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MY IVLP... WASHINGTON – BALTIMORE – CHARLOTTE – SAN ANTONIO – SALT LAKE CITY...

FINAL DESTINATION... SALT LAKE CITY...

I leave San Antonio and I am already on a plane to Utah/Salt Lake City. The city is known to many as one of the venues of the Olympic Games. Few are aware that the state of Utah is the center of the Mormon religion. And at the same time it is also the last stop our [IVLP \(International Visitor Leadership Program\)](#) will be finished with. The program has taken our extremely diverse group from Washington to Baltimore, Charlotte, San Antonio and now to Salt Lake City. Linked with the goal to understand what is meant by the term "USA" in religious, political and cultural terms. And indeed, that is not an easy task. After all, the USA is a melting pot of cultures, religions, opinions and worldviews. While Central and Northern Europe are rather rational and Southern Europe subjective, something that can be felt like an invisible dividing line even within Europe, this is nothing compared to the diversity of feelings and dogmas in the USA. It sometimes seems as if opposites attract in this country, only to repel each other again. High technology meets religious ideologies that could complement each other, but don't have to. The East Coast considers itself the intellectual center, Texas the Supreme Commander, towards Utah Christianity leaves its footprints, and on the West Coast, around Silicon Valley, you can't help but be amazed when you listen to the ideas of young and creative engineers.

Our group has grown together during the last three weeks. Marcelo, we call him Boss Marcelino, our group leader, introduced us to the diverse culture in an extremely intensive and lively way. His historical and political knowledge was invaluable and often helped us, on site, to better understand conditions. Vibeke, whom I simply nicknamed Viking because of her Norwegian heritage, was coolly silent at first. I had the feeling, maybe that was part of the Scandinavian culture, that she was rather eager not to attract attention. Melika, whom I gave the title "Queen", comes from Bosnia - Herzegovina. Her name, which is Semitic, really means queen. You could notice that Melika has experienced war in former Yugoslavia. Something I have in common with the strong-willed participant. Vladimir is a priest, belongs to the Evangelical Church and is from Belarus. In Aramaic, which is my mother tongue, we address priests as "Abuna," meaning "Father." And so it remained. After a short time everyone in group just called him Abuna. I remember very well how "Abuna" could hardly wait to go to a rodeo in Texas, to see a real sheriff and to wear a cowboy hat. I noticed Gökçen, who originally is from Turkey like me, as a human "thing" in an oversized and bright red winter parka when we first met. And not just me. The entire community around us reacted to the red thing, which was immediately noticed everywhere and, because I could never pronounce her name, earned her the nickname "Ms. Red." Ms. Red and I had a lot of fun talking in German, which always earned us a nice and humorous rebuke from Marcelo. Everyone considered the "Germans" being too dominant in the discourse during the trips. That was pretty funny when you take a closer look at our two backgrounds. And finally, there was Vasiliki, who is from Greece, and whom I gave the title of Ms. Athens. I have to admit, I quite enjoyed arguing with her as well. All our conversations, philosophical in nature, provided me with a lot. Her intellect was at its best when it came about justice in the world. I also enjoyed taking pictures of her.

It is surprising that it takes such a long distance from home to better understand your closest neighbor, with all their worries and hopes. Melika, for example, lives in a divided country, in the middle of Europe, where religious differences can still play a role. Vladimir, the only Lutheran priest in Belarus, is unable to exercise the freedom that citizens of the EU enjoy. Vasiliki, who is pedagogically extremely educated and operates very empathetically, is more than eager to unite religion and diversity across borders. Vibeke, the quiet Norwegian, is trying to identify the code that pushes people to commit assaults. And Gökçen, who has so much in common with me, possibly faces the most difficult task of all of us. She has to teach aspiring Islamic theologians to define religion beyond the absolute, aligned with the current age. Islam is one of the largest religions in the world. It is growing worldwide. Even in the United States. But faith also leads many people into a deep conflict with themselves and God when it comes to balancing the freedom of the individual with their own faith. Something that the many foundations, universities and associations in the USA are willing to do every day, precisely because of the strong political division in the country.

And so it is with joy and respect that I remember Dr. Raymond Blanton, who teaches students from all over the world the symbolism, the "code" of what art brings to society in his special subject - "Communication Arts" - at the UIW (University of the Incarnate Word - UIW -4301 Broadway San Antonio, TX 78209). Struggling with the rapid pace of technological development, art has also went through an intensive process of transformation. With both positive and negative results. For example, fake news, fake videos, fake paintings... are a certain kind of art. But precisely in that negative form that divides society and turns a politician into a digital "messiah", who has mastered the art of "Twittering" emotionally and has thrown the world into a religious and artistic disaster.

After all, the division of society is also a crisis of art that is no longer able to teach knowledge, because in the age of fast-moving headlines that feed us with "fast food news" on our Facebook timeline, there is no time left for profound philosophy.

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It will be up to people and scientists like Dr. Raymond Blanton, Gökçen, Vladimir, Melika, Vasiliki and Vibeke to develop a key (code) to counteract the division of society caused by false prophets in the media and political context.

Even to reunite them.

In the deep hope that people will act as human beings locally, while the elite will divide globally and, solely for the sake of power, drive out the values that still exist and work inside the USA, when they are relegated to the individual.

I was able to experience this every day, in conversation with the citizens of the United States.

Thank you for this...

Simon Jacob,
Flight transit - San Antonio/Salt Lake City,
25th February 2020

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