

**C&CofMARS Personal Experience Report**  
**Winnipeg to Târgu Mureş,**  
**or There and Back Again**  
**By Sasha La Tour**



Our house in Târgu Mureş

My journey began in Winnipeg, Manitoba on a cold winter morning. From the Winnipeg airport, I flew to Toronto, then to Zurich, then Budapest, and finally Târgu Mureş. I was greeted at the airport by Dr. Lórinç Márton, who gave me a lift to the house I would be renting with the other students on the exchange here in Romania. Located on a hill in Sâncraiu de Mureş, our house was nicer than I could have ever imagined. I met our landlords, who soon turned out to be great friends whose recommendations were always helpful. After a very long day, some much-needed sleep ensued.

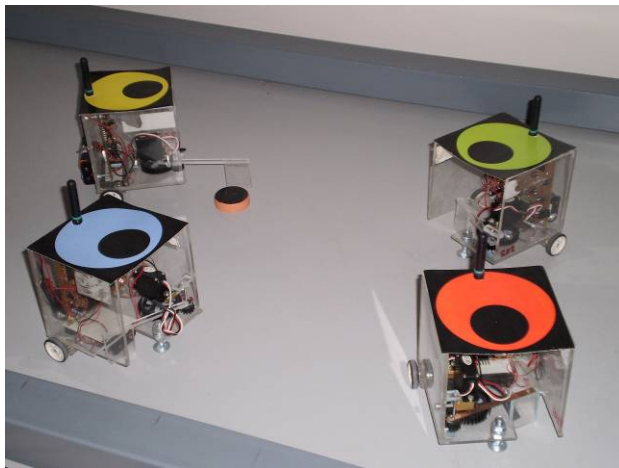


Dr. Lórinç Márton (middle left) and the crew



Our "other" landlords

Eventually Monday rolled around, and with it our first day at school. After giving us a tour of the Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Dr. Márton laid out the work to be done, and let us know what our respective jobs and ultimate goals would be during our four month stay. I was placed in charge of the design and implementation of a shooting mechanism for the robots, as well as the development of an ultrasound-based navigation system to minimize collisions between them.



The hockey team



My girlfriend Hayley and I at the Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania

Weeknights in Târgu Mureș (or Marosvásárhely, in Hungarian) were spent exploring various restaurants and local sights, while more major excursions were reserved for the weekends. Dr. Márton invited us out to a local pool, right next-door to a gym. Between these two facilities, we managed to keep ourselves quite busy. Along with our house, we rented a vehicle from our landlords, and were allotted some extra mileage to do some sightseeing. This proved invaluable, as we were able to drive to neighbouring villages and cities.

Working at the University was fairly relaxed for the first month, as the students were suffering through their exam period. Midway through February, the new term started at Sapientia, and the once lonely halls were replenished with a crowd of friendly individuals. A student-run cafeteria offered us some great coffee and an excuse to stretch our legs.

The people in Romania were extremely hospitable with us Canucks. Not only were they friendly, they were also very patient when it came to communicating with us.





Welcome to Reghin

As aforementioned, our weekends were spent touring the surrounding sights. Our first trip was to the city of Reghin to the north. Renowned for its hand-crafted stringed instruments, primarily those of two luthiers, Reghin sported some violin-shaped welcome signs and statues. There were also some nice churches, and a decent pizza shop owned by a former Québécois. I later purchased a half-size classical guitar which was made in Reghin from a shop in Târgu Mureș.

Another weekend brought us to the medieval city of Sighișoara, known as the birthplace of Vlad Țepeș. An uphill drive through narrow dirt and cobblestone streets brought us to the base of the covered staircase, which in turn led us to the Church on the Hill, a crypt, and a cemetery. The inside of the church was extremely impressive, with many frescoes and ancient

wooden pews. We also learned that possessing a student I.D. saves you some substantial cash on museum entrance fees. A walk back down the hill brought us to the foot of the foreboding Clock Tower, a brilliant example of gothic architecture. A museum inside the tower led to the top, where a breathtaking view of the city awaited.



