

YEAR OF AN ALIEN

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I welcome you to read about the Year of an Alien. This short story is about things experienced in Hungary. It is not written to hurt anybody or to mock that culture: it is just about a stranger in a new culture.

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Almost one year as an alien in hungary

My time in Hungary has been full of funny and different - and interesting - happenings. Some may call these as clashes of cultures, some might call those dull ways of doing things - but at least they never were even close to finish me! Challenge in every day life - odd habits and customs of our brothers so far away.

I bumped into this greeting-habit in a quite early stage of my visit. Men (well, every male) shake each others hand on when ever they meet. No matter if they are just passing each other or stay for a longer time - they will shake hands both coming and going. Females they kiss on the cheek, starting from left and giving two or three kisses. (The amount of the kisses given depends on something, I don't even know what!) Girls (women, girls, young women) kiss each other the same way - two or three times.

In my country it is more hugs we change when meeting a dear friend or relative, kisses sometimes and hand shaking always on a formal occasions. ...but no, we do not have a habit of kissing and shaking hands so many times and with so many people during a day. After all, Finns are known to be shy, cold and distant people what Hungarians are not. Besides, this Hungarian way of greeting is definitely faster way of making new friends!

You first... no, no - me first!

One other thing I found pretty nice and positive is the way Hungarian young men (sometimes even a bit older, too) open doors for women and let them go first. For us, living in an equal nation (well, at least we are trying to be that), it is not a habit for all but still a part of good manners. You can like it or even enjoy it, but you are not supposed to wait neither demand it!

Later on, when using public transport and other services in Hungary, it made me confused. I wondered where in earth these good manners disappeared when it was a question of queuing. Going to a bus or train, waiting for turns in a service desk - all these are situations where a Hungarian raises his (or her) elbows and rushes pushing and jostling!

It is not just people in Miskolc or Hungarians doing this; it is rather common in crowded cities and metropolises. But the difference to this polite you-go-first - attitude was so significant and visible that it shook me.

Help - she is an *Alien*!

My early times in the University of Miskolc were slightly strange. Even though Hungarians are thought to be polite and considering to the others, not everybody was welcoming us - foreigners. The way they showed this was confusing: if we - politely! - went to someone (student) in the University asking for help, they very often just turned their back on us. Probably these students felt not strong enough using their English or they were shy, I don't know. After all we really felt like aliens in these odd situations! This same happened so many times in shops or hypermarkets that it was quite annoying. I can easily live with an answer of "nem értem" or anything, but turning their back was a sign of non-willingness to help at all.

Yummy - she *is* an Alien!

I had many opposite experiences, too - situations where I felt special in a positive way. For example: number of teachers (and some co-students also) needed to work extra on my or our behalf. They also used their time to make it sure we had it all right when taking part in their courses. These made us (at least me!) to feel special and noticed in very nice ways.

Private enterprise

It may be due to the era of socialism (now passed away) or some other form of private enterprise, but after all has a really, really bad effects on you; that is cheating in its various forms. The extra charging what you may face in a restaurant, shop or gas station or even in the office of the state railways. It made me so many times pissed and even angry when I noticed it - and, for sure, every other time I didn't even realized what has happened. It is like a bad apple in a basket full of beautiful apples: it looks good, it tempts you to have a bite, but its taste is bitter and makes you suspect all other apples too.

We, Finns, are sometimes too attached to rules and regulations surrounding us and that can make other people frustrated. But I have grown up in a country where honesty was important and you could count on people's word, and that's probably the reason why it is hard for me to accept any dishonesty. Even today when old Finland is just a dream anymore, we are number one country in a list of non-corrupted countries around the world.

You can surely run into bad experiences everywhere but in Hungary it happened so often and so many places... I would like to trust the other human being and somehow I assume the others to treat me the same way. I know it is not right that we Finns, a couple of millions of people in some distant northern country, should make rules the others to obey. Still it is very difficult to understand why I should let someone (basically) to steal from me?

Dinosaurs

Another left over from the time of the socialism is the culture of queuing and stamping. Every other month we (exchange students) were asked to come back to the faculty office for re-newel of our student cards. And so we did: we were queuing in that office at the University and in the post office - and back again! And in every round these ladies behind service desks were

stamping and stamping... Funniest thing was, of course, that it was not so obvious when you could go to these offices - and they did not speak English! ...so it was an adventure of a small kind.

