the most interesting people from all over Europe, but mostly the UK. Key businessmen told me about their careers, high-society ladies tried to convince me to marry a rich boy and ordinary Joe was just happy to spend all his money on his annual leave. These people and their stories inspired me. More and more I was able to focus on what I wanted to do in life, but I was still missing the two special people who would help me to see.

My best friend realised she would move to London right after school, when she was sixteen years old. We had our first trip to the city of fog all by ourselves and enjoyed every minute. It was a great feeling to be somewhere else, without our parents or any travel group. There was this sense of being free and able to go just everywhere. At that very moment, we could feel that we were becoming young adults and that there was a whole world waiting for us. I appreciated that independence and knew it would somehow determine my life, but I deeply doubted that I would have the courage to move to another country all by myself. She did it and became more than happy. It was like her life just started when she went abroad. I needed her to remind me of these feelings we had experienced a few years ago and so I flew from Malaga to London. We spent an extraordinary week together, started up from where we left off, as if no time had passed at all. I knew we would always rely on each other, no matter how far we are apart.

After almost six months in Spain, I decided that it was time to move back home, although I was not sure anymore where home is. Nerja felt a lot like home, but deep down I was sure that I could not stay. Back in Berlin I was torn apart and did not know what to do with myself. The daily routine in Spain was so different and I had made so much progress that it felt like I just did not fit in anymore. My parents thought I was still their little girl who had left a few months ago, and they acted as if nothing had changed. But things had changed a lot. Spain had changed me and living with my aunts also did. Life was very laid-back there, it was all about having a good time, good food and even better wine. We had the beach right in front of our door, every morning I could breathe the sea. I learned what life really is about and that people worry way too much. I had a different personality, different goals, different ways of dealing with things, and now it felt like I was being pressed into a pattern that had fitted before, but no longer made any sense to me anymore.

So one more time, the only logical consequence was to get away. I went off to visit the second person I had lost – my cousin in Amsterdam. Since she was also feeling an urgency to get out of her system, we travelled through Europe for a couple of weeks. We woke up in another city every morning, each new adventure followed the last. We went rafting in Toulouse, hiked over the Pyrenees from France to Spain, had the worst pizza in Italy and the world's best ice cream in Croatia. We danced flamenco in the Alhambra, visited all the coffee shops in Amsterdam and got wasted on Slivovitz in Budapest. It was the time of our life and nothing could stop us. All these experiences we gained, the cultures and people we got to know, changed our ways of thinking and the memories we were left with made us the people we are today.

I returned home and this time I was sure what home meant. Moving back in with my parents was not a compromise now; it was exactly what I needed. They realised that I really had changed and were willing to accept it. They acknowledged that their little girl had grown up and was able to make her own decisions. These decisions may be right or wrong, but it was time for them to let go and support me, instead of holding me back. I got the chance to be the person I wanted to be. The person I was during my travels, but could not be at home. I knew my way would not always be straightforward and there would still be side roads and paths that would lead me to where I am supposed to be.

Knowing all this, I realised what I want to do in life, at least professionally. While traveling to all these places around Europe, I came to know that I want to work in an environment where I can support people to find their own ways and where I can enable them to do their best. So I applied for the vocational training I wanted to pursue and got the job.

All of this happened quite a while ago and the three of us are now back in Berlin. We have careers, partners, apartments that have to be cleaned and bills that need to be paid. We are adults now and sometimes this gives me nightmares. But at least we go through this together, right?! We could be anywhere, because home is where your heart is.

IF YOU HAVE A DREAM, GIVE IT A CHANCE TO COME TRUE!

It is a rainy April morning, I can feel the drops falling and the cold outside; however, I can still hear the birds signing, it is spring, it may get warmer later and I should get up soon and start the day, a new day. I will quickly plan my day before leaving my bed . . . so first brush my teeth, quick shower, get dressed, make up, do my hair, and then have some breakfast or better the latest Bio Schoko Müsli I became a fan of just a few months ago. Then I will leave home exactly at 8.02 am so that I have three minutes to walk to the tram stop, then, after two minutes on the tram, jump in the underground at exactly 8:10 which will lead me to the S-Bahn that will arrive at 8.12 and finally make my way to the office, where I am happily working and where I will be able to be on time thanks to the punctual public transport of Berlin. Life has become different, very different since I came here, since I finally made it here.

Let me just go back a bit and tell you the whole story, my personal story. The paragraph you just read would have looked very different five years ago. It wouldn't be such a quiet, uncomplicated, planned morning; it would rather be quite stressful, messy and difficult, only with the exception that the weather would be more friendly and warm. Bogota, Colombia, where I am from, is really different from Berlin, Germany.

I will just put you in the same scene, but in Bogota. This is how a morning was for me back in 2010. Out of bed at 4 am, then the same as before: first brush my teeth, quick shower, get dressed, make up, do my hair, but no breakfast, no time for that, get out of the house, but careful, there might be someone stalking at the door (security is a big issue), then go quickly to the main avenue looking now and then backwards (out of fear or insecurity), made it to the avenue, there is no bus stop and no bus schedule, so let's try my luck today . . . Normally I will wait ten minutes until the bus I need to take runs by, but then I will try my luck again . . . will the bus be full? Am I going to be "hanging" outside the bus? Should I wait for the next one? But if it takes twenty minutes, then I will be late to work . . . It is not a nice feeling, believe me. It is not easy to get a place in a bus in a city without an underground train system but with nine million people moving around.

And it was there in one of those crowded buses in Bogota, where I thought: "I really want to change this situation, there must be another life, a quieter one, but how can I possibly do it?" My desire for change was enormous, and I was not sure how to achieve it. I knew there must be a way and that I would walk that way, whatever it takes, wherever it would lead me. I don't know about you, but I believe that sometimes destiny, life, God, luck or whatever you believe in has something prepared for you and when you really want something in life and work for it, it will happen.

And because I was meant to be abroad, life put me in the right place, at the right time with the right people. I met a guy in Bogota, who is very Colombian but with Dutch roots. "Dutch." I was not even very aware of a small country called The Netherlands back at that time, but then Kenny – the guy I e-met in one of those thousands of expat forums in the Internet – was the one to push me towards Europe and the other life I was very much looking for. He made me believe that with some savings and clear steps to follow it could be a dream coming true.

Back in 2010, Kenny himself was preparing himself to start a new life in London in England, and he therefore knew all the process and everything I had to do in order to travel abroad. In one of our endless conversations by e-mail, he asked me where I would love to travel to. I knew I wanted Europe, and the USA was not a destination I would consider. I wasn't interested in American capitalism and consumerism. It was the culture and societies of Europe that were calling me, especially the freedom of life and other very European values that no other continent has. After undertaking a detailed search I came up with the idea that I wanted very much to go to the UK or The Netherlands (after reading to what Kenny wrote about his roots) or to Scandinavia.

It was challenging, but it was exactly what I was looking for, that new and quiet life. The first thing I discovered was that Britain was not really welcoming Colombians. Only if you have millions in your bank account, then maybe it would be possible, but in my case, no thank you, next please . . . Scandinavia was extremely expensive but they happily welcome Colombians, but what about the winter? I had never before been exposed to temperatures below 10 degrees. All in all the last option was The Netherlands and that was indeed where I went. Yes, I went after overcoming many challenges, I became financially independent, I started working when I was eighteen years old, full-time, forty-eight hours a week, while also studying for my bachelor's

degree in the night shifts and at the same time learning English during the weekends. It was a hectic schedule, with not much time to sleep but lots of time to dream about what it would like on other side of the Atlantic.

I was not sure if I wanted to live all my life abroad, but I wanted to try, I wanted to live it myself. Kenny's new stories of his life in London and the pictures he sent me encouraged me to step forwards and continue working for my goal. Meanwhile I met an amazing group of foreigners in Bogota whose aim was to teach people English while getting to know locals. Mostly Germans, but also French, British and one special American were part of the group. Every Saturday we met, about thirty people in a beautiful location in the city, a place called Virgilio Barco Library. During those meetings I was eager to hear all the stories from outside. All the effort I was putting into going abroad really made sense. Those guys telling me that they just decided to take a gap year and enjoy life and be happy, I also wanted something, I wanted to be free and not follow the boring life of the Colombian system. In that system – at least for middle-class families – there is no stop, there is no time to enjoy, but instead there is always this feeling of guilt if you dare to waste time and if you have do not have a family at the age of thirty or a proper permanent job.

I couldn't wait to be in The Netherlands to test myself, to feel different, to change my life. And the day came, one of the happiest days in my life. The agency where I was going to take the English course in The Netherlands called me and told me I could start with the visa process, they told me it was 99 per cent sure I was going to get it . . . but wait . . . the dream was pretty close to coming true, I just needed to go to the embassy and after one week I could leave the country, but my family knew nothing about all of this, actually no one knew anything except for Kenny. Gosh, what I was going to say to these traditional people who had never left the country before, not one of my sixty relatives, not one of my group of friends?

It was a shock for most people. "How come you didn't say a word?" they asked me, and of course there was also this feeling of bitter-sweetness. It was a huge opportunity for me, another continent, another language, other food, and so on, but I was also sad that I was leaving my family and I knew there would be many unknown situations when I would have to cope just by myself, but inside I was extremely happy and excited, it was a feeling of "well done you made it" that wandered through my body.

I remember I told my family: "Tonight I want to invite you for dinner, please be at home at 7 pm." They, my mother, father, brother and uncle came to the meeting. I had cold chills and I was so nervous but I had to tell them, I could not just go to the airport and come back after a year. No way.

