

EU-Canada Student Mobility Program Personal Experience

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In spring 2010, through the EU-Canada exchange program, I had the excellent opportunity to do a four-month internship in the city of Tirgu Mures in Romania. I was very excited to work in the robotics lab at Sapientia University to finish the 2-on-2 hockey playing robots project.

Tirgu Mures

I arrived at Tirgu Mures in the middle of January with another colleague from my university. We, along with three other students from Winnipeg, rented a house in the outskirts of the city. The house was located in a very picturesque and peaceful neighborhood. We also rented a car which made our transportation to the university, in the city, and outside to other cities in Romania, relatively easy.



Our House, Tirgu Mures

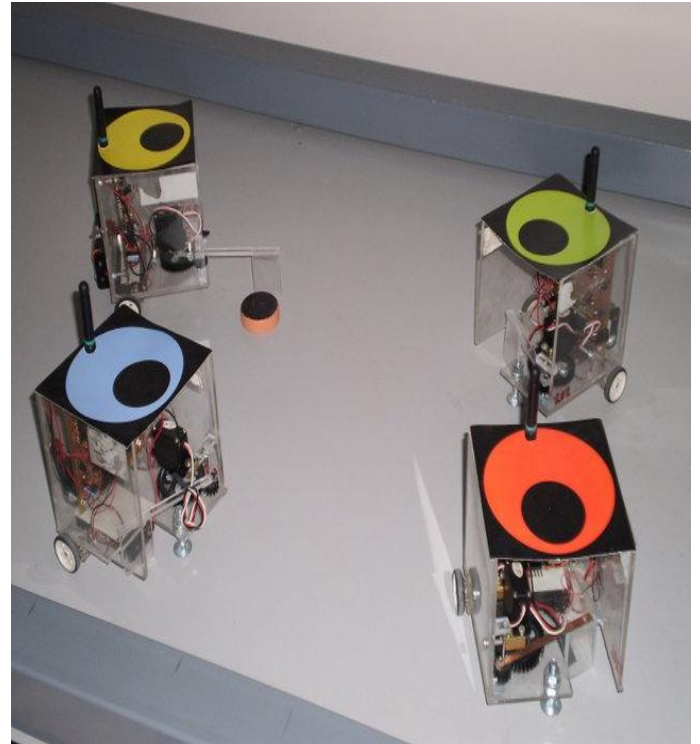


Our neighborhood, Tirgu Mures

Tirgu Mures is located in the province of Transylvania. The city is composed of a large population of Romanian and Hungarian people. Before coming to Romania, I was well aware of the problems I might face without any knowledge of Romanian or Hungarian language. However, the situation was far better than I thought. Majority of the people at the university spoke fluent English. Most of the young generation outside of university spoke English. I had an occasional trouble of communicating while getting grocery, or taking a taxi, but even then, the people were very patient and understanding of my situation. I managed to communicate my points across, regardless of the whether someone spoke English or not. However, I familiarized myself with the basic words and phrases of the Romanian language as time progressed. Very soon, we got used to all the streets of the city, and slowly but surely, the city started feeling like home. We loved the local food at various Hungarian and Romanian restaurants. In addition, we went swimming in the local pools in the city, and to the gym by the

university often. The city's atmosphere was very relaxing, the people were very polite and friendly, and the surrounding was very scenic.

Sapientia University



Sapientia University is located just outside the city centre of Tirgu Mures. It took us about 20 minutes to get to the university from our house daily. We worked in the Mechatronics laboratory of the University. On first sight, I was impressed by the different types of creative projects being done in the lab. Dr Marton Lorinc, our supervisor, gave us the tour of the university and introduced us to the staff members of various faculties. He briefed us about the project, giving us the bigger picture of the current situation, and explained us our individual roles to accomplish in order to finish the overall project. I was assigned the task of completing the higher-level artificial intelligence of the robots to assist them in their decision making during the gameplay. I started implementing my programming in MATLAB, and after successful initial testing phase, I shifted to C# simulated environment. Majority of my job involved testing and debugging at various levels to ensure the accuracy of the algorithm, and the compatibility of my newly programmed modules with the existing modules. I updated Dr Marton on the project regularly, and we discussed the current situation of the project and the future approach necessary. I loved the project, specially my part of the job, and it was very satisfying to see the algorithm working as expected, and the robots performing on the field.