New methods, new results

I spent many hours sitting, watching and listening different groups of students from many faculties. The only common thing in these groups was that they were mainly Hungarians. Sometimes we were sitting in a class room just receiving information given to us; sometimes we participated actively. We might of had sat behind desks or we had no desks at all. Different teachers had different methods spreading their knowledge, different views of life and the world. Tests, exams and questions were all with a different style, but somehow it was interesting to be part of all of them.

Nutrition: food

During the last decade Finns have lost something important from their pattern of family behavior: meals together. It is not a custom anymore to have a dinner as a whole in every family. That time used to be an important moment for a whole family to gather together, have a nice and peaceful meal, chat about things happened during that day and feel the closeness. As far as I can understand, Hungarians still have this ability and will to share their meal time with their family.

The other thing is what we eat... Our eating habits are so different when comparing these two countries. Hungarians use a lot of salt - we don't do that anymore. We have learned that it is bad for your blood pressure and your health. Finns also use less fat and maybe more low-fat products (fat is bad and it blocks your veins). Most Finns love the rye bread and other full-flour bread while Hungarians consume mainly the whitest and fluffiest bread and rolls. It was quite difficult to try to please my guts and find food with the best influence on them!

And still: Finns are the third fattest nation in the whole Europe - this is an equation which is very hard to understand! Maybe Hungarians can (in some, not so obvious way) take more power out of those wonderful vegetables and fruits there are available all year round...

...and drinks

What these both countries seem to have hard to handle are the consumption of alcohol: we both tend to drink too much and too often. In this case I have nothing special to mention about that when comparing our cultures. So much wasted money, so many wasted lives - it is sad but true.

On the road again

Finns as car drivers are probably the most selfish in a whole wide world. We always want to go before the others and we are not letting anyone to pass us. So it is difficult to turn from a smaller road to the highway. Hungarians behind the wheel felt to be more flexible when it was a question about joining the line or giving way. What our relatives have as a minus on the road is their crazy and dangerous habit of driving with a speed of maniacs!

You can never drive fast enough or use a road narrow enough of not to be passed on Hungarian roads!

My city for one year

I spent big part of my time in Hungary in a city called Miskolc where I continued my Finnish studies for business administration. This university is not the biggest one in the country and - what I heard there - not even the most wanted one among Hungarian students.

Miskolc is an old industrial city which experienced a negative impact of the end of an era of Russia. This hard industry lost a major part of its customers and the city had tens of thousands of new unemployed people in a minute. This was crucial hit when you look it this way: this city used to have approximately 180.000 inhabitants and suddenly over 10% (nearly 15%) of the working citizens lost their jobs. Miskolc is also a twin town of my Finnish home town. Recession time hit also my home country in the early 1990's but somehow we have survived from it. We have had a new "industry" to replace our old fields of industry which used to be machinery, locomotive producing and cotton factories. These new ideas of working and creating are based on new technologies of IT and mobile phones.

Unfortunately Miskolc has not been among areas where Hungary's new jobs and work places were situated. The city has a bit worn out cover on it and depressed look at the faces of its inhabitants. It surely takes time and effort to set your mind and body to fight for your better, new future. That is the only way up, by doing it yourself, but first it will ask real want to change things and to set your mind to a new channel of thinking.

Luckily we can see now that being a part of an EU has improved city's capabilities of rebuilding and constructing its main buildings and places. City's main street and its surroundings will probably soon look like they used to in the "good old times". I wish the mayor and his team will find a huge, refreshing injection of colors and good mood for the people of Miskolc, too!

The results

Deep in my mind I'm still thinking about things I have seen and heard. I'm working on it, weighing and scaling. People in Finland and friends around the world will definitely ask me all over and over again: "What have you learned, what you gained from this time spent there?" I hope that one day I can honestly answer to these questions saying that I learned to be better human being, more open and receptive to new people and things crossing my way. I surely wish that I could somehow take advantage of this time and experiences in my work - somewhere, some day.