I waited until they were done with the food and then I said with my voice trembling: "I have something to tell you." I immediately felt cold blood running through my veins and everyone's faces staring at me. My brother broke the silence, asking: "Are you pregnant?" I had to laugh and said: "No, of course not . . . it's rather good news . . . I am going to Europe, I am going to live in Europe for one year."

I could feel the tension. Nobody said anything until my mother asked me to repeat. "I can't believe what you just said," she was saying. But before my mother finish her sentence, my father left the table without a word.

Then I went on in explaining that it was going to be for a year, I told them about everything I had done over the last year, including taking driving lessons and getting a driving licence, and that I could now speak English. They were there just listening and frozen. My mother still without believing. Then we went to the computer and thanks to technology and to google, I showed her where I was going to live, where The Netherlands are located in the world – beautiful pictures, the bicycles, everything I could find that would persuade her that it was true and the worst of it was that I was leaving soon.

Anyways, the day came and I found myself at the airport with two huge suitcases – how can a girl put her life into two suitcases? It was almost impossible and my poor experience in packing didn't make it any easier. Goodbyes are not nice and can be very emotional and in Colombia we are very sentimental and emotional indeed, so there was a lot of crying, but once I was in the plane this emotion that I cannot describe came to me and I couldn't believe my eyes: I was going to Europe. "There we go girl," I thought," there we go!!!"

From that day on not only my mornings but my whole life was going to be rather different. My new home was a beautiful Dutch house in Eindhoven, I lived there for one year between 2011 and 2012. It was indeed the best year of my life so far, I grew up very much in all senses, I discovered first-hand what I was exactly expecting to learn and how to live. It was magical, I felt like I could breathe for the first time. It was a different air that was around me.

There were many adventures on the way, adventures that today are memories, the most wonderful ones. I am going to relate one of the most fantastic experiences of that year. I had come to Europe driven by a desire to go to the United Kingdom, Well, now I was just one hour away by plane from Eindhoven to London, Ryanair was flying at very good prices and I said to myself – it is now or never. So I got a British visa and on 10 May 2012 I took a plane to the UK. I have to confess I even bought new clothes and cut my hair, it was my real dream coming true. I cannot describe what I felt when the plane was about to land and I saw English land, and I find it hard to describe the next days I spent in England.

I made my way to Cambridge, catching the train at King's Cross railway station, and I was so astonished by the beauty and history of this city. I was lost in one of those narrow, cobbled streets in central Cambridge, close to the imposing King's College building, when a man approached me and told me that the street was closed due to construction works. So I thanked him and we returned to the main street together. He must have been around fifty years old. He was very kind and I was so happy to be talking to a British citizen and of course as expected I was enchanted by his very posh British accent. His name was Paul.

He started to tell stories about Cambridge and then he said that he was helping his son to move into one of the dormitories at the university, just as his own father had done with him many years ago. I said that he was the first ex-Cambridge graduate I had ever talked to, and he asked me if I was just travelling and where my family was. He was touched to hear that I was there all by myself, like a little girl in a big book of stories.

As an alumni he had an identification card that allowed him to visit all the Cambridge University colleges and, even better, he could take one more person in too. He very kindly offered me a walk around the colleges, as he had four hours' time until his wife Ruth was due to come back with their son. I happily said yes, and off we went first to the wonderful King's College, I stared at the architecture with my mouth gaping wide. I thought about the music, the history, and was amazed that Isaac Newton had been there, and Albert Einstein, Prince Charles and many more famous names. The best was yet to come, we found a little entrance that led to some stairs. We made our way up the stairs and ended up on the highest roof of King's College Cambridge. The view was so stunning. This was too much, this was wonderful, it was amazing and it was free. It was England, it was Europe.

I remember Paul telling me that I should feel like the Queen since that was such a special place to be. This is something I will never forget, never.

By mid-2012 I needed to decide whether to stay and start a new bachelor's programme at the University of Eindhoven or whether I should go back to Colombia and finish my bachelor's there, where I had just one semester to go. And so I was rational and decided to fly back to Colombia with a bitter-sweet feeling, leaving behind what had been the best time of my life. But I knew inside I was going to come back, yes, it was not a farewell, it was a see you soon Europe!

Back in Bogota there was a strange feeling. I felt no part of the society anymore, something had changed, I had changed a lot. I had grown up in so many different ways but nothing in the city had changed. The people had not changed. Nobody really understood all my stories as I wished them to, they were just too far away, as I had been when in The Netherlands. I just decided to put the Colombian chip in my head again for some time to cope with the situation and to avoid misunderstandings.

Once I started a new job I secretly started to plan my way to Germany to do a master's degree. Why Germany? Well, when I was in The Netherlands I had travelled to sixteen European countries and somehow I felt most at home in Germany. I had some friends and, yes, I will learn German, I said to myself. Germany has something special no other country I went to has. The best of all was that I could do my master's there in English – believe me, that's a relief.

My biggest obstacle to doing a master's in Germany was financial. I thought, even if I worked in Colombia fifty hours a week, it would take me three years or more to have enough money to do a master's, because as a non-European your bank account must be filled up with lots of euro, and, given the value of the Colombian currency, there was not much hope. Therefore I opted to seek for other ways to make it possible and I came up with a great idea. If I went to do an internship in a German-speaking country, I could earn money in euro and I could also learn some German – not bad at all.

After a year and a half of thinking, applying, planning, filling papers in, official translations, procedures at the embassies, and thousands of other procedures you can hardly imagine, all thanks to the bureaucracy of both Colombia and the European Union, I finally got an internship in a small

village called Mühldorf in Upper Austria. It was a magic place, a four star hotel, the perfect place to get married, with an imposing castle which was part of the hotel, beautiful gardens and the friendliest atmosphere. And it was just one hour away from the German border, the goal was closer now, maybe something like nine thousand kilometers closer than Bogota.

And again, now in 2014, but this second time without as much fuss as the first time I left the country, I had got on board a plane and then again stepped on European soil. The experience in Austria was fantastic, I shared time with wonderful people, especially the owners of the hotel, Johannes and Cristina, who made me feel at home and very welcome. At the hotel there was a mixture of people (just like Europe itself – with people from Germany, Slovakia, Spain, the Philippines, Austria and Colombia), all working together towards the same objective. My German skills developed quite well, much better than expected, to be honest. Do you know the saying “das Leben ist zu kurz, um Deutsch zu lernen”? Well, it is absolutely true, “life is too short to learn German,” but everything in life is worth it as long as you achieve what will make you happy and free. In Austria, it was a great feeling to be back, but it was a bit different this time, maybe because I went with a clear plan and precise objectives. This was not as much about travelling and adventures as things had been in The Netherlands, but still a fantastic experience for sure.

To cut a long story short, with the help of some friends and good luck I achieved what I had been wishing for, and I was accepted at the Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau in Brandenburg, just thirty minutes away from Berlin, which today I proudly call the city I live in. I cannot explain the feeling of happiness that runs through my body when something like this happens. For me it means a lot, I did it with my hands. I know that for Europeans this is a very different story, because of the free movement of people everything is easier and relaxed. You should thank the European Union and its laws that have made this possible.

Today I can see myself as a young woman of twenty-six, who has already lived in four countries, speaks three languages, is pursuing a master’s degree in European Management, and living in Berlin. For me this is definitely a very personal achievement. And yes, I might not have many material belongings – no car, no house, not the latest mobile phone – but instead I have a happy soul and a pleased heart which are much more important than any material belongings.

IDENTITY CHANGES

“I come from France.” When abroad, I used to present myself that way, without thinking of the amount of information carried by those four words. Being French is not only being born in France. It also means that I was raised in a French family, our lives marked by French customs and habits. I received an education in a French school and I was hanging out with French friends. Later I also read newspapers written by French writers and published by French publishers. Nationality is related to a specific geographical territory, but it also involves progressively taking in a cultural background that influences your perception, beliefs and attitudes – without you even noticing that this is happening.

I signed my Erasmus contract in spring 2014. One year in Trondheim, Norway. If you have no idea where that is, trust me, you are not the only one. And it is scary to leave for a city when even some airport staff do not know where it is. Yet, what I discovered in this unknown city is invaluable to me to this day. During one year, I spent every day surrounded by students from all around Europe, all of them so eager to seize the opportunity offered by the Erasmus programme. A few of them also came from farther-away countries.

Each person there was born in a country that had its own norms and values, raised in a family with certain customs and habits and received an education within a specific system. When people from different backgrounds come together, share experiences, exchange points of view, defend positions, debate current topics ... the learning about others is great, and the learning about yourself is immense.

Once, when I was on a walk along the Norwegian fjords with an Austrian friend. I looked at my watch: 12.30 pm. I asked him: “What about grabbing something to eat?”

“Are you hungry?” he asked me back.

“Well ... not really, but you know, it is lunch time,” I answered.

“And why don’t you wait to be hungry to eat?” he asked me.

Yes, why? That would actually make much more sense. Here comes the influence of my background. In my French family, breakfast is at 8 am, lunch at 12 am and dinner at 8 pm. Hungry or not.

This may seem like the kind of funny travel story that someone might like to share once back in his or her home country. For me it is more. I recall that this sentence triggered the following reflection: I have always eaten at settled times, sitting down together with my family. I never thought it could be done in a different way and I unconsciously assumed that this was the best way of doing it. This was normal for me. But what is normal for me and for my close surroundings is not normal for others.

This doesn't stop with meal times. I realised that day that my entire way of thinking is influenced by my background. My political opinions are shaped by debates among my family members. My vision of other countries is influenced by the past and current position of France on the international stage. My values are influenced by my experiences as a French citizen. Is that good or bad? I guess it is natural, unavoidable.

And if it is so for me, it is also true for others. We all have a background that influences our views. As our backgrounds are different, so is the impact on our own selves. Understanding that point changed some of my attitudes.