The social atmosphere at the university was phenomenal. From day one, I felt like I was part of the university. The students were very socially interactive and intellectually mature. I could not help but notice the rich European culture's influence on the students' way of thinking, their way of communicating, and their way of working. The level of co-operation shown by fellow students, working on other projects in the laboratory, was gratifying.

We were invited by the university to take part in the annual masquerade, which was a great event full of dancing, eating, and admiring creative masks and costumes. We met the new dean of the university at this event, and had a long entertaining conversation with him. We were also invited to the engineering faculty meeting, where we introduced ourselves, our projects, and got to know the professors in the engineering department.



With our Hungarian language teacher (in green) at the masquerade

The Hungarian language and culture course that I took at the university was very informative. Our teacher, Reika Szalo, showed a high level of enthusiasm and interest to teach us, and even learn from us. We learned about the history of Transylvania, the conflict between Hungary and Romania regarding this province, the culture of Hungarians, the political and social status of Hungarians in Romania, and last but not the least, the Hungarian language. By the time I left, I could not only converse in basic conversation in Hungarian, but also read and write the language. Hungarian is one of the hardest languages in the world, and it was challenging to acquaint our brains to unique sounds and rolling of tongues, but I loved every minute of learning in that course. Most of the people I met during these four months spoke multiple languages. I was amazed at how our sphere of thought can broaden if we can converse in more languages, and that realization made me want to learn Hungarian and German in the coming future.



Sasha, Hayley, and I trying the local Hungarian cuisine

Traveling

Romania

Although Romania does not get the limelight like other countries in Europe do in tourism, it is a beautiful country nonetheless. Comprising of breathtaking historical monuments, natural beauty, and distinct cultural color, it deserves to stand parallel with the best tourism spots in Europe. We had the opportunity to see Tirgu Mures, and travel to nearby towns and places of the country, and the whole experience was incredible.

Tirgu Mures, although not the tourist hub of Romania, has a very nice city centre, containing old, yet beautiful architecture of buildings and churches. Reghin, a small town about 30 km from Tirgu Mures, is famous for the manufacture of musical instruments in the world. I bought a beautiful guitar from the town. The town of Sighisoara, about 50 km from Tirgu Mures, is a beautiful medieval town with narrow cobblestone and dusty streets, old churches, and an incredible clock tower. The town is also notoriously famous for the birthplace of Vlad Dracul, also known later as Dracula.



Orthodox Church, Tirgu Mures



Medieval streets, Sighisoara



Clock Tower, Sighisoara



Town of Sighisoara

The city of Brasov is located in the center of Romania, and is one of the metropolitan hubs of the country. The drive from Tirgu Mures to Brasov took about 2 hours, and the road is very picturesque, going through numerous villages, dense forests, and mountains. The city was full of tourists, and there was a lot to see. We stayed overnight in Brasov, and felt the overwhelming character of the city – the streets, the culture, the architecture, the overlooking Carpathian mountains.



View of Brasov from the Carpathian Mountains



Town Square, Brasov



Catherine's Gate, Brasov

The town of Rasnov is about 15 km from Brasov, and contains the Rasnov fortress, which was built in the 12th century. The town felt like a very old village, with old dirt roads and carts all around. However, the fresh air, the surrounding mountains, and the simplicity of the town, was magnificent. The Bran castle, located on the border of Transylvania and Wallachia, is a famous tourist attraction. Also known as the Dracula's castle, the castle is historically associated with the legend of Dracula, and informs a lot about his life. The Pelisor castle, located in Sinaia, about 45 km from Brasov, is often regarded as the most beautiful castle in Europe. The exterior presence of the architecture, coupled with its interior grace and historical significance, swept us off the floor. After taking the interior tour of the castle, I was awestruck at its beauty, and I did not see any castle matching its stature anywhere in Europe afterwards.