Church on the Hill in Sighișoara



Clock Tower in Sighișoara

One weekend, we decided it was high time we do a proper tour of our host city, Târgu Mureş. This proved to be a most fruitful endeavour, as we were able to walk through the art museum



and the Hall of Mirrors at the Cultural Palace. The Hall of Mirrors has many stained-glass windows depicting various stories from Romanian culture. As we walked along the City Center, we entered and viewed some of the most ornately painted churches I've ever seen. We also walked through the Târgu Mureş Fortress, which was initially built in 1492.

A window in the Hall of Mirrors



Inside Târgu Mureş Fortress



At the masquerade with our Hungarian teacher (middle)

On a Friday night in February, we were invited by our Hungarian teacher to take part in a traditional masquerade. The purpose of this event is to dress up and scare winter away, which results in an early spring. It also results in lots of drinking and dancing. It was definitely an interesting way to meet the professors and teachers from the University.





The Council Square in Braşov, and the looming Black Church

Our major weekend getaway involved leaving Mureş county altogether, and heading south to the city of Braşov, the commune of Bran, and the mountain town of Sinaia. Braşov possessed a spectacular amount of attractions, all within walking distance. This suited us perfectly, as the day was sunny and warm. Among the most memorable of our visits were the gothic Black Church, a panoramic view of the city from atop Mount Tâmpa, and the canal running the length of the old fortress wall on the edge of the city. We spent the night in a nice hotel in Braşov, and went for supper at an excellent Hungarian-Mexican restaurant. Free shots of plum schnapps are commonplace in the Hungarian community, and this restaurant offered the most flavourful Pálinka to date.





The View of Braşov from Mount Tâmpa



Catherine's Gate in Braşov



Braşov, the Black Church, and Mount Tâmpa





Bran Castle

Early in the morning, we left for the ruins of Râşnov Fortress, which were unfortunately closed for refurbishment. Thus we continued southward to Bran, which houses Bran Castle, commonly referred to as Dracula's Castle due to Bram Stoker's famous novel. A self-guided tour of this castle and a neighbouring museum offered some very impressive pieces of furniture and decor. The labyrinthine castle corridors proffered a wondrous sense of history as one walked over worn stone stairs or stooped to pass through a smaller doorframe. The utmost towers revealed a wonderful view of the fog-laced countryside and the inner

courtyard. After a visit to the nearby bazaar and a haunted house, we continued on to the resort town of Sinaia. With the help of a stroke of good luck, we found Peleş Castle almost instantly after we arrived in Sinaia. Unbeknownst to us as we hiked up the winding cobblestone entrance road, this magnificent castle would shame most anything with its shear splendour.