Once, I met with a Russian friend. We were discussing homosexual rights in the world today. She was defending a position that I consider unfair and intolerant. Here is what I probably would have thought before going abroad: "She is terribly closed-minded. I do not understand how people can still think that way in the twenty-first century." After an experience abroad, I thought this way: "We have two opposite views on this matter. I know that my position is influenced by both my education and my experience. My family members always taught me that homosexual people should have the same rights as every human being. And I have talked over this topic with a friend of mine who is homosexual and got some input from his side. Both of these are factors influencing my present position on the matter." What about my Russian friend? I do not know her family nor her experience. I can only make assumptions. It is possible that she has experienced something negative related to this topic? Perhaps the attitude of government towards this matter has affected her view and led her to defend such a position. Considering her background did not make me agree with her view, but it allowed me to acknowledge it.

Going further in my thinking process, I wondered: "If what is normal for me is not for others, then what does their normality look like?" By sharing experiences with people from different nationalities, I got some clues. A Spanish friend told me about the importance of the family in her everyday

life. Explanations from a Moroccan shed light on Ramadan. Eating dumplings and being surprised to find a coin in one during the Chinese New Year's celebrations made me realise the differences between customs ... These are the realities of others' lives. It is enriching to hear about other customs and to compare them with your own. Some were surprising, some funny and some ... some marked me permanently as they so clearly highlight the opportunities that I have. My flatmate fled Iran in order to escape a forced marriage. A friend from China expressed her emotions when she discovered that the government was forbidding websites and information to its people. An acquaintance from Tanzania explained the ongoing problem of female genital mutilation in her country to me.

Hearing those stories, I realised that being French also means being safe, being free. And this chance is not shared by everyone. I should always recall it.

One year has passed and my Erasmus exchange in Norway is over. I am going back home, happy to share my experience with my family and friends. But soon, an uncomfortable feeling tarnished the joy of reunion. I am different. Doing an Erasmus year has opened my mind, enhanced my critical thinking, raised my awareness about cultures, made me curious ... Yet the environment I found once back in France was exactly the one I had left one year earlier. I am out of phase. How? It is difficult to explain. Within a year, I have discovered different habits, perceptions, ways of doing things ... I want to have the choice, the possibility to keep the things I like and to get rid of those I dislike. Back in France, I felt that a culture that I was now finding too conservative and rigid was being imposed to me.

I have the impression that my place is no longer settled in one country, as it was before. Borders across Europe are meaningless. English, as a shared language, is the key to broader opportunities. I feel closer to any European student who has ever lived in an international environment than to a French student who never left the country. Europe is my playground and I have the intuition that I would feel home in any member country.

Is that being a European citizen?

A UTOPIAN DREAM

I still remember my feelings entering the room before class. I was excited, eager to learn a lot. From the perspective of a sixteen-year-old village girl who had never travelled before, the European Union was something complex but fascinating. The economics teacher I had was passionate about this unique organisation and he clearly “passed on to me” his consideration for Europe. When the class ended, every time I was a little more mesmerised that humankind decided to build something together and to stop the era of warfare. Every time, I realised a little more how fascinating it was that some persons, full of hope and promising ideas, gathered and created this remarkable organisation offering plenty of possibilities and notably individual freedom and the equality of rights. This was how I started to “think European.”

When I think back, before this “turning point,” I never really felt strongly that I was part of a large community. Obviously, an individual is part of a country, which for me was France, which until this point was my singular culture. However, after a deep reflection that lasted the three years I attended high school, and due to the large amount of knowledge I acquired, I realised that my sense of belonging to my national culture was weaker than my sense of belonging to the European community.

Some people might think that I am naive or crazy and that it is not at all conceivable to not have a strong nationalist feeling. Of course I like France. It is a beautiful country with an interesting diversity of landscapes, a country of good food and good wine. However, nowadays, I like Europe even more because the diversity is even bigger. It is a huge wonderful hotchpotch! Eat a pizza in Italy, go skiing in Sweden, enjoy a tea break in the UK, hike in the Tatra Mountains in Poland, relax in a park in Berlin, go partying in Brussels ... During all these beautiful moments in my life, I met great European people, thinking Europe, living Europe and wanting more Europe. That was a cause of great joy and therefore I cannot wait to explore this continent more and more. Europe is so wide and, therefore, so rich; it is not only one country with a specific history and economic situation, with a specific language and traditions.

Some people might look at facts and claim that what I am stating does not make sense in the current situation. Indeed, the faults and the incompleteness

of the European Union are highlighted nowadays more than ever before. European values are contested by terrorists, by problems in the economy, and the refugee crisis has also put Europe through the mill. Nevertheless, it is the only attempt of its kind so far and of course it cannot be perfect. "Unity in diversity" is a tough challenge and I believe some improvements can be made. The current powerlessness of the states is a call for more Europe.

A utopian dream? Maybe it is. However, my personal and professional experiences make me believe that Europe can find solutions to the challenges it is facing today. It is not going to be easy but I believe we are stronger together than we are individually. That is why I would like to devote my professional life to the search for solutions in order to make the twenty-eight nations feel strong, safe and European. Erasmus is, par excellence, the programme that makes you feel European and that makes you realise that the European community is formidable.

I will never forget my first step out of France. I had mixed feelings of course: fear and sadness to leave my relatives, but considerable desire to see something else, to be part of something a little bigger and to finally not only to "think European" but to "live Europe" as well. This happened in Sweden, a country that can be considered one of the most successful states in the European Union. I studied one year in Karlstad, the city of sun, with Swedes and with students of many different other nationalities. This has been so far, without doubt, the most enriching period of my life. As my Finnish friend used to say: "Every day here is like a dream." I learned so much from her. She helped me to improve my language skills, she helped me to be critical towards my country, and above all she helped me to realise that the cultural and social differences between Finnish and French persons could lead to an authentic and deep friendship. Learning from others, also bringing some knowledge to them, sharing ideas with them, studying, partying and traveling around Europe was my everyday life. This made me grow a lot and broadened my mind. In fact, our group was not defined as a group composed of German, Spanish, French, Dutch, or Finnish persons but as a truly European group, behaving "European," sticking together. Seeing myself as part of this group made me feel so delighted and I often told myself: "Yes, Europe can and will work better because there are so many young and dynamic persons here, believing in it and willing to make it better. It is like that in my little Swedish town right now but it is also happening all around Europe. In every state, some European group of friends is being formed."

After this Swedish year and the end of my bachelor's, I decided I wanted more experience abroad, through the Erasmus+ program, as I was still eager to learn more about European countries. This time, I am living and studying in Berlin for six months. This young, flourishing, multicultural and dynamic city can, in my opinion, be considered one of the hearts of Europe with regard to its geographical position and to its history. When I walk next to the remains of the Berlin Wall, I am always thinking about how lucky I am to live in peace today, how lucky I am to share great times with Germans instead of fighting against them. The circumstances seventy years ago are not easy to imagine for the young generation. Living in Berlin makes it most definitely easier to understand because some traces of the past are still visible. I believe this is important and I think that is one of the reasons why this is the city and the place where my feelings of being European are the strongest.

In respect of my studies, I chose without hesitation to study Europe by choosing a master's programme with a particular European focus. I am extremely glad to work every day with students and teachers who have hope in this institution and try to make it better, each in their own way.

However, if I have to describe an experience that most clearly describes my European feeling and my European identity, I would choose to talk about my love life. Two years ago, I met someone who is not French but German, someone who has a different culture, someone with different habits and someone with different ways of thinking, but someone I am in love with. I was first afraid that the differences and the distance would impact negatively on our relationship. But differences are not dangerous. I realise that if we respect and learn from each other, there is a deep connective tissue, which can be the basis of a happy and healthy relationship. The differences brought extra value to our relationship – although I still cannot understand how he can eat sausage and cooked meat in the morning and he, on the other hand, cannot understand why I have such an impulsive temperament and I am, therefore, not always rational.

Usually, we see each other once a month for a long weekend. Sometimes, we stay together for longer. We have never lived in the same place together for long but when you want something with all your strength, kilometres get shorter. We always have to plan in advance and we love the fact that we can get cheap flights. We both have a great desire to travel. We have shared friends all around Europe that we love to visit. We sometimes had to leave what we knew and loved for each other. I had to resort to any spelling possible to try

to get my relatives to pronounce the name of my foreign boyfriend correctly. At the beginning, we had to learn how to talk to each other and we spoke mostly English, but now we jump from English to German to French. It is not always easy but we laugh a lot because of our cute mistakes or funny accents.

All those little facts characterise our relationship and who we are. Our relationship is not French or German. It a European love story. Without the European university mobility programme, we would have probably never met.

Not so long ago, this would have never happened. France and Germany were fighting against each other, killings millions of innocent persons. Thanks to the European Union, my boyfriend and I have the chance to share our lives, our cultures, our languages and this is, to me, the most enriching thing that someone can experience. We learn a lot from it, we have become more open-minded, more attentive and tolerant. Moreover, the persons around us are also touched and tend to think a little more “European,” and that makes me really happy.

I still remember the words and the face of my grandmother, who was in her twenties during the Second World War, when I announced to her I was in a relationship with a German man. Her eyes full of tears, she told me how happy she was and what a beautiful thing it was that I had met a German person. Even though her family and she suffered a lot, even though she lost some close relatives during the war against Germany, she was really happy and proud that, nowadays, we are able to forgive and move forward. This is unquestionably a great proof that Europe is worthwhile. Only for these words, I am happy to live in Europe and be a member of the European Union, which does not have a monopoly on universal values, but is, historically, a source of multicultural inspiration and of mutual sharing. It offered reconciliation after the conflicts of the last century and claims that we can make progress through sharing and communication, by leaving no one alone.