Fortress on the mountaintop, Rasnov



Pelisor Castle, Sinaia

Germany

I went to Hamburg to meet my relatives. Hamburg is a beautiful city. Most of the city was destroyed in WW2, but the new infrastructure is admirable. Hamburg's port is one of the largest in the world, and it is a major transportation hub in Europe. As I am a big fan of Hamburg's soccer team, Hamburger SV, I enjoyed watching their games in the local restaurants. After living with my relatives for a week, I picked up some German words, ate delicious German cuisine, and made many new friends. As English is mandatory in German high schools, all the youth speaks very good English.



Rollerblading, Hamburg



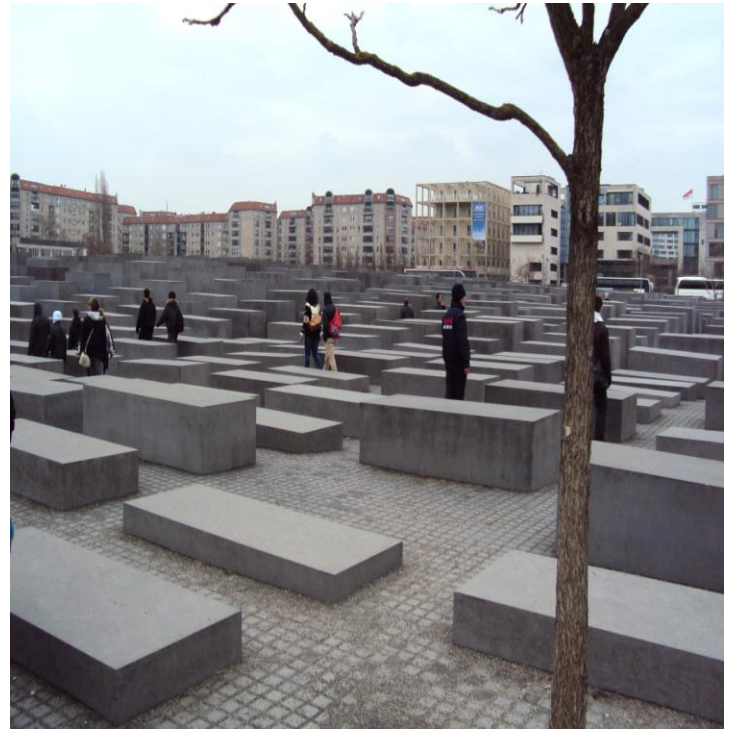
Port, Hamburg



Berlin is the largest city in Germany, and the culture capital of Europe. We drove from Hamburg to Berlin, which took about 3 hours. Seeing the Berlin wall was very inspiring. The Madame Tussauds Museum of wax was very entertaining.



Brandenburg gate, Berlin



Jewish Memorial, Berlin



Reichstag, Berlin



Hitting the drums, Madame Tussauds, Berlin

France

Paris is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world. I felt the overwhelming presence of the French culture, especially in the pride of their language. Walking around the streets, tasting the French food, experiencing the art museums, interacting with the tourists from all over the world, one cannot help but notice why Paris is called the global capital of the world.



Arc de Triumph, Paris



Eiffel Tower, Paris



Paris from the 2nd Floor of Eiffel tower

Czech Republic

Prague is the capital of Czech Republic, and the biggest city in the country. Prague is beautiful to walk around the streets, over the many bridges connecting the city, specially the Charles Bridge, which offers a panoramic view of the city. Majority of people we came across in Prague spoke fluent English, and were very helpful..



Prague Castle in the middle



Royal Gardens, Prague



Charles Bridge, Prague

We also took a train from Prague to Cesky Krumlov, a small town in the south of the country. Cesky Krumlov is a tourist hub due its medieval appearance, beautiful streets, surrounding mountains, and the Krumlov castle.



