

Marshall Plan Foundation Field Report

September 17, 2019 – March 19, 2020

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Host Institution: IST Austria

Project: Machine Learning for Super-Resolution Microscopy

General Impressions of Research & Quality of the Host Institution

I was working with the Danzl group at IST Austria, located 20 km northwest of the city of Vienna. I was mostly pleased with my working environment. Everyone I met at IST was friendly, welcoming, and extremely dedicated to their work. The institute had a fair amount of academic programming, including the well-attended weekly symposiums from distinguished guest speakers.

However, I would not recommend my particular research group due to several unresolved internal conflicts between the PI and the post-docs and graduate students. The tension created an unhealthy atmosphere in which my lab mates constantly overworked themselves and took much of the responsibility of running the lab on their shoulders. Personally, I only ever had friendly interactions with the PI, but I wish there had been a more conducive environment for healthy working relationships in the lab. The post-doc who was the main supervisor for the project was extremely capable and dedicated, and the success of the project is a credit to her excellent supervision.

IST is smaller and less established than other research institutions at which I have worked, and they have a rather limited spread of research interests. I would urge only future Marshall Plan applicants who have an excellent reason for working with a particular group at IST Austria to affiliate there.

I did enjoy that the institute being located outside of Vienna meant that I got to leave the city and see the Austrian countryside everyday, but the commute for future applicants should be a serious consideration. From my flat, I took the U-Bahn to Heiligenstadt (7 minutes from Schwedenplatz) and then took an IST shuttle to the institute (about 30 there in the morning, 40ish minutes back in the evening due to traffic) -- these shuttles run every half hour but are notoriously unreliable, so many days extra time was added to my commute because, e.g. the shuttle I was aiming to take had come 10 minutes prior and I had to wait at the station for the next one.

Living Abroad

Beyond my work, I felt I was able to integrate myself well into Viennese life. I joined the UniWien Symphonischer Chor, a local church (4 Corners), and a Christian fellowship (OESM) at UniWien for international students. I took a class at the Sprachenzentrum at UniWien, which was generously subsidized by the Fulbright Commission. I had a very positive experience in the class and my German improved dramatically.

I became close with an Austro-Scottish family with whom I stayed with for a bit when I first arrived in Austria and who introduced me to many facets of local Austrian life. One of the most visceral ways I was

able to share American culture while in Austria was, with the help of another American friend, preparing a traditional Thanksgiving dinner for our friends and my unofficial host family. Afterwards, my friends often commented that the experience positively changed their opinion of American culture.

Regarding the logistics of living abroad, I found Vienna to be a fairly livable city. I invested in a Wiener Linien student railcard and an OEBB Vorteils card Jugend discount card, which made using public transport in the city cheap and easy. I hadn't had much positive experience using public transport in the US but found Austria's to be extremely clean, punctual and useful. I chose to cook rather than eating out often to save money, and I found living costs to be comparable to what I was used to in the Mid Atlantic and New England regions of the US. My housing options were limited by the fact that many more affordable areas of Vienna would have made my commute horrendously long, so the centrally-located flat I ended up renting required a significant portion of my monthly stipend. Even so, I was able to do several weekend trips via train, bus, or plane (with a good amount of pre-planning).

Some travel planning applications I found extremely useful and can recommend to future Fulbrighters are Skyscanner (for flights), Wegfinder (for public transport routes within Vienna), Omio (for trains and buses), Hostelworld (for hostel booking), and Google Translate (for real-time translation of signage/written text via camera). I can also recommend to future Fulbrighters to get a sim card from Hoffer (€1) with the HoT data plan for €5.90/month as most calling/texting can be done via WhatsApp and you can simply pay for any necessary phone calls with a minutely rate. The card works at the same rate everywhere in Europe and allowed me to pay less than €10/month for all the calling/texting/messaging/web surfing I needed to do. I can also recommend an app called Too Good to Go, which allows you to order bags of leftover food from restaurants around the city very cheaply and helps to reduce food waste.

When the U.S. Fulbright program was suspended at the end of March, the Fulbright Commission generously paid for my evacuation back to the US. I was incredibly disappointed to leave the life I had built for myself in Vienna and hope to return at some point in the future. Nonetheless, I am extremely grateful to those who made my time in Austria possible.

Contacts within the Host Institution

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