AN ENTRANCE TICKET TO EUROPE – THE ENTRANCE TO A NEW LIFE!

My dad was born on 8 May 1959 in Palestine. He was living there with his parents and his younger sister. Although it's been a while, he remembers his story like it was only yesterday ...

On a very warm and nice day in March he came home from school and wanted to tell his parents about his first week at school, but suddenly a few steps from the door of their house he heard his mum shouting and crying because their house had been attacked by Israeli soldiers. He will never forget the moment he saw his father standing there without a plan and not knowing what to do. The soldiers forced them to leave their house or otherwise they would kill them.

All of a sudden my father had to pack all a few necessities, which basically meant his favourite teddy, two or three shirts and his shoes. The last thing he remembers when escaping out of Palestine was a little lemon tree standing next to the damaged houses as if nothing had happened ...

After a long journey of several days the family arrived in Jordan. They could stay at a house belonging to my grandfather's friend. The only things they had brought with them from Palestine were just a few clothes and some money.

A few years later my father and his family had recovered from what had happened and had accepted the fact that there was no going back to their house in Palestine. By now my father was sixteen years old and had seven siblings, and he was the oldest. His parents suggested sending him to Europe to establish a new life and start a good career. Because he was the oldest child it was him who got the entrance ticket to Europe – the entrance to a new life!

In 1975 my dad arrived in Berlin, Germany, where his new life started. The only thing he had was an address of a distantly related uncle he had never seen before. A lot of things and ways of life here were new to him. During the first days and weeks he had a great feeling of freedom because he was able to do everything and go everywhere without anyone asking or even caring. It was simply a kind of independence that he had when he compared Berlin with his home town. After several days he met many people from

Turkey, Bosnia and Greece, and also Germans. They all hung out together without speaking the same language. It wasn't necessary to speak a common language, and a little bit of everything, a multinational language, helped them to communicate and understand each other quite well.

After signing in at a language school and attending some classes my father noticed that he already understood a lot and was able to do his first supermarket shopping without being embarrassed because nobody understood when he was asking for some Arabian ingredients for some traditional meals he knew from his mother.

The funny thing is that even if the people didn't understand him in the beginning somehow they did understand. It was the people who made my dad love this country. Strangers were supportive when my dad didn't know how to buy his first *Monatsmarke* ticket to use public transport.

He was fascinated by the way people helped a foreigner who didn't even speak their language. Before he came to Germany, my father had had mixed thoughts the country. Of course he had wanted a good and stable life with a good career and independence, but he also knew how the world was talking about *Nazi Deutschland* and about negative attitudes to foreigners. So of course he was also afraid and a bit insecure about how to behave when he made his first Arab-to-German contacts. But these doubts were gone as soon as he met all the people who showed him how welcome he was and were happy to have an international Germany.

Several years after my dad established his life in Germany he got German citizenship. Then he started realising how big the difference is when you exchange a black Jordanian passport into to that red "entrance to everything" passport. He said that having this European passport gave him a stronger feeling of being related to Europe because he was able to visit countries without being bombarded with questions at the airport by the nice guys at the passport control.

It was simply natural to travel within the European Union. It was now easier than ever to go for a weekend trip to Rome or Madrid.

For my dad, Europe is the fact that he married a woman, my mum :-), who didn't share the same cultural and religious values. You have to know my mum is a pure Berlin girl. So you can imagine how big the differences in values and culture were at the beginning of their love story. Nevertheless they have now been now married for almost thirty-seven years and both of

them have adopted values from the other culture. Here I have to mention that my dad started to be the most punctual person I have ever met – this is so German!

My brother, my sister and I grew up with tolerant and open-minded parents who always gave us the possibility to travel as much as possible, to go to the best schools and universities and definitely we were able to study and choose the career we would like to go for.

My father always mentioned that we should make the best of our education, because here we can achieve everything and can make our dreams of becoming a doctor or working in business come true. He said that having a free education system is something we should really appreciate. Europe gives us the possibility to study what we want and where we want. Taking a semester abroad is something really normal here nowadays, but think how it would be back home in the Middle East just to imagine a semester abroad. You would need thousands of euro, rich parents and a passport, and this is all not so simple.

So coming back to the question of what Europe is for me or my family, I clearly know that I myself am a cultural mix of German and Jordanian values. Whenever I visit my family in Jordan I always realise how stable, independent, open-minded and peaceful our European Union is. We should think about what kind of beautiful life with so many chances we have on this continent. As Barack Obama said, the European Union didn't happen by accident – it happened by choice and we can be proud of today's Europe with all the history it has ...

FROM EUROPE TO EUROPE

He was a young guy in a big country where people with different sets of beliefs lived together. Fraternalism and unity were the most important values. His father was a farmer with a lot of land and cattle. He expected his son to do the same and to continue the family tradition. During his younger days he dreamed of leaving his village and starting a life in the city near his family. As he attained full age, he was called up to the army and experienced his first moments alone in the distance. Europe did not mean anything important in this society because this was a socialist regime and everything outside the state was in some way far away. After the army he started to work around the country and met all kinds of people. Everyone was the same before the law, there were no exceptions although the population consisted of different ethnic groups. Europe was never really a topic in school and in the news it was just mentioned neutrally. Did he live in Europe without knowing it?

In early 1992 he heard gunshots and realised that everything he believed in was going to be destroyed. Suddenly neighbours were hating each other and fighting for ideological beliefs; everything changed within weeks, days.

I remember it like it was yesterday, I was at home in East Berlin, in a small apartment in a huge building, which had the function of a refugee home, my mother took my hand and took me downstairs and said she would bring me to a nice place where I could play with other children, but I did not want to go because the refugee home was the nicest place for me. Everybody spoke the same language and I had a lot of friends. It was the place to be for me, everybody was so kind and it was my home. Crying did not help and so my mother brought me to the kindergarten, where I got to know many other kids, mostly from the former Eastern-bloc states. I remember my first days there, I did not understand anything they told me and it was an uncomfortable time for me. My mother visited me every day during breaks to see if everything was fine. In the course of time I learned German and started to love the kindergarten. When I remember this time I wonder how my parents could become orientated in such a big metropolis, they did not speak the language at all and they had no clue where to find what in this city but they tried their best to give me the feeling of being home.

Some years later we moved to West Berlin and I started to go to school.

It was a wonderful class with mixed nationalities; at this moment I noticed that I was living two parallel lives. One was the life the system taught me. The German way of living with all the holidays like Christmas or Easter, the typical behaviour or stereotypes like tidiness, punctual homework or the regular visits for vaccination. On the other hand I was living the life my parents taught me, and which I got to know better through cultural associations and vacations in the Balkans. I got to know values like family solidarity, respect for other cultures and patience. Sometimes I thought I did not fit into either of these societies because in my home country they called me German and in Germany they never accepted me as a full German. Through conversations with my friends I saw that they all had this problem of feeling not fully accepted. At home I was feeling like I was in a multicultural place because I spoke German with my sister and Bosnian with my parents. Sometimes we argued because of different views that came from our different education. So the question whether I could move out of home before marriage is always a sensitive topic because it is not common.

For my internship in my bachelor's programme, I went the first time for a longer period to my home country and saw the world from a different perspective. During my time there, I saw how I differed from the others and that the local people immediately noticed that I was from the outside, just because of my untypical cultural behaviour. So where is my home? I would describe myself as cosmopolitan. I like the world and I feel home wherever it is nice. But where is my identity? Do I even have one, or do I have several? It is always the same when I talk about myself. I am Bosnian, born in Croatia, I have German citizenship. I would not have this background if several things in history had not happened. The man at the beginning of my story is my father and he said to me that he never thought in his early years that he would live in a foreign country but now it is like it is and we cannot change it. In the course of time I noticed that even he adapted to his new home and, like me, he started to mix languages while speaking. Sometimes I ask myself what would have happened if I had never come to Germany. Would I know all the things I know at the moment and would I have the same values as I do now? Probably not. Wars never bring good things, but in this case I am grateful to be here and to have the chance to achieve goals which others can only dream of. In several situations I talked to my mum about her life "down below," as we called Bosnia in our family. Some events are not predictable and she never thought that she would leave her country. Although it was not voluntary, she is happy to be here. Mostly because of myself and my

sister, she says in a melancholic way. "Up here," meaning Germany, "it is safer and you are in Europe," she adds. Even when we are talking about European countries, we do not share the same meaning. For them, the real Europe is Germany with some neighbouring states, nations where you are protected by the state even when you do not have a job. For me Europe is not defined by some country names, it is rather a way of living, an attitude and practice of values and norms. Maybe their thinking is influenced by a destroyed former Europe called Yugoslavia. Today I am active in a cultural association where I have met a lot of young people with almost the same background and everyone agrees that they are happy to be in Germany. None of us would ever have met if Germany had not taken us in. Maybe bad things must happen to ensure that good things can be created. That is one of my mottos in life and the full explanation of the story of who I am. All the effort in my life is worth it to be "up here."

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Germany:

a country that opened its doors for immigration in the 1960s and again about fifty years later, which stands for diversity, freedom of religion, being cosmopolitan and tolerant.

Is Germany really as tolerant as it would like to see itself?

This is one of many frequently asked questions I have encountered so far. I have been thinking about this question for a long time now and I still haven't found the answer that I am looking for. Now you might ask why this question is of such interest for a twenty-three-year-old German living in Germany; the following will help you to understand that.

In 1986 – seven years before I was born – my mother emigrated from her beloved, and culturally rich home country of Syria to Germany, and there she married my Arab–German father. They were living in a two-room flat in Berlin which got too small when they were expecting me, their second child. They later bought a house in a new housing estate on the outskirts of Berlin to stay close to the city, but to have a greener and friendlier environment to raise their two girls.

