

# ATSIMINIMAI – MEMOIR

## WHY EXCHANGE MATTERS: PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS OF THE TRIESTE-SAARBRÜCKEN CONNECTION

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**SUMMARY.** In this personal essay, Astrid M. Fellner takes her reminiscences about her Erasmus stay at the University of Trieste when she was a student as a springboard to talk about the transformative effects of going abroad and the importance of cultural exchange and international collaboration.

**KEYWORDS:** studies abroad, cultural exchange, international collaboration.

Sometimes coincidences are not coincidences. We never know whether something that we engage in or participate in will have a lasting effect. Often, the impact of something can only be felt much later. And, as the saying goes: somehow, you always meet twice in life! We all know that going abroad holds immense significance in today's interconnected world, shaping us in multifaceted ways. From an academic perspective, international exposure offers a unique opportunity to expand one's intellectual horizons. Engaging with diverse educational systems and cultural frameworks enhances a person's adaptability and critical thinking skills. It exposes us to varied perspectives, encouraging a nuanced understanding of global issues. This cross-cultural interaction fosters a rich learning environment, where students and professionals alike can exchange ideas, challenge assumptions, and broaden their academic prowess. Often, going abroad is also a transformative experience on a personal level.

### SUMMER OF 1992: WHY GOING ABROAD MATTERS

I had just finished my MA studies in American Studies at the University of Vienna. After spending a year as a Fulbright student at the University of Texas at Austin, I was enthusiastic about going abroad. My stay at UT Austin had not only broadened my horizon; it had changed my life. In a lot of ways, it forced me out of my

comfort zones and encouraged me to navigate hitherto unfamiliar environments. Crucially, I also learned a lot about myself, and the experience helped me reshape the goals in my life. I was exposed to the fascinating field of Chicano/a literature and Border Studies. When I returned to the University of Vienna, I wanted to stay in academia and embark on a PhD in Chicano/a Literature, a new area in ethnic American literature that was very difficult to find information on in Europe. Walking into the office of my advisor, I heard about the Erasmus program and the unique experience of living and studying in other European countries. The University of Trieste, I learned, was about to become our partner university, and I could go there, gauge the potential of collaboration, and help jump-start the exchange between the two American Studies programs in Vienna and Trieste. I had just finished my MA studies and I needed some time to come up with a topic for a PhD project, so taking a break to “see the world” sounded intriguing. Having just returned from the US and banned from re-applying for another J-1 visa for two years, I started to deliberate my options.

There was a certain conundrum: why should I as an Americanist, who wanted to collaborate with American professors and live in an English-speaking environment, go to another European university? By the time the Erasmus exchange program was opened in Austria in 1992, this country had not joined the EU yet (this happened in 1995). The Erasmus program was a harbinger of the European Higher Education Area, which intended to enable mobility for students, teachers, researchers, and administrative staff. With the awareness that global competency is a necessary component of university life, many students and researchers have participated in Erasmus exchanges since its creation. But the question of why – as a student of English and American Studies – one should study in another European country where English is not the official language remains, I assume, an important question to many. I am certain that countless other students of American literature and cultural studies wonder what other American Studies programs in Europe have to offer. But learning and experiencing what other programs in neighboring countries offer is enriching, and can enhance professional prospects.

In the case of Trieste, my questions were soon answered, and my doubts were refuted. In the small American Studies program that the university offered, there was a renowned American scholar, who, as it turned out, was an expert in ethnic American literature. Surely, he would be able to help me come up with a good dissertation topic, my advisor in Vienna told me. And the thought of being able to study and read books in cafés around the *Piazza Unità*, near *Miramare* or on the cliffs in Duino, combined with excellent Italian coffee and food, convinced me even more to spend an Erasmus semester in Trieste. Retrospectively, my stay abroad in another country whose language I did not speak nurtured resilience and

adaptability. Overcoming language barriers and bureaucratic hurdles instilled confidence and self-reliance in me, qualities that I later found extremely valuable in both personal and professional spheres. And again, like in Texas, the exposure to different lifestyles and value systems encouraged introspection, helping me to develop a broader worldview.

Before the times of the internet, and at the beginning of European program – a time when universities still lacked experience in the organization in large-scale student mobility, and local Erasmus offices had not really been functional – my only option was to hop in my car and drive to Trieste to find out when I had to be at the English department, where I could live, and what the course program looked like at that university. No one at the University of Vienna could tell me when the semester was going to start in Trieste. Maybe this sounds intimidating and exaggerated, but since the exchange program between these two universities had only very recently been agreed upon, there was no way for me at the University of Vienna to find out any details of our new partner university. But since going abroad is always like embarking on an adventure, I considered it a challenge to find out these details and take life into my hands. After mastering my studies in Texas, I was ready for another adventure. Eager to meet new people and to learn a new language (my Italian was very rudimentary) I set out into this new phase of my life.