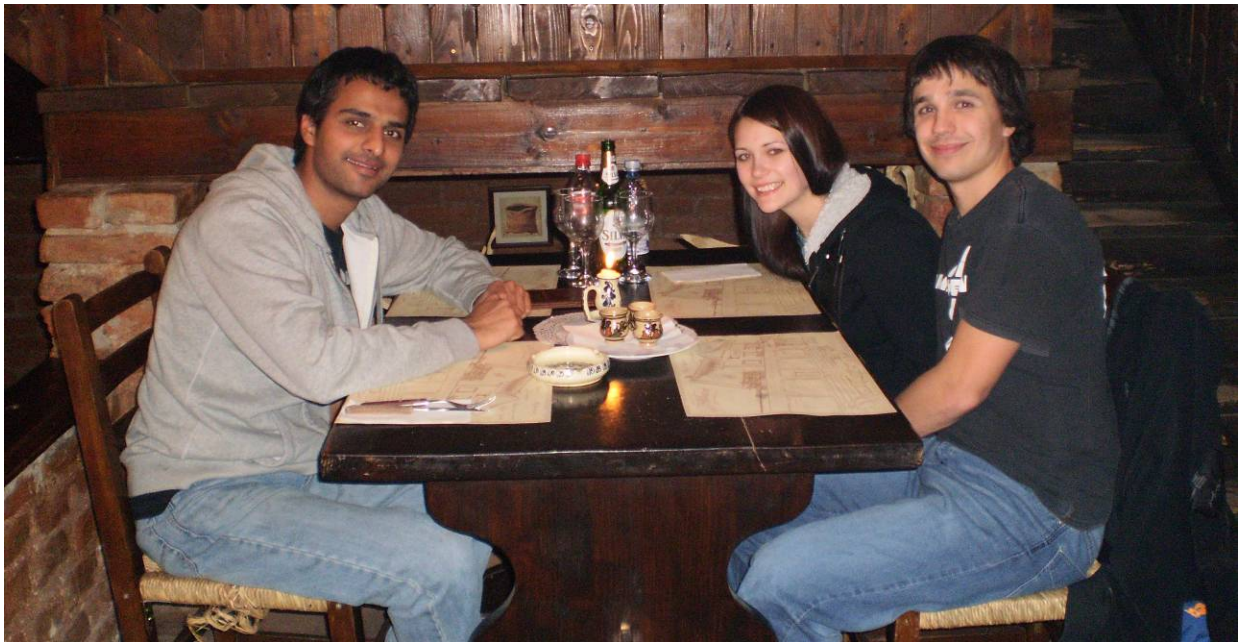
Bran Castle courtyard





Peleş Castle in Sinaia

Our guided tour took us through countless chambers elaborately decorated with sculptures, paintings, carvings, and glassworks. The amount of detail in these pieces was seemingly endless. The closer you looked at anything in the castle, the more complicated its features would appear. The design of each separate room was heavily influenced by various cultures from around the world. Outside the castle were hedges and sculpted gardens adorned with statues, made navigable by stone walkways and staircases. This was easily the most impressive structure I saw during my whole stay in Europe (in my opinion).



Jasmeet, Hayley, and I at a Hungarian restaurant after our weekend away



The big highlight of this exchange to Europe was a three week vacation I was able to take with my girlfriend Hayley in the middle of my studies. As the sights we saw on this part of our trip are fairly well-known, I'll try to write less and let the pictures do the talking.



A very symbolic image

First off, we left for Budapest, where we stayed for six days. This was enough time to see most of the major sights inside the city. These sights included the castle district, the Hero's Square, St. Stephen's Basilica, the Chain Bridge, and the Parliament Building. A major highlight for Hayley and I was seeing Rammstein live at the sport arena. It was the greatest show either one of us has seen to date.



The Fisherman's Bastion in Budapest's Castle District



The Parliament Building in Budapest



The (massive) Hero's Square in Budapest





Rammstein live in Budapest!