I still live in this small village in the federal state of Brandenburg. It is indeed very close to the modern and open-minded capital Berlin, but it sometimes still has the charm of former conservative East German territory, particularly when it comes to certain topics. One of these topics is a different cultural background and a different religion. Growing up I learned German values from my father and Arab values from my mother. I chose to pick the best out of both cultures and to create the best way of living for myself. When I was ten years old my mother had the will and the courage to start wearing a headscarf, well knowing that the reactions of her environment would not be too positive and supportive. She was proven right. Being the only woman in our village and the surrounding small towns who wore a headscarf at that time did not make it any easier for her.

Over the years and after several unpleasant incidents I have observed that especially the older generation in my area is still very conservative and limited in the way they think about different cultures and how they approach

foreigners. Today this is still a sensitive issue in many regions in Germany and the question of tolerance has to come into sharp focus again.

Do you think she will understand me?

One day I was helping my mother at work in a big German retail store. An elderly lady approached me and asked where she could find a first-aid box for her car. I kindly asked her to talk to the woman on the other side of the shelf, who was my mother, as I was only there to help out. The lady felt noticeably uncomfortable, turned around to me again, and expressed her uncertainty that the woman would even understand what she was looking for. After reassuring her that she definitely would, I saw her walking towards my mother talking really loudly and slowly, gesturing with her hands to show what she was looking for, and only to be even more surprised that my mother answered calmly in accent-free German.

When people talk negatively about Islam or the Arab culture in front of me I have often heard them say: "We are not talking about you ... you are different!" I could only think: No, I am not – you have just decided not to apply your stereotypes to me but you are keeping your stereotypes of everyone else – of "them."

It is important to understand quickly that most of the time this is not meant personally. Most of the barriers in the minds of people are based on stereotypes, bad experiences, or just a lack of knowledge regarding other religions or cultures, which makes it even more important to have conversations and to overcome cultural bias. I have especially noticed a lack of knowledge paired with a huge interest in new cultures and religions when talking to people of my own age.

Are / were your parents strict?

What happens if you eat pork (by accident)?

Did you ever drink alcohol? Not even for your birthday or New Year's Eve?

Why do you fast during the month of Ramadan? Not even water?

Is it healthy?

...

Why are you not wearing a headscarf?

What do you think about the Islamic terror attacks?

I am sure that every young Muslim living in Europe was asked one if not

all of these questions at least once. Whereas the first questions are easy and quick to answer, the last two take more time and explaining.

It is more difficult to explain that even today, in a tolerant and open-minded Germany, women with headscarves face extreme forms of discrimination. That it is almost impossible to get a (highly qualified) job or rent an apartment and that they have to face several other difficulties just because of a piece of cloth on their heads which neither represents their intellect, nor their qualifications or personality. Seeing our mothers facing these difficulties causes us, the younger generation of German Muslim girls, to think twice about whether we should wear a scarf.

What do I think about Islamic terror attacks?

It should not be necessary to ask what Muslims think about “Islamic terror attacks.” It should be clear and obvious for everyone that we condemn them just as much as others do. Maybe even more than non-Muslims, as the violent acts put a wrong complexion on our religion and lead to stigmatisation. These events have transformed what being Muslim means from a private to a public experience, as Muslims always have to defend and explain themselves and the actions of others.

Is confessing religious preference in Europe only negative?

Luckily being Muslim in Europe does not only mean negative experiences and being stigmatised. The majority of people are open-minded and keen to learn about the differences and similarities and to broaden their horizons. Being Muslim can also lead to having a family and a home away from home. When I spent a semester abroad doing an internship in London a friend of my roommate happened to be a Muslim from Turkmenistan. When he saw that I was fasting he invited me to his home for iftar, which is the highly valued dinner at the end of a day of fasting mostly spend with the family. He said that nobody should be alone during Ramadan, even though I was still a stranger. Over time I came close to his family. They helped me whenever I needed something and invited me over as often as possible, becoming a second family.

I personally don't believe that generally people in Europe have deeper issues with Arabs or Muslims. Europeans fear changes. They know that Muslim and Arab cultures are different. In addition to that the media is doing its bit by promoting a negative image. It is somehow like creating and having a scapegoat for problems people or countries have.

I have never thought that being German could be a reason to be discriminated against in Europe until I went to Greece in October 2011 for a vacation. At bazaars or shops we were asked where we came from and we told everyone that we were Arabs, as we recognised very quickly that there was a lot of aggression towards Germans. While visiting one souvenir shop the owner overheard other tourists talking German and locked us up in his shop and started to insult us, saying that Germans never buy souvenirs and that we were the reason for the bad state of the Greek economy and the desperate financial situation. On the other hand, whenever we said that we were Arabs they were happy and their attitude changed into a friendlier one, recognising us as friends of the Greeks who share the same roots. I guess that this sentiment towards Arabs has changed nowadays as well, with the giant problems Greece faces regarding the refugee crisis. The economy is still bad and there is a new scapegoat. Who knows – maybe in a couple of years or decades this sentiment will be completely different again.

What I have seen for myself is that identity, as well as the stigmatisation of a certain other, depends on where you live. It doesn't only differ between countries such as Germany or Greece, but it matters whether you live in a small village like I do or in a big city.

Wouldn't it be better to be more open-minded and benefit from cultural enrichment rather than discriminating against certain groups of people? This thought leads me to my last frequently asked question.

Will the stigmatisation stay forever?

My wish for Europe is that it keeps continuing its path to become and be more tolerant – not only regulated in law, but also reflected in everyday life in society. Germany is already cosmopolitan and now it has to make sure that every member of society feels accepted and free to practise and work whatever they want, no matter of ethnicity, religion, looks, sexual orientation, or other individual characteristics. Europe is still young and has to overcome its first obstacles and first crises. There is still a long path until it reaches its final shape, if it will ever reach it.

I don't know if the existing images of violent Muslims and the refugee crisis have made things worse for European Muslims in the future, or if this might lead to some kind of change and help to raise awareness about the real and peaceful nature of Muslims, helping to overcome existing barriers in the minds of people and strengthening solidarity.

Hopefully, someday the slogan of the European Union – “united in diversity” – will be practised and embraced as the wonderful concept it is, and the people who fear others’ religions and cultures will understand that the main goal of Muslims in Europe is not to implement Sharia law, make everything halal or to cancel Christmas every year anew, but that it is about acceptance, equality, peaceful co-existence and respect for every one of us.

When this day arrives, I can finally stop asking myself my personal FAQs as to whether Europe, and Germany in particular, are really as tolerant as they would gladly see themselves.

I REFUSE TO SINK

When I started my trip to freedom I imagined myself sitting on a veranda together with my two nieces in Sweden. Now, while the fishing boat is keeling over and I can feel the cold water of the Mediterranean Sea around my ankles, I wish I could remember the smell of Syrian summer and feel the warm sun on my skin. But at the moment all I can see is the fear in the eyes of my mother and the desperate look of my father standing close to me. Both cannot swim, me neither. I hear the scared and angry cries around me. Some of them I cannot even understand. Bassam, my fiancée, is pressing my hand. My whole body starts quaking with fear. The boat begins sinking and everything is happening so quickly. All I want to do is survive somehow. I grab onto a life vest floating nearby in the dark rough sea. Bassam! I start searching for him but I cannot see anything, so I just shout his name as loudly as I can. Around me people screaming in different languages, catching hold of anything they can to survive somehow. The sea goes black and I am feeling like I am going to drown.

After a while the sea calms down and it becomes unbearably silent. One after another people go down deep into the sea, giving in to the cold, their tiredness, and their lost hope. Corpses are everywhere. I am feeling so lonely. I knew the risks, but all I want to have is a better and more secure life in Europe. A life without fears, without bombs and without death. But at the moment I am not sure if this was worthwhile. I can feel the fear of death in every piece of my body.

Suddenly I perceive a familiar voice. Bassam! With all my remaining power I finally reach him. Looking into his eyes I can see that he is struggling not to surrender. Recognising that he is also reaching his limits makes me start to cry. He is just pretending to be very brave but I know him very well. He touches my cheek and looks deeply into my eyes. "I am sorry my love. Please forgive me!" Then he surrenders and I have to release him into the cold dark water of the Mediterranean Sea.

The sea took everything I had.

Suddenly, I wake up, sigh with relief that it was just a dream, but I am still very shaken by all the emotions. I start crying. My fiancée next to me wakes up and holds me tight. "It could have been me," I tell him the details about

my dream and also the similarities to my own life. "It was me, struggling to survive in the sea. The girl was the same age as me. Her fiancée Bassam looked and felt like you. Do you understand? I am living the life she was dreaming of, living well protected in a calm environment."

But my fiancée does not seem to be as touched as I am. "It was just a dream," he calms me. But it felt so real. I am trembling, and nevertheless I start with my daily routine. I go to work, have lunch with my colleagues and go to volleyball training afterwards. As usual I get annoyed about the trains which are never on time, I am looking forward to meeting a friend in the evening and I am very happy that finally I have received a binding promise for my semester abroad. Actually, it seems to be my lucky day but I am still somewhere else. My thoughts are with the girl trying to survive in the Mediterranean Sea.

Sitting in the train on my way back home I listen to a conversation between two older women. They are talking about refugees. "Believe me," one is saying to the other, "all the refugees are just coming for the money they get for free. My granddaughter is acting in a play next month and all the children's parents have to buy the costumes themselves, because the school does not get enough money from the state. Can you imagine that? All the money they have is given to the refugees and we suffer."