And again, what a life-changing and enriching experience this was! I was again forced to leave my comfort-zone – much more than in the U.S. – when I discovered that because of low English skills, some classes were offered in Italian and that my landlord did not speak English at all. My knowledge of Spanish and the great patience of the people I encountered in Trieste helped me survive in terms of communication. Not only did I learn a tremendous amount from this American professor who took me under his wing, but I also got to know fellow students who shared similar interests and with whom I could converse in detail about Chicano/a literature. What a pleasant surprise it was to find a student there with whom I could share my special interest. Spending a great deal of time chatting with her and joining her at local Aerobics classes, I soon found myself surrounded by Italians who introduced me to Italian cultural practices. My stay in Trieste, it turned out, was not just a physical journey but a transformative odyssey that shaped me intellectually, emotionally, and culturally.

Exchanging thoughts with Triestine students, I learned about the differences in academic cultures within Europe. Situated right on the border with Slovenia in a contested border area, I also learned many things about this region, its important role in the former Habsburg empire, and the presence of Slovene minorities in the city. Trieste is a border town, and crossing into Slovenia where gas was cheaper made me feel like a local person from the area. Living in a different place, absorbing a

new environment, listening to the stories of its inhabitants broadens the mind, and that is precisely what these months in Trieste did for me. It forced me to stop and re-think, and it gave me an opportunity to look at myself from a critical distance. The ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries became a valuable skill, not only enhancing my personal relationships but also opening doors to global career opportunities. In my case, as it turned out, my Erasmus stay formed the basis for my academic career when a job opened at the University of Vienna, and I was given preference because of my experience abroad. It was in Trieste that I was given the opportunity to teach a lecture for the first time, filling in for the professor there, who said that if I wanted to embark on an academic career, I should co-teach with him. I felt well-prepared when I started my job at the University of Vienna, returning from Trieste just at that moment when I wanted to prolong my stay and spend another semester there. This job opportunity was clearly more important than an additional semester in Trieste, even though I regretted having to leave. I knew that because of our agreement I could return again at any time – and I did, shortly after I took on my new job, for an Erasmus week that brought together students and teachers from all Erasmus partner universities.

#### WINTER/SPRING/SUMMER OF 1997: WHY INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION MATTERS

Five years later, I was back in the United States, working with my American PhD advisor at the University of California at Irvine and doing research in the library there, busily finishing my dissertation. And, as life would have it, I accidentally ran into my Erasmus friend from the University of Trieste at an event in San Diego. What a small world – she too was now working on her PhD and was at UC San Diego. I had been in touch with her sporadically through letters. These days Facebook and other forms of social media allow for easy contact that make “staying in touch” easy. Back then in the early days of e-mail, this new medium was used only for job-related matters, and staying in touch and knowing about your friend’s whereabouts was not that simple.

During my research visits to UCI in 1997 and many other times when I was in California, we met several times, exchanging thoughts, talking about our career options, and remembering our joint trip to Venice to a conference where we both talked to a young Americanist who was just about to become a professor at the University of Trieste. We bonded over a series of experiences and observations and soon found out that one of the most lasting effects of staying abroad is the

friendships that you make during your exchange period. Unlike me, she had decided to leave Chicano/a literature behind, turning to Italian American Studies, which opened the door to American academia for her. I, in turn, gave up on my ideas to stay in the US and returned to the University of Vienna to research and teach Chicano/a Studies and Border Studies in Europe. In the years to follow when I finished my PhD and embarked on my “Habilitation,” the second PhD that many European countries demand of academics when they want to become full professors, I divided my time between Vienna and prolonged research and teaching stays at the University of Amherst in Massachusetts and Stanford University. At the University of Vienna, our cooperation with Università degli Studi di Trieste continued. I stayed in touch with my mentor from Trieste, who then moved on to the U.S., but whom I met during academic conferences. Somehow, I lost touch with my Italian friend. My academic path led me to new fields and directions in research (as the “Habilitation” requires one to do), and it took me years until I was settled as a full professor and Chair of North American Literary and Cultural Studies at Saarland University. At Saarland University I could go back to Chicano/a literature and Border Studies, and the expertise acquired abroad helped me co-found the University of the Greater Region Center for Border Studies.