Cesky Krumlov



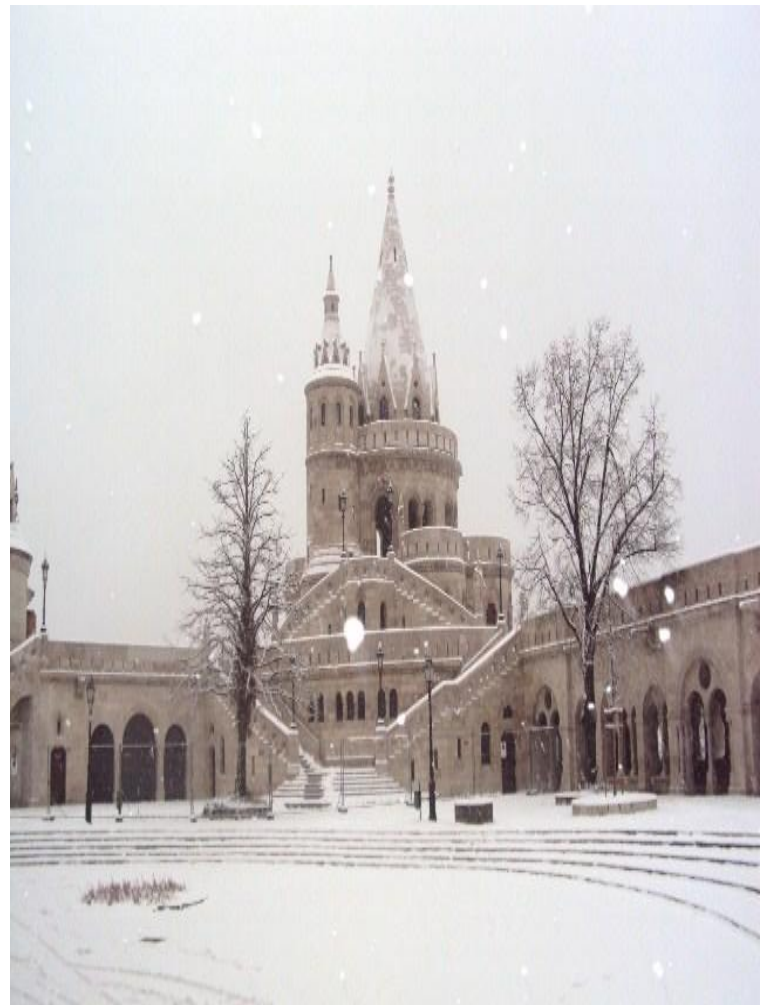
Railway Station, Cesky Krumlov

Hungary

Budapest is the largest city in Hungary, and the country's political, cultural, and economic backbone. The city captivated my senses immediately with its beautiful design - the division of the Buda side and the Pest side, with the beautiful Danube River flowing through the middle. With the basic Hungarian I learned in the university, I was able to communicate with the locals, although most people speak good English. The city has a tremendous cultural influence, not just to the local Hungarians, but also to Hungarians living in Transylvania. Budapest is one of the most beautiful cities I saw in Europe.



Hero's Square, Budapest



Buda Castle, Budapest



Danube flows through Budapest



Parliament House, Budapest

Reflection

Looking back, the past four months have been the best time of my life. Technically, I am glad to have been a part of such an exciting project. The testing and debugging skills I have learned in C# and Matlab will be valuable in future technical projects. I have also learned the approach to tackle a robotics project. The integration and interconnection of mechanical, electronics, and software programming in the project enhanced and widened my technical experience. Dr Marton's trust and invaluable help went a long way in my accomplishment and the success of the project. Not just technically, Dr Marton helped us in many other ways, giving us important tips and information of the city and the surrounding areas, giving us a broader picture of the social and cultural aspects of Romania, and constantly getting updates from us to ensure our satisfaction.

Personally, the whole experience has been very fulfilling. Living and traveling on my own, I have become more organized, more responsible, more efficient, and most importantly, more lively. I always believed that our learning is not restricted to the four walls of the classroom, we can learn more by experiencing new cultures, living in different societies, learning with students from various backgrounds, and traveling to feel the diversity and richness of our world. During these four months, I have met people all over Europe with excellent mindsets and unique perspectives, which have broadened my mind extensively. Many tourists flock to Europe yearly to see the famous cities and monuments, but it is by living in their society for some time that you truly feel the richness and the influence of the European culture on your personality. I sincerely thank Professor Shahram Payendeh for providing me the chance to take part in this program.

"I met a lot of people in Europe. I even encountered myself." - James Baldwin