Listening to these two ladies makes me sad and angry. Somehow I feel attacked because just this morning I was one of those refugees, trying to survive in the sea. How can they really believe that they are in the right? The simple truth is that refugees would not risk their lives on a journey so dangerous if they could survive where they are. Nobody would resort to handing over their life savings to smugglers if there were a possibility to migrate legally. Even if they wanted to return, they cannot because their homes have been completely destroyed. And no one would be on those boats if they could live their lives in freedom and safety. Those people have the same rights as we Europeans.

Back home, I started doing some research. Almost sixty million people are now displaced worldwide. That is eight million more than last year and already the largest number since the Second World War. In 2014 at least 219,000 refugees and migrants crossed the Mediterranean Sea to reach safety. How many actually died along that passage over the dark sea we will never know. And unfortunately also their families will not know what happened to their loved ones. The International Organisation for Migrations

estimates that 22,400 migrants and asylum seekers have died since 2000 in attempts to reach safety in the European Union.

What is happening next? The current refugee “crisis” is one of the biggest challenges in Europe and is driving Europe further and further apart. I don’t understand the public fears. European citizens worry about their security, their economy and the loss of their culture. But is this selfishness and the fear of the unknown an apology to avoid saving human lives? Do we really want to spread the value of egoism among the youth of our continent? Freedom, tolerance, respect and human rights are essential elements of European societies. And these rights should not only be valid for us, but for all the refugees coming to Europe. It remains Europe’s decision, our decision. Sure, the easiest way is just to look the other way. If you cannot see and feel it, it does not touch you. This time it was me on the boat trying to survive in the Mediterranean Sea but it could have been you as well. Put yourself in their shoes. Would you risk your life and accept the fact that you might not see your family and friends any more, living a lonely life just to reach safety? Imagine you are on a boat in the Mediterranean Sea.

PART THREE

Europe in Thirty Years from Now

Alesia Ehrhardt

Europe is our home. It depends on us how we want to live in it: under one roof or under different, solitary or disjoint rooves, openly or isolated. Time will tell. The idea of united countries is brilliant and I truly believe in it. By definition a community cannot be weaker than an individual. For a European Union, what is needed is to preserve the national interests of the individual countries, a rational distribution of financial resources by each state to the main pot and the execution of policy based on the principles of equality and trust. This will sustain European identity. The European Union is a young association that is constantly gaining experience of becoming, through trial and error, and wins and losses – just like any other young organism. Let's be patient and add to the work of our predecessors to build a strong and lasting home for those who come after us.

Alexander Herold

My vision for Europe is that there will be millions of people going on their own odysseys with their own individual stories. The Europe I want my children to see is an open-minded and warm-hearted European people that will not judge people according to their passports, skin colour or religion any more. I want my children to grow up in a world of diversity in which no one will be left behind and everybody will be able to travel as easily as I was able to. Europe in thirty years is going to be a much better place to live in for people from all parts of the world; that is at least what I am hoping for and dedicating my life to. Europe is a dream which lives in all of us; however, it is up to us to listen to it and to actively develop and realise it.

Alisa Schmid

I feel uncertain about Europe's future, especially after what happened in Paris and Brussels. Europe used to be a place of peace and freedom. A place of mobility and security. But the terrorist attacks changed my view of Europe's future. I believe it is just a matter of time until the next terrorist attacks happen. It is very unpredictable and scary and I wish it would stop and everyone could live in freedom. For me war was always in the past, something we left behind, and I never thought that Europe would be at war again. But now Europe is at war against ISIS and I hope that all European countries will work together, support each other and focus on European rather than on national interests.

Another reason why I feel uncertain about Europe is the millions of migrants and refugees who crossed into Europe last year and the majority arrived by sea. Many people died on their way to Europe because their journey is so dangerous. I feel very sad about the fact that people have to illegally get onto a boat to cross the Mediterranean Sea to enter Europe. Many people died on their way to Europe and all they were searching for was a better life in peace. Which I believe is a basic human right regardless of your nationality.

I feel that Europe has many challenges to overcome and I hope that all European countries will collaborate to make Europe what it should be: a place of liberty and equality.

Anastasiia Soloveva

Speaking about Europe's future development I think it is going to become a strengthened version of itself today, keeping the existing tendencies going. Europe will become more internationalised and more diverse until it reaches the point when it will need to go in another direction. For me, I hope Europe will stay united and keep the best we appreciate in it – its values, culture, free movement, diversity of lifestyles and high standards of living. I hope Europe will be able to keep its identity and not succumb to external influences in terms of culture, as well as manage economic difficulties and resolve political issues – which will allow it to stay a safe place where people can develop themselves, making our shared lives better.

Anastasiya Ahn

What I want to see in the future is us all living without any boundaries, so we can meet a huge amount of interesting people to share knowledge, experience and relationships. Europe would have one unique system of rules, law, education, work requirements, and one currency in every country of a union. Sometimes I feel that the European Union does not behave as one organism, but tries to identify some "guilty countries" for some unpleasant situations. I would prefer them finding solutions for problems together, as a real union. In the future I would like to see that everything has to be perceived as a common goal of all countries within the EU. Common problems. Common solutions. Common success.

Anna Bikmetova

In my opinion the number of original "Europeans" in Europe will decrease. This can be seen today already in France, Belgium, Germany and in other

European countries. The birth rate is too low in many European countries. Even if people get married or live in civil partnerships they don't care about having children. Nowadays we can see that refugees are moving to Europe. If you go to France now, you will meet an "original Frenchman" very seldom. Refugees are coming with big families, their children will continue to live in Europe. In thirty years there will be a large number of immigrants in almost all the European countries. I don't want to say that this is bad. It is just my vision of Europe in thirty years.

Eboa Body Elvis Moliki

I wish for clarity in Europe. Clarity while acknowledging European values. As an immigrant from Cameroon, I do believe that the values of democracy, tolerance, equality, solidarity, and the rule of law which Europe today is proud of can transform other regions, places and even continents around the world. I wish for European clarity in performing and exercising its responsibilities as a continent with an experience of transition. The impression Europe is giving the world at the moment might seem controversial or even sinister, with rising nationalism and xenophobia. There is still room for clarification of the past and optimism towards the future without allowing the repetition of Europe's darkest moments. And finally, I wish for a future Europe that is not implosively fragmented but integrated.

Ekaterina Korneichuk

2036. Turkey is celebrating accession to the European Union after a long wait. That event is a consequence of successful integration and a result of the accession of Ukraine and Moldova to the EU in 2025. This has made European culture richer and more diverse. Due to the successful resolution of the refugee crisis of 2015, Europe underwent demographic changes. The percentage of Muslims has risen and the share of mixed families has increased. The European population has grown as well. By working together to overcome such a serious issue, people have become more united and more open. Europe is less afraid of the difficulties than before because now citizens are sure that by staying together and being part of a strong union they are capable of finding a solution for all their problems.

Evá Listár

Apart from Brexit, I hope that in the future all European countries will work better together in order to solve their problems faster and quicker. I

believe that somehow the nations will be able to cope with the migration situation and hopefully people are going to show more solidarity, and be more tolerant and empathetic. From my point of view the creation of the European Union was a great initiative; hopefully it will regain its popularity and more and more countries will want to join and introduce the common currency that could make them even more united.

Giovanni De Nuccio

Europe is facing some important problems at the moment, between economic and political issues and more precisely Brexit, immigration and terrorism. My vision of the future of Europe is not really different than what Europe is today. I guess Europe will face many challenges, maybe the same ones, but I hope better ones. I'm thinking about a united Europe where countries would finally realise how important it is to support each other in good but also tough times. If Europe was built for peace at the beginning, Europe should always remember that unity is what makes us stronger and that is what will help us go further together.

Jessica Novakovic

Europe was once young and green, bringing its admirers, critics, friends and enemies into being. Several decades have passed and Europe has become more mature as it has experienced the maturity of these admirers, critics, friends and enemies. It has learned how to work on its cohesion from inside and how to present itself to the outside. This experience has made Europe and this will always distinguish it from its admirers, critics, friends and enemies. However, it will give Europe the chance to reinvent itself as a place of lyrical origin, industrial evolution and perfect union in the future. But this time, Europe will be strengthened by its own economic, political and military power as a union.

Kirill Kudriavtcev

Now we are living in a world of globalisation. There are a lot of unions and alliances nowadays. The European Union will stay for many years. It will become bigger than it is now. But I believe that in the distant future such things as borders, countries, languages, nationalities, values, laws, and cultures will become unified. We will have one language, nationality, common values, laws and culture for all people on the Earth. We will have only one border – our planet. We will have only one country. My words sound utopian but

I really think that this is the purpose of globalisation. Nowadays we can see how people cross borders between different countries, how people absorb and take in new cultures and how this mix of cultures is changing them. We have already become victims of globally standardised products and services. More and more companies are selling one product all over the world.

Previously I was talking about whole world. The European Union is a small world inside a big one. They are trying to make one big country from twenty-eight smaller ones. And one day they will be successful in this.

Lisa Otto

I believe in Europe. It has changed so much, has offered us all the opportunities of a lifetime and it will continue to do so. We will continue changing to make things better, grow together and live in peace and comfort. I believe that Europe is the right way to go and that we will continue to be a role model for equality, equity and communality. We will keep on growing to make the world a better place. It might sound utopian and I know this is not a perfect world, but for my future children's sake I want to believe that this is within the bounds of possibility.

Marcela Barrera

Perhaps two years ago if someone had asked me for an opinion on how I see Europe in the future, I would have answered with a simple word: "perfect." I guess giving opinions without clear arguments or ideas about the current situation is very easy and whoever can say whatever, because it is just an opinion. But now, in the year 2016, I see the European Idea with other eyes, thanks to my master's studies and thanks to my international classmates. I can see Europe in the future from a much broader perspective.