St. Stephen's Basilica in Budapest



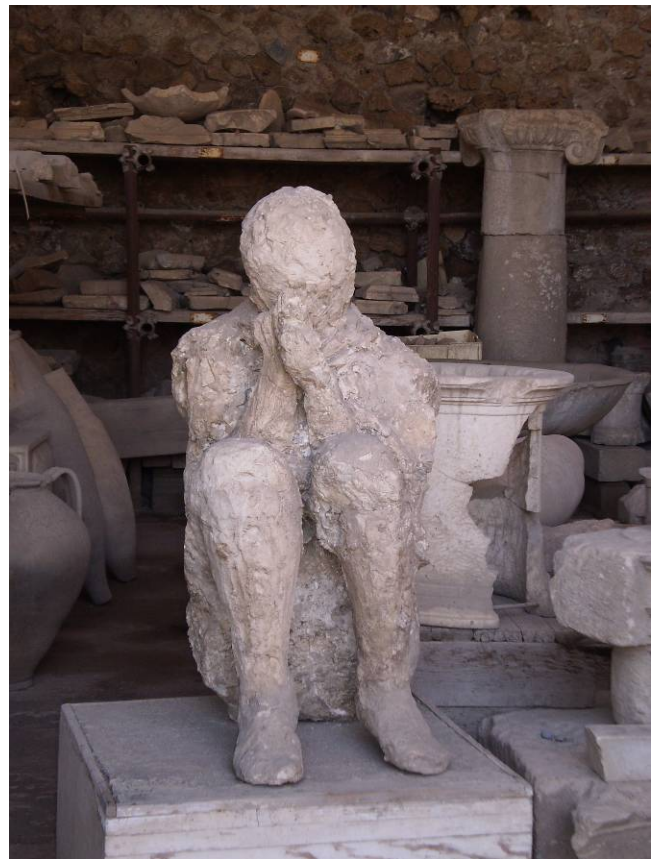


Hayley and I in the ruined Temple of Apollo in Pompeii

After Budapest, we flew to Rome, and then took a train to Pompeii. It was definitely awe-inspiring to walk through the streets and buildings of an ancient civilization, especially one so well preserved. It was also a beautiful day, so we were able to walk around in t-shirts instead of a bunch of hoodies. The old temples and villas were worth the train ride out. The brothel with stone beds and painted diagrams is a must-see for a chuckle as well.



A street in Pompeii



A man encased in ash in Pompeii



After Pompeii, we stayed in Rome for three days. We were able to see the Vatican City and St. Peter's Basilica on our first day there. We visited the Colosseum, Palatine Hill, and the Roman forum the following day. Finally, we were able to see the Vatican Museums and the Sistine Chapel on our final day. The Sistine Chapel was worth the seemingly endless line-ups and the suffocating crowds. I'm no art critic, but that Michelangelo guy may have had some talent.



St. Peter's Basilica in Rome



St. Peter's Square in Rome





Michelangelo's *La Pietà* in Rome



Inside the Colosseum





Trevi Fountain in Rome



The Sistine Chapel ceiling



Rome was followed shortly by Florence (where more of Michelangelo's works are visible). More nice weather ensued, and we were able to see most of the things we were interested in during our first day there.



The Duomo in Florence



Michelangelo's *David*



View of Florence from Piazzale Michelangelo



We took a train to Venice from Florence, and managed to make our way through the maze-like alleyways to the bed and breakfast where we were to spend the night. A detailed map is a necessity unless you have lots of time to wander, as the streets of Venice are disorienting at the best of times. That being said, everything in Venice is perfectly accessible by foot, and there aren't any extreme distances to be covered at any point.



Hayley in Venice



Me, lost in Venice



St. Mark's Basilica in Venice

From Venice we flew to Paris, which was incredible. We met up with Jasmeet Gill (another student participating in this exchange), who we traveled with for the remainder of our vacation.



You get one guess as to what this is a photo of.

Paris was (for the most part) absolutely amazing. I may have enjoyed it more than my friends as I was able to converse with everyone in French. The others found communicating a little harder, as Parisians are not fond of speaking English. The metro system in Paris can take you anywhere in the city in a relatively short amount of time, but at first glance the map of trains looks like a circuit schematic drawn by a preschooler. After the inevitable headache of deciphering your first metro trip, the city becomes very accessible, and traveling to major sights is easy. Our hotel in Paris was in the Montmartre district, and was right next to the Sacré-Cœur Basilica and a bunch of restaurants. On that note, the food in Paris was great, though expensive.



The Moulin Rouge



During our stay we were able to walk through L'Arc de Triomphe, scale the Eiffel Tower, and wind our ways through the bone-chilling Catacombs (pun intended). These sights were incredible to witness in all their magnificence and splendour.

