Ryan Eavenson’s Summer 2014 Experiences in Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic

My summer in Eastern Europe was a challenging, exciting, and rewarding experience. I had the opportunity through a FLAS to study Czech language at the intermediate level in Prague. As a student with a serious interest in Czech history in addition to Czech language, I couldn’t have been happier! But my journey did not begin in Prague. I decided to travel to some additional countries in Eastern Europe before the start of my intensive Czech language course. I wanted to take the opportunity to further advance my knowledge of this part of the world by exploring the culture and seeing in person the places I had read and heard so much about.

First, I flew to Budapest, Hungary, arriving in the mid-morning after a long flight from the United States. I was very tired, but excited to have finally arrived in Europe! I spent my first day getting acquainted with the city by walking around. I really enjoyed the experience of simply observing my surroundings and studying the amazing architecture of Budapest. Some of my most enjoyable experiences were venturing across the famous Chain Bridge, and stopping to admire its unique design and lion statues that greet you upon entry. This bridge provides a wonderful view of the Hungarian Parliament Building, which sits on the bank of the Danube. I walked down Andrássy Street, the historic main street of the city, and before leaving, I also made sure to eat a traditional Hungarian meal of chicken paprikash at a small local restaurant.

After a few days in Budapest, I traveled by train to Bratislava, Slovakia, where I arrived in the late afternoon. Eager to explore, I immediately walked down to the old historic district as the sun was beginning to set. With my knowledge of Czech, I found that I was able to read many of the Slovak signs throughout the city. This gave me a greater understanding of the close similarity between these two languages. In Bratislava, I visited the well-known castle which rests on a large hill overlooking the city. Nearby, I stopped to see St. Michael’s gate, which is a very old and important landmark. My last night in Bratislava was exceptionally memorable. I had the chance to observe a traditional Slovak folk dance at the main town square. This was an event that truly presented to me the essence of Slovakia’s rich culture and tradition.

The final part of my journey took me to Prague. Traveling by train allowed me to see the extraordinary countryside of Moravia, a part of the Czech Republic defined by clear lakes and dense forests. After a long trip from Bratislava, I finally arrived at my dorm. I immediately knew the moment I checked in that this was going to be an enriching summer because the receptionist only spoke to me in Czech. In Prague, I embarked on a demanding Czech language course while simultaneously experiencing Czech culture by visiting both museums and many historic locations. I found the Czech food to be excellent, and there were so many different meals to try. My favorite foods included beef goulash, potato dumplings, and the wide variety of freshly baked bread. Having a particular interest in post World War II Eastern Europe, I visited the Museum of Communism, where I was exposed in detail to the nature of life in the Czech lands during this period. My dorm was within walking distance of the Prague castle, a truly amazing structure. Through a walking
tour, I gained a greater appreciation for the importance of this castle and its place in Czech history. The cathedral in the castle complex is exceptional both for its size and design. In addition, I spent a great deal of time on the Charles Bridge, a place with tremendous historical significance and one of the most notable symbols of Prague. I was amazed by the exceptional detail of the numerous statues that line the bridge. Close to the Charles Bridge, I visited the Franz Kafka Museum. There, I had the unique chance to see some of the actual writings of this famous author while also learning new information about his life. Overall, it was wonderful to be able to constantly use and improve my Czech everyday during my time in the Czech Republic, and I am certain that I have developed a deeper understanding of Czech culture. I had a wonderful experience in Eastern Europe this summer, and I hope to return in the near future and continue to learn more about this unique part of the world.

Ryan Eavenson is a MA student in Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies. He is particularly interested in communist development in Eastern Europe. His additional interests include Imperial and Soviet Russian history, Czech history, and Russian and Czech language. He received a AB in History/Russian and East European Studies from Lafayette College in 2010. After graduation, he hopes to find employment focusing on international affairs and then continue his education.