Describing Europe itself is tricky and can lead to thousands of answers coming from different observers. Today I am going to comment on how I see Europe in thirty years, actually how I see the European Union, because that is what Europe is for me. And I will do it from the heart instead of from the rational brain.

I admire what the European Union has achieved so far, the integration and sharing of sovereignty is something unique and special. I am positive that the EU will overcome all troubles and issues that are hurting the system at the moment. In one way or another the EU will rise and stand up strong and victorious from these years of crisis. Hopefully the desire for more open

commercial borders with the world will not alter the good and effective standards and regulations that protect not only Europeans' well-being, but also the environment, labour and the quality of life. I see a European Union defending peoples' interests and asserting democracy. I see an EU combating the financial system and the multinationals that want to rule the world by stepping on people's lives.

In thirty years, I would love to come to Europe and feel the same sensation of freedom, happiness and possibilities as I did when I first came. I would love to walk again out in the streets and feel safe breathing clean air and watching rabbits and foxes running around at night in such metropolises as Berlin or Vienna. That speaks volumes of a sustainable environment where we all live in harmony.

I hope for a united European Union, solving conflicts together and maintaining the good name and reputation the EU brand has had until now. But I also believe that for that to happen EU leaders should have the moral courage and be wise enough when it comes to saying no and when it comes to saying yes in the light of the world's never-ending problems.

Marion Devouassoux

The Europe of tomorrow depends on the attitudes of its citizens toward it. I have the feeling that today Europe is either seen as a powerful economy resulting from the merger of twenty-eight markets, or as a complex institution with no impact on citizens' everyday life.

In thirty years, I wish Europe to be defined differently. Europe is allowing its citizens to travel, to study, to work freely among countries. I wish that within this period of time many will have seized those chances. Ideally this would lead to generations of European citizens aware of cultural differences and similarities and steady to accept them. This would shape an open-minded and dynamic Europe.

To reach this stage, there is a crucial need to promote Europe. I am sorry to see that, today, images of Europe are all about a Eurozone crisis, a refugee crisis and endless meetings in Brussels. What about the absence of armed conflicts thanks to the tight cooperation between states? What about all the co-financed projects that help disadvantaged regions to catch up? What about the opportunity given to EU citizens to travel freely?

Europe is a great achievement. I wish that in thirty years people will realise that more than we do today and can finally stand proud for being European.

Marion Mazabrard

Europe is nowadays facing a lot of challenges and is going to face a lot more in the next years since its wealth as well as its population are decreasing. I believe we must continue the work of the mothers and fathers of Europe, with the same view, but by using different means. The European Union enabled some economic progress and a certain convergence. However, the level of political federalism has been reduced due to the unwillingness of countries to lose their sovereignty and this is causing disequilibrium. We, the young generation, should work on finding solutions to establish a balance again. I would like to see movement towards “a United States of Europe” even though it seems unrealistic nowadays.

In the future, I hope my children and grandchildren will be happy living in Europe and will not struggle to have the same standards of living as we do. I hope they will realise that they benefit a lot from the European Union and that diversity is not a barrier to the success. I hope more people will have a strong feeling of being European and will spread the beautiful values of democracy, equality and freedom.

Mohamed Hekal

For me Europe in the future will be more diverse than ever. The refugee crisis, which is a very big issue now, will also confront Europe with different values and different cultures. It will be our task to integrate people into our lives and let them adopt the values we stand for and definitely also accept some of their values. Maybe from this mixture, Europe will have some different values in the future, which might change the view we have about Europe now. Another thing that will change Europe in the future is that more countries might join the EU and make it stronger and bigger than before. Hopefully Brexit will be a warning signal for the EU and it will be a once-only experience. For the future I hope Europe will remain a place of freedom and peace and a place where dreams come true. I personally believe in the EU and support it as much as I can – now and forever!

Sanel Habibović

I hope Europe in the future will be a place where the question where someone comes from will not be important as long as one is human.

Selma Djouchadar

Many countries within the European Union are seeing a rise of right-wing parties at the moment. My hope for the next decades is that Europe will never forget its history and the results of having a fascist dictatorship at its centre. That it copes with the rising threat from the far right and finds a way of dealing with the challenges of integrating refugees, scepticism towards the EU and the economic downturn that fuel the fears of many. I wish that in thirty years I will still witness a united Europe and not different sovereign countries which have terminated the union. My hope is that we will be further united in our diversities and not separated by them and that Europe will be further enriched by new cultures mixing with its old cultures, instead of being deprecating and grudging. There is and will always be a place for everyone.

Victoria Korreckt

Does Europe have a future? Europe is a unique continent. Isn't it amazing that people from different countries came together to build a strong and peaceful union under the slogan "united in diversity" to guarantee peace and stability? For the future, I hope Europe is going to be more diverse and European citizens won't fear immigrants, but that they will look forward to meeting them, that we will learn from each other and that Europeans will perceive immigrants as a cultural enrichment.

THE AUTHORS

ALESIA EHRHARDT, hey folks, I was born in Brest in Belarus and I live in Berlin, Germany. My educational transit began with grammar school in Frankfurt an der Oder and continued at Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau. I almost have my master of arts in European Management. I have experience in creative industries like film, fashion and photography, in Hamburg, Berlin, Paris and London. My interests are in aesthetics and creativity. Well, in my heart, I am a dreamer. Participation in this story-telling project was something I enjoyed a lot. It was my first and most likely the last time I practised the art of writing. Maybe I will write a sequel in some twenty-five years, but only for a smaller circle of readers like my children and grandchildren. We all have something to say. "We" here means the generation that has crossed the historical boarder from the twentieth to the twenty-first century.

ALEXANDER HEROLD, after finishing vocational grammar school in the field of business administration in Germany in 2011, I moved to Poland because of love. There I studied International Relations and European Studies. I spent an exchange semester in Finland where I met my second love. After Poland I moved to Sweden in order to spend a year learning Swedish. In 2015 I started my master's in European Management in Wildau, Germany, in the course of which I will be moving to Istanbul for at least one semester. During these five years of study I have been able to work in the German embassy in Poland, the German-Swedish Chamber of Commerce in Malmo and a large German electricity company responsible for the Swedish market. My main goal for my upcoming Erasmus semester is to achieve fluency in a fifth language. Europe provides me with the opportunity to be able to follow my dreams and I therefore proudly call myself a European.

ALISA SCHMID, born 1991 in Lindau, Germany. B.A. International Business from Berlin School of Economics and Law, including two semesters in Cambridge, United Kingdom, and an internship semester in Singapore. M.A. European Management from Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau. Student in the MA programme in Mediation and Conflict Management at the Viadrina University in Frankfurt (Oder). Project Assistant in the Student Advisory and Recruitment Centre at the Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau.

ANASTASIJA SOLOVEVA, born 1994 in Saint Petersburg, Russia. I did a BSc in economics at Peter the Great Saint Petersburg Polytechnic University.

Currently I am a master's of economics student at the same university. During my bachelor's I studied at the Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft Berlin as an exchange student. Now I am studying for a double degree with the Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau, Germany.

ANASTASIYA AHN, born 1993 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. BA in International Management from Peter the Great Saint Petersburg Polytechnic University, including an internship semester in Wildau, Germany. Student in the MA programme in Business Development and Innovation in International Contexts at Peter the Great Saint Petersburg Polytechnic University and in the MA programme in European Management at Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau in a double degree programme. I aim to work in energy sector in development.

ANNA BIKMETOVA, born 1993 in Saint Petersburg, Russia. BA in International Business at Peter the Great Saint Petersburg Polytechnic University, diploma with distinction. Student in the MA programme in International Economics at Peter the Great Saint Petersburg Polytechnic University and in European Management at Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau, Germany. I am a competitive swimmer and I graduated from ballet and music school. I aim to work in the field of European or Russian economics.

EBOA BODY ELVIS MOLIKI, born in Cameroon. I studied at CCAS (Cameroon College of Arts and Science). After vocational training at WBS Training AG Berlin in System Integration (Information Technology), I studied and obtained a bachelor's degree in International Business at Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft Berlin with an internship at PrimaHolding GmbH in Berlin. Presently, I am a student in the European Management master's programme at Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau. My aims are to achieve further certifications and a higher degree in finance (CFA or FRM and MBA) so as to perform professionally in the industry.

EKATERINA KORNEICHUK, born 1993 in Saint Petersburg, Russia. I did a bachelor's degree in Human Resources Management at St. Petersburg State University of Economics, including an internship in Saint Petersburg in the human resources department of Baltika Brewery, the second largest brewing company in Russia. As soon as my university life began I started to attend dancing school. Dancing became my passion and I was deeply involved in it during the four years I spent at university. In the third year of my bachelor's degree my team had several events abroad, and therefore I decided to find a student job to be able to fund my journeys. Working, studying and dancing

at the same time meant a year with no free weekends and not enough sleep, but it was a wonderful experience. After my bachelor's I moved to Berlin and now I am a student in the master's programme in European Management at Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau. Studying and living in Berlin gave me an opportunity to see the world in a different way, to meet wonderful people from different corners of the world, and to learn a lot from them. Here I found my love. I always thought I would work in HR, today I don't know. The most important thing is to find something where you always keep learning.

ÉVA LISTÁR, born 1990 in Mór, Hungary. BA in Administration Management at the National University of Public Service, Budapest. Student in the MA programme in European Management at Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau. I will spend the next semester in Vilnius, Lithuania. I aim to work in the fields of human resources and marketing in the future.