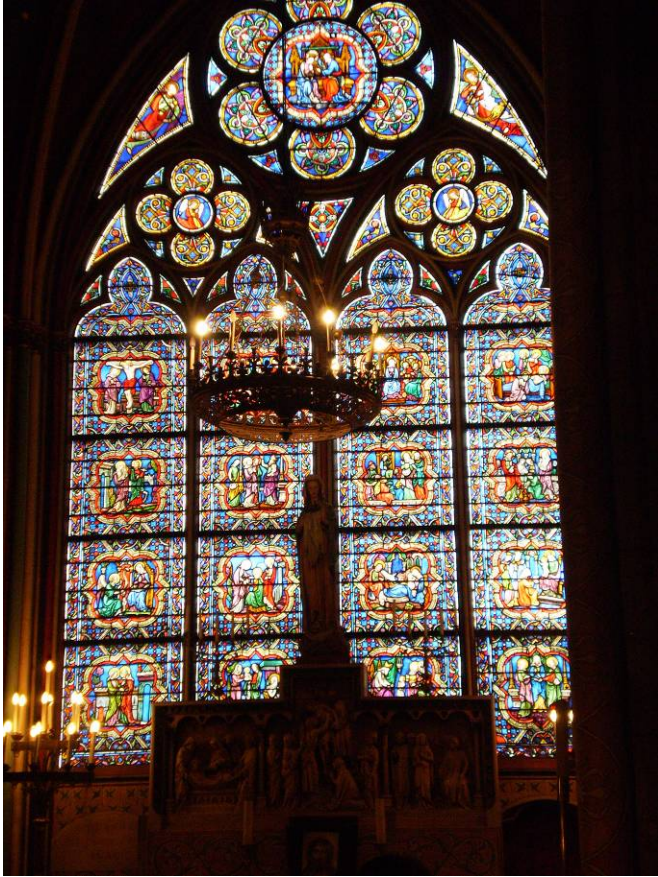


Sacré-Cœur Basilica



Notre Dame Cathedral





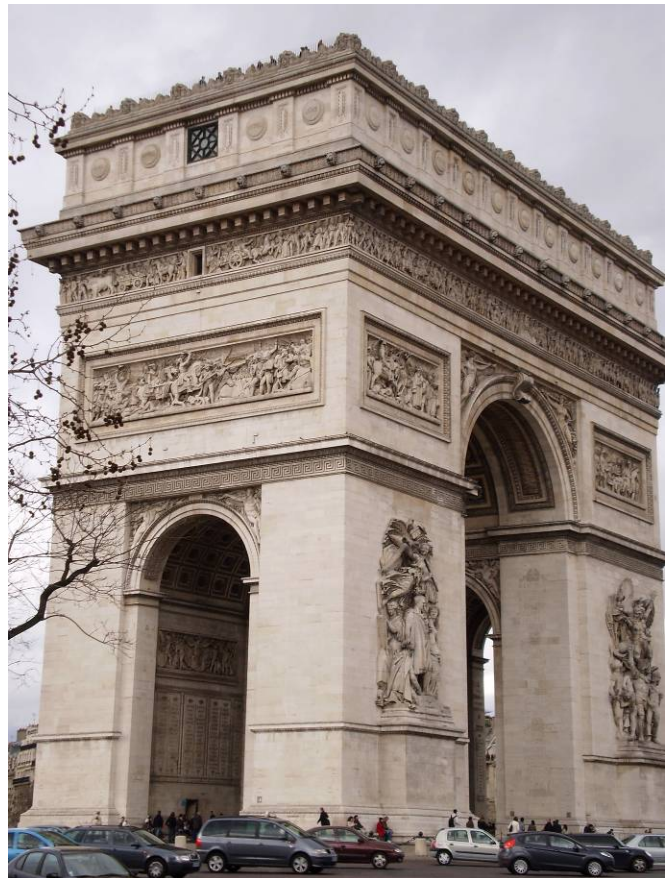
Inside Notre Dame Cathedral



*Theseus and the Minotaur* by Ramey



The Catacombs of Paris



L'Arc de Triomphe



After Paris we flew to Prague, and then took a train to Český Krumlov, a small city in the south of the Czech Republic. Known for its historic old town and Český Krumlov Castle, this city was a great break from the mobs of tourists we encountered throughout the duration of our trip. Interestingly enough, the castle has a moat housing bears instead of the more traditional water...

