

Between Bratwurst and Doner: Experiencing Culture in Berlin

I went to Germany and came back with a love for Turkish food.

When I say this, some people look at me without saying anything, apparently trying to assess my grasp on reality. Others will pretend that there is no contradiction in these statements, and continue as if they know exactly what I meant, when really they have no idea. What is most surprising to me is the fact that very few people will ask for an explanation, which is a shame, because that statement typifies my experiences of working in Berlin for two months.

When I first heard my internship location was in Berlin, I was ecstatic. I began compulsively checking internet maps as to where my work location was, searching for apartments, and planning all of the amazing things I could see. Ever the history geek, I centered most of my attention on the wide array of historical things I could see in Berlin. Obviously the wall, Brandenburger Tor, and other symbols of the Cold War captured a large part of my attention and excitement. But also the museums, Zoo, and shopping. I would have anyone willing to give me a little bit of attention listen to me list endlessly all of the things I could do, how close work was to Potsdamer Platz, and all of my plans. I think by the time my parents took me to the airport, they were partly relieved that they would finally have conversations that did not revolve around Berlin and how *amazing* it was.

Once I got to Berlin, I did do a lot of the things I planned to do. I visited the East Side Gallery, where artists have turned the remnants of the Berlin Wall into artwork. I ate bratwurst, drank beer with actual substance, and watched a lot of soccer. But I did not just experience German culture—far from it. I somewhat expected to learn about the large Turkish immigrant population in Germany, and especially Berlin, through work. I worked with an organization that was part of a Turkish-German Alliance group, that focused on providing educational and job finding skills to youth with an immigrant background. At work I did learn a lot about the immigrant population in Berlin, but most of this revolved around the way that the mostly second generation immigrants were adjusting to living in between two different cultures. A lot of the students had a subpar education, severely limiting their possibilities for employment. They faced issues with discrimination, especially the girls who wore headscarves. It

was also at work that I was first introduced to Turkish food. While most students who study abroad have Turkish food at one of the many small stands, which is in fact delicious, at work I got to experience home-made authentic Turkish food. One of the women who grew up in Turkey would make a huge meal for those who chose to partake every Tuesday. Most of the time I had absolutely no idea what I was actually eating, but it was delicious. Over time I learned more about the foods, especially when I would go to one of the Turkish restaurants with some of my coworkers for lunches.

But it was more than just working with and observing parts of Turkish culture through work that exposed me to Turkish culture. My roommate in Berlin had grown up in Stuttgart, but her parents were from Turkey, and it was because of her that I had one of the most enlightening experiences of my life. She helped to really show me the idea of people living between and within two very different cultures, which are increasingly coming into contact with one another. But more than just telling me about her life and what she experienced, she took me with her and I got to really experience the depth of Berlin. Beyond pointing me to the best museums and tourists sites that were really worth it—which was a valuable part of my experience—she also took me to Turkish restaurants, helped me struggle through Turkish dancing, and introduced me to Turkish music. And it was through her, that I fell in love with Turkish food.

Perhaps the most expressive idea of the intersection of the cultures in Berlin was the market I would go to on Mondays and Thursdays. I went there for the first time with my roommate, and was astounded at the way she could bounce through the crowds of people, with women pushing strollers and children scrambling around, begging for treats. The market was mostly for fresh fruits and vegetables, but there were also tables of cloth, racks of cheap clothing, jewelry stands, flowers, kitchen utensils, and prepared foods. People milled through, usually so crowded that a slow shuffle was as fast as anyone could manage to go, carting bags of goods. The energy, even on rainy, cool days, was stimulating—I would often go after a day at work just to walk around and feel the energy around me. My roommate would often go with me, telling me about the markets in Istanbul, and how similar this one really was to so many of those. I would listen to the different languages around me, desperately trying to pick up on the few Turkish words I could guess at with reasonable accuracy. My favorite days were actually when they thought I just might

speak Turkish, even though I had to ask if they spoke German or English. I also loved the samples many of the vendors would give. I got to taste different kinds of breads and sweets, and would buy what I have come to think of as a Turkish quesadilla, very thin bread wrapped around a Turkish cheese and fried in front of you.

It often seems funny to me that, when I think of how I really learned about two cultures this summer, many would argue that we have even more cultures in the United States. And we do. But what strikes me about my experiences in Germany is the fact that so many people are living their lives on the edge of these two extremely different cultures, to varying levels of success, and doing so is a rather new conception. Many people in Germany asked me about how many immigrants I see in the United States, because we do have the reputation of being a nation of immigrants. But largely growing up and living in suburbs, I have not really had the chance to experience such entrenched cultural practices the way that I could in Germany. It goes beyond the night to Greek town or a little Italy for dinner that often marks being multicultural in the United States. Many of the students I worked with in Germany spoke much better Turkish than German, and did not even learn German until they entered the schools.

The culture in Germany was also unique because of the connectedness of the Turkish population in Berlin and Turkey itself. People were genuinely shocked that I had never really considered going to Turkey—although now I really do want to go to Istanbul. When a Turkish person talked about taking a vacation, it was essentially assumed that they would be going back to Turkey. Even some of the students I worked with wanted to go back to Turkey to work, maybe not for the rest of their lives, but for a few years. This really struck me, because one usually perceives immigrant communities as escaping from worse situations back home—but now I have come to consider how that is mostly because of my education and the way immigrant communities in the United States have worked.

For me, I think it will be extremely interesting to watch how the two different cultures in Germany, and especially Berlin, in the coming years to see how they continue to interact and influence each other. But I feel that I really got to experience them both at a unique time, as Germany has started to once again embrace a sense of nationalism, and as more young people with Turkish ethnicity spend the entirety of their lives in Germany.

Most of all, however, I got the chance to spend two months in Berlin and experience a culture I thought I would, but also a whole other culture and experience. I got just a chance to experience what so many people, such as my roommate, do everyday, living on the edge of these two places. And so I went to Germany, and came back with a love of Turkish food.