GIOVANNI DE NUCCIO, born 1993 in Croix, France. I started my academic route with a bachelor's in Economics. Since I was very interested in business relationships between countries, I did a first year of a master's in Economics and International Management in Lille, France. Then I decided to focus on Europe with a master's in European Affairs, dealing with current issues and the institutional framework of the European Union. Going abroad was on my "to do" list, so I decided to take part in a double degree partnership in Germany with the Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau. This experience made me realise how strong my desire was to live abroad. I would like to find an internship in Germany and then to move there.

JESSICA NOVAKOVIC, born 1990 in Munich, Germany. BA in European Management from Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau, including an internship in Paris, France. Student in the MA programme in European Management at Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau, Germany. I intend to write my master's thesis in politics and I aim to work in international politics in the future.

KIRILL KUDRIAVTCEV, born 1994 in Saint Petersburg, Russia. I did a BA in International Management at Peter the Great Saint Petersburg Polytechnic University. I am now a student in the MA programme in Business Development and Innovation in International Contexts at the same university. I am studying for a double degree with Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau, Germany. I aim to create my own business in the future.

LISA OTTO, I was asked to write my bio, so I thought about what I want you to know about me. Here are some quick facts to start with: my name, obviously, as the most important information – Lisa Otto. I know, probably as German as it gets. I was born on 2 July 1989, which means the Berlin Wall still existed and this is where I grew up – East Berlin. One could think that I was influenced by the East German system, because, after all, my entire family spent their whole lives there, but, on the contrary, I was raised to be open-minded, tolerant and sophisticated. After graduating high school, I did a voluntary year of social service, completed vocational training to become an industrial clerk, worked as an interim HR business partner and then started my bachelor's programme in European Management. I spent some months in the US, Pittsburgh to be precise, to do an internship over there. Honestly, I had the time of my life and even if they say there is no such thing as the American way of life, I lived it. Now I am 27 years old, working on my master's degree in European Management, and I travel as often and as far away as possible, because one day I want those words engraved on my tombstone: she has seen it all.

MARCELA BARRERA, hey there, the first thing I want you to know is that whatever your dreams and wishes are, through discipline, planning, pragmatism and remarkable skills in saving money, depending on your social conditions, you can achieve the unimaginable. I am Marcela and was born in 1989 in Bogota in a middle-class family. My very loving mother Cecilia and hard-working father José raised me with good values and formed a family of four after my little big brother Cristian was born in 1997. I want to emphasize that it feels good to be Colombian and have the inner strength, positivism and warmth that characterises us. Believe me, those attributes help a lot in the long cold European winter. After high school, I started vocational training in corporate management in Bogota, as university was very expensive and not an option. However when I finished I still wanted to go to university so I chose the only path to reach the goal. I worked full time while pursuing my BA in Business Administration in the evenings for three years. It wasn't a very easy task, but it was possible and I did it. Those years of working experience in marketing, customer service and international procurement were a very special time for me since I believe in "learning by doing" and was able myself to experience that for real. Bogota is a diverse, vibrant city of culture, but it is also messy, full of people and has no metro. My goal was to experience other cultures and lifestyles; I knew there was something different awaiting me far away from that city. In August 2011, I first travelled to Europe, the continent

that now I consider my homeland. I lived in The Netherlands for almost one year. It was the best year of my life in all possible senses. In 2013 back in Bogota, I envisaged my next goal, I wanted a master's degree from Germany. So I moved to Austria where I was able to start learning German and worked in a fantastic hotel for some time. People asked me why I came to Austria to learn German. I never understood why they asked ... Nowadays, after overcoming stumbles and after piling up experiences, I am finally pursuing my master's programme in European Management at Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau. The master's has offered me much more than expected. The multiculturalism in our group has helped me to think about global cultures and to become more critical about diverse topics, and to develop clearer arguments. My love for Europe, its history, revival and future grows every day. I have developed a great interest in European politics and history. I aim to work in international organisations, NGOs, or international politics. Sustainability and entrepreneurship are new interests that I would like to discover further. Now, at the age of 27 years I can say that the present and the future seem bright and I like it!

MARION DEVOUASSOUX, born in Chamonix, France. Chamonix is a village, yet many foreigners come there to enjoy the Alps. The international atmosphere I grew up with may have influenced some of the choices I have made. After a BA in Business Administration at IUT Annecy, France, I seized the opportunity offered by Erasmus and flew to Trondheim, Norway, for one year of study. Back in France, I enrolled in a MA programme in European Management at Lille 1 University, France. Willing to see more of Europe and of the different teaching methods across countries, I studied one semester at the Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau, Germany. Currently I am an intern at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) in Geneva, Switzerland, where every day I enjoy the international working environment. I can see my future working on European projects related to food quality in Europe.

MARION MAZABRARD, born 1994 in Saint-Agrève, an authentic small French village in an unspoilt setting, which nobody wants to get away from. Even though I was feeling at ease in this "green bubble," I wanted to see what the world actually looked like outside of it. I ended up moving more than I had never expected. I have a BA in Economics and Management from Grenoble Alpes University, France, including an Erasmus year abroad in Karlstad, Sweden. I am currently a student of the MA programme in European Management at Lille 1 University, France, including one semester at Technical

University of Applied Sciences Wildau, Germany, as part of a double degree programme. After five years of studies and travels, I realised that there are plenty of “bubbles” in Europe where I may feel at home and this is one of the reasons why I want to work for the European Union in the future.

MOHAMED HEKAL, born 1990 in Berlin, Germany. BA in Business Administration at The Berlin School of Economics and Law, including an internship semester in Berlin, Germany, and also internships in London, UK and Amman, Jordan. Student in the MA programme in European Management at Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau. I intend to spend next semester in Bangkok, Thailand. I aim to work in the fields of human resources or supply chain management in the future.

SANEL HABIBOVIĆ, born 1992 in Zagreb, Croatia. BA in European Management at Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau, Germany, including an internship semester in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Student in the MA programme in European Management at Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau. I will spend the next semester in Bangkok, Thailand. I aim to work in the fields of human resources and accounting in the future.

SELMA DJOUCADAR, born 1993 in Berlin, Germany, five years after my mother left her beloved home country Syria to establish a new life and family with my half-German, half-Syrian father. I was raised with a good mix of Arabic and German values and traditions – receiving the best of both worlds. They taught me to always be kind, respectful and hard-working. After finishing school I decided to start a BA in European Management at Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau, Germany. The distances between my home, my former school and the TUAS Wildau are less than 20 km – but my drive to experience new and foreign environments was soon to be discovered. The degree programme included an internship semester abroad which I completed successfully in London, United Kingdom.

Back at university it was soon time to write my bachelor’s thesis for which I picked a topic related to my story. I wrote about the discrimination in the job application process in Germany based on the ethnic background and religion of the applicants. Now, two years later, I am writing my master’s thesis in the field of human resources management and am about to be a master of arts in European Management. I spent the third semester of my master’s at the Siam University in Bangkok, Thailand. There I strengthened the awareness of how important it is to find the right balance between adapting to something new and staying true to the familiar. In the near future I aim to work in the field of human resources management.

VICTORIA KORRECKT, born 1989 in Mühlhausen, Germany. After finishing grammar school I went to incredible India to do some voluntary work. Three days a week I worked in a girls' college in Baramati, a small village. The rest of the week I was employed in a childcare home in Pune, one of India's megacities. I travelled around the whole country, and to its neighbours Pakistan, Nepal and Thailand. I fell in love with India, its diversity, its culture and of course its people. After one year I therefore decided to stay for six more months. Arriving back in Germany I felt lost. I did not feel German anymore and it was hard for me to adapt to my old environment and to be put into the shoes my family and friends wanted to see me in. I decided to do my BA and BSc in European Public Administration with a special emphasis on international management and exploration at the University of Twente in Enschede and at the University of Muenster, including an internship semester in Penang, Malaysia. Thanks to an elective study programme during my bachelor's I had the chance to visit India for a second time and to do some cultural research. The journey helped me to perceive my European identity from another perspective. I decided to join the master's programme in European Management at Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau. Part-time I work as a recruiter for an international company. I aim to work in the fields of international human resources management, especially human resources development.

THE EDITOR

GREG BOND, born 1963 in Manchester, UK, where I grew up. I teach at the Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau and coordinate language services there. First lived in Germany in 1983, for a year in Hamburg. Later lived in Leipzig (1985–1987), and spent a period with an Erasmus “free mover” scholarship in Frankfurt am Main (1989) and another with a DAAD scholarship in Berlin (1990–1992), where I have been living ever since. I have a PhD in German literature and an MA in mediation. I work as a teacher, trainer, facilitator and mediator, and am involved in numerous international projects, often with students from around the world. I have published and edited essays and books on German and European literature, teaching methodologies and mediation. I count myself lucky – and privileged – to be able to work in exciting and meaningful European and international contexts.

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In recent years, Europe has been facing difficult times. There is a perceived need to legitimise the European project anew. The attraction of Europe to so many people outside Europe is undisputed, while within Europe the challenges seem to be greater than ever. Through focusing on the challenges, Europeans may forget what Europe has achieved.

This book takes a different perspective – that of young people from all over the world studying in Europe, asking themselves what Europe means to them. All of them took part in the international master's in European Management at Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau.

They write about their own lives, beyond ideology, with remarkable perception and insight into contemporary and historical Europe. Together these stories provide a complex European narrative, in which questions as to shared aspirations are raised. The stories are full of passion and energy. They are humorous and serious, and some of them will move you to tears. They are stories about how travel, leaving home and arriving somewhere else changes people, about how meeting people in new cultures and places leads to self-reflection, and about how this can challenge values and stereotypes. They are stories about falling in love. These are views from inside and outside Europe, and they offer a compelling answer to the question as to what Europe is – or can be.

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