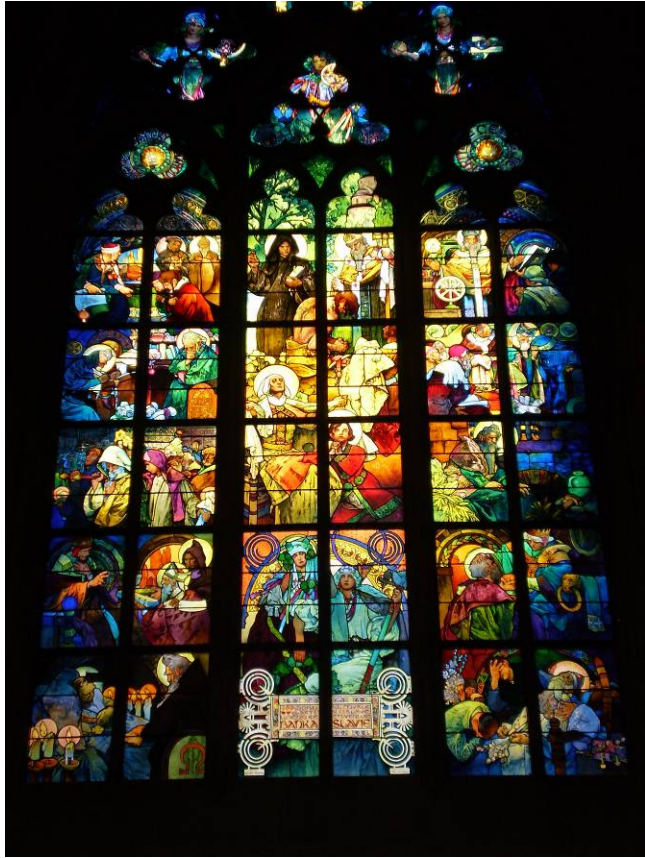


Český Krumlov



The guardians of Český Krumlov Castle





A very similar train ride returned us to Prague, where we stayed for another couple of nights. The Czechs have great food, and as the leading consumers of beer in the world, they have pretty decent beer as well. Beyond the cuisine, we also went and visited the Prague Castle, which is home to the ominous St. Vitus Cathedral. The Charles Bridge and the Old Town were also some must-sees.