During my stays abroad, and because of the many international scholars that visited the University of Vienna (also from Trieste), I learned that international collaboration in teaching and research is of paramount importance. Collaboration with colleagues from other universities promotes the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and methodologies, enriching the intellectual landscape. Within the university alliance called “University of the Greater Region” I met like-minded colleagues and I started to cherish interdisciplinary collaboration, which fosters partnerships, cross-pollination of expertise, and innovation, contributing to the advancement of academic fields, in our case Border Studies. When scholars from different countries collaborate, they always bring their unique insights and experiences to the table. This diversity of thought can yield novel approaches in research. Moreover, international collaboration enhances the quality of education. In a globalized world, students benefit from exposure to a variety of teaching styles and content from around the world. This is why I have started to team-teach with colleagues from various countries: the U.S., Luxembourg, and most intensively with Ukraine. I hope that through teaching collaborations my students can gain a more comprehensive and comparative understanding of their fields of study, and that the experience of learning from educators with diverse cultural backgrounds is enlightening to them.

## FALL OF 2021: WHY CULTURAL EXCHANGE MATTERS

Cultural exchange, a fundamental aspect of human interaction, holds immense significance in fostering mutual understanding, tolerance, and harmony among diverse communities. It serves as a bridge, connecting individuals from different cultural backgrounds, thereby enriching the tapestry of global society. This phenomenon is not merely a casual interaction; it is a complex process that involves the exchange of customs, traditions, languages, art, and ideas among people. And this process which bears transformative potential is important in our times of poly-crises. We need more cultural openness and mutual understanding for each other in order to achieve the social transformation that is direly needed in times of war, the rise of right-wing populism, economic hardship, social divisions, and environmental crises. Cultural exchange contributes significantly to the development of intercultural competence. Exposure to different cultures enhances one's ability to navigate complex social situations, interpret diverse perspectives, and communicate effectively across cultural boundaries. Researchers in fields of the Humanities and the Social Sciences emphasize the role of cultural exchange in breaking down stereotypes and prejudices. By interacting with individuals from varied backgrounds, people are often exposed to alternative worldviews, which can challenge their preconceived notions and promoting acceptance of cultural differences. This transformative process is crucial in creating a more inclusive and tolerant global community. Friendships formed through cultural exchange can transcend language barriers and geographic distances, creating bonds that also have the power to promote peace and understanding. Embracing cultural exchange therefore is not only an investment in mutual respect but also a commitment to building a more compassionate and interconnected world for future generations.

Had it not been for our mutual teaching and research exchanges within Saarland University's DAAD Eastpartnership project with Mykolaiv in Ukraine, my Ukrainian colleagues would not have been able to come to Saarland University and continue to work here after the full-blown Russian invasion started in February 2022. In the fall of 2021, my Ukrainian colleagues and my Saarland team all attended a virtual conference on issues of borders and migration, which was hosted by the University of Palermo, one of Mykolaiv's partner universities in a network that Saarland University had also joined. And there she was again! I spotted her name on the call for papers: my friend, whom I had met in Trieste and who was now a professor of Italian and Italian American Studies in the US! What a surprise it was to be on the same critical board of that network and attending the same conference! How wonderful to reconnect with her! We exchanged emails, memories

of the good old times in Trieste and later California. She was surprised to hear that I had ended up in Germany, where at Saarland University we now work within a new European Alliance with nine other European universities, Trieste being one of them. We both agreed that this really is a coincidence. This collaboration now allows me to rekindle my contacts at Trieste. In the fall of 2021, I went back to Trieste, visiting the city and enjoying the view from atop the karst cliffs in Duino. The saying is not true. You do not always meet twice in life; fortunately, you meet multiple times!

Going abroad is often described as a life-changing adventure. That is certainly true for me. Every time I go abroad, I feel the transformative effect that cultural exchange has. I have been fortunate enough to spend many times abroad. And with my university's many exchange programs and partner universities, there are plenty of opportunities that allow me to travel and spend some time at one of our partner universities in our alliance Transform4Europe (T4EU). Currently, I collaborate predominantly with Kaunas, Katowice, and Sofia, but I am confident that our project will also allow me to go back to Trieste. Each time, my experiences at foreign universities have created lasting memories and friendships, enriching my life with a tapestry of cultural encounters. The excitement of discovering new places and meeting people from different backgrounds is unparalleled. In me, it continues to foster a sense of wonder and curiosity about the world.

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KODĖL STUDENTŲ MAINAI YRA SVARBU? TRIESTO IR SARBRIUKENO RYŠIUS  
PRISIMENANT

SANTRAUKA. Šioje asmeninėje esė Astrid M. Fellner dalijasi prisiminimais apie studijų metais vykusią „Erasmus“ programą Triesto universitete, pasakoja apie transformuojantį išvykimo į užsienį poveikį ir kultūrinių mainų bei tarptautinio bendradarbiavimo svarbą.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: studijos užsienyje, kultūriniai mainai, tarptautinis bendradarbiavimas.