The Charles Bridge in Prague

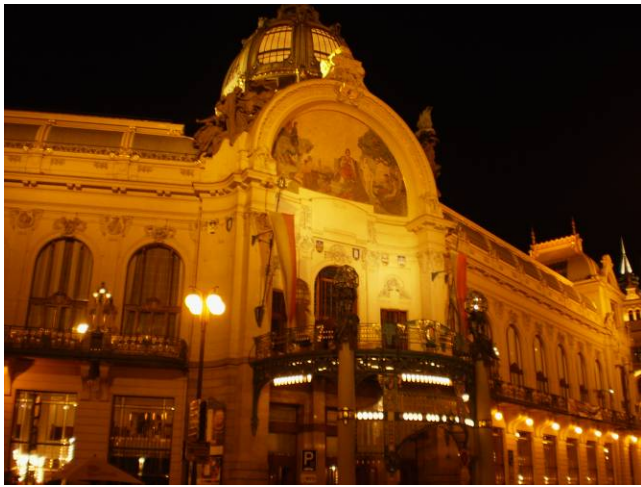


St. Vitus Cathedral

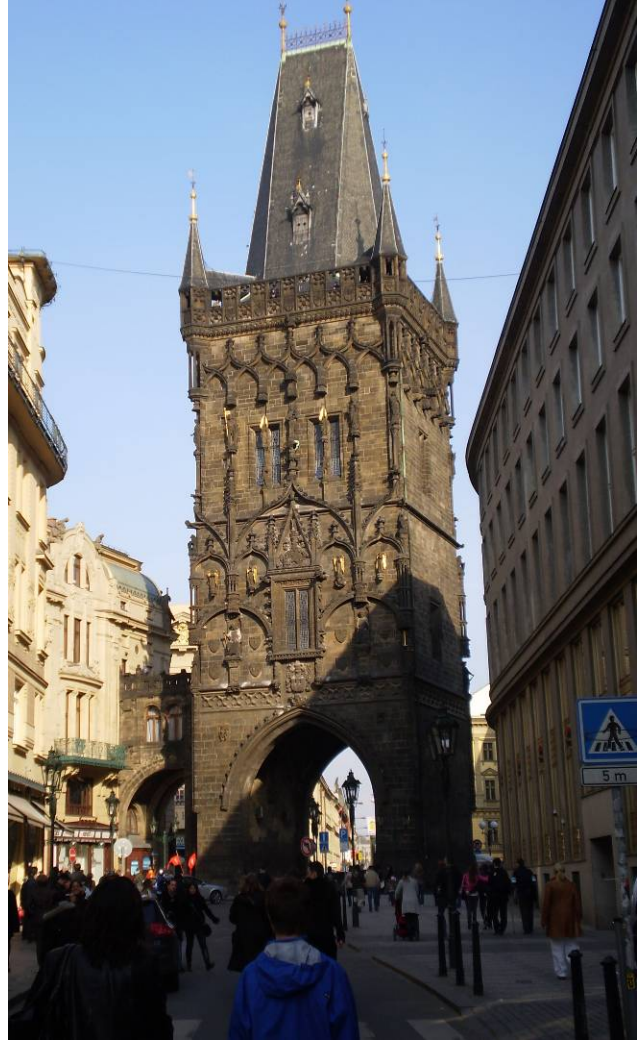




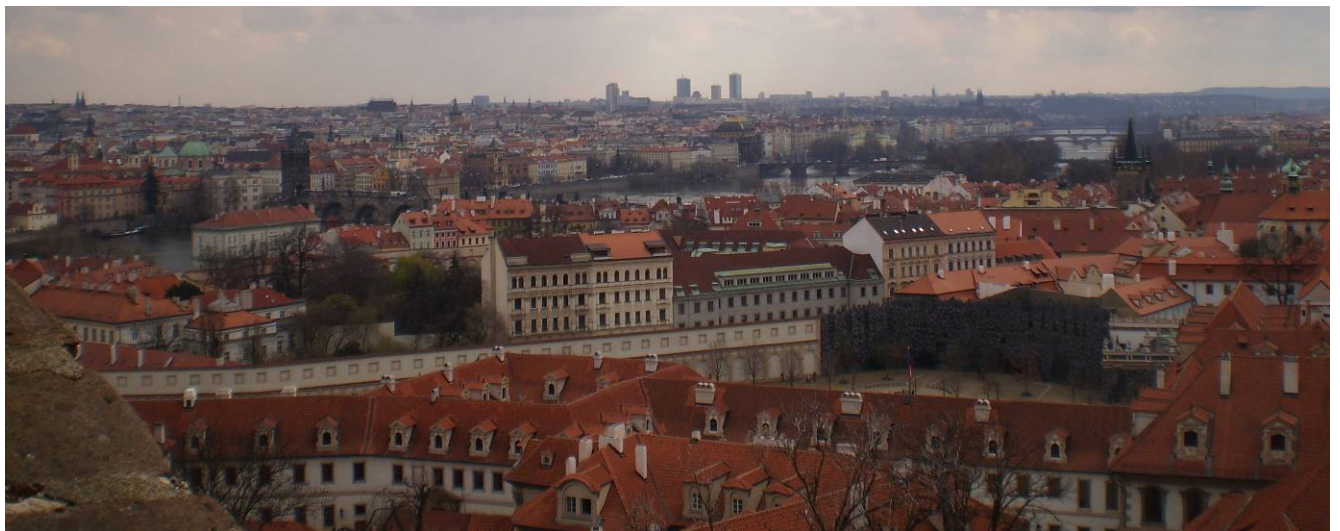
An Easter fair in the Old Town Square



The Municipal House at night



The Powder Gate in Prague



View of Prague from Prague Castle



An excessively long (but cheap) bus ride took us from Prague to Budapest, then from Budapest back to Târgu Mureș. All in 23 days' work!

After returning back home, we went to lupper (lunch + supper?) with Dr. Márton at our Hungarian teacher's place, where there is a large hill-side garden overlooking the city. Needless to say, the food and company were both exquisite! The following day was spent at a pool/spa trying out bizarre European saunas and hydro-massages.

And now, the end has come. All in all, I heartily recommend an exchange like this to anyone remotely adventurous. Romania was incredibly accommodating. The people, the sights, the food, the atmosphere, the prices, and everything else I can think of were all great. I am certainly hoping that I'll be able to return sometime in the not-too-distant future!



Carpathian Mountains