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### Hungary Study Abroad Travel Writing Portfolio

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University of New Hampshire

Hungary Study Abroad Travel Writing Portfolio

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English Honors Thesis  
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## **Table of Contents**

<i>Why I want to study abroad – Predeparture Reflection .....</i>	<b>3</b>
<i>The Lively Mall .....</i>	<b>5</b>
<i>On Ukraine .....</i>	<b>8</b>
<i>Busójárás Festival.....</i>	<b>11</b>
<i>The mental strains of Hungarian volleyball.....</i>	<b>13</b>
<i>The silence of Hungary .....</i>	<b>16</b>

## Why I want to study abroad – Predeparture Reflection

When I was 5, my grandparents retired and embarked on their honeymoon retirement travel phase. During four years, they spent most of their time traveling to all the US states and every continent besides Antarctica. When they were in New Hampshire, I would help my grandmother make scrapbooks that compiled photos, tickets, wristbands, dried flowers, postcards, and other mementos from her trip. I would look at pictures of my grandparents riding camels in the Sahara Desert, eating snails in France, walking for miles down the Great Wall, and petting kangaroos in Australia. My favorite part of the scrapbook was the photocopies of my grandmother's walking journal. My grandmother religiously walks for exercise and diligently keeps a journal detailing how far and where she walks. The journals date back for decades, and document thousands of miles walked. My grandmother's feet stepping on many sidewalks, regions, countries, and continents fascinated me. My young mind could not comprehend all she had seen, the languages she heard, and the people she met. I was jealous, and I was disappointed, at age 5, to find out that my retirement was 60 years away. But my parents and grandparents assured me I would be able to travel abroad before then.

I first set my hopes on international boarding school—something my parents made clear they would not pay for. Universities abroad or even out of state were also not possible because of my family's financial situation. When Covid-19 hit in 2020, I thought I would need to wait until I retired to travel internationally for anytime longer than a week. Last summer, I discovered that UNH planned to host study abroad programs during the spring semester of 2022, my last semester of college. I am so grateful and so excited that I get to experience time abroad. This upcoming semester I will be studying in Budapest, Hungary for five months. I will be living in a

dorm with other Hungarians and other international students and taking humanities classes in English at Károli Gáspár University.

For a while I did not know why I wanted to study abroad. All I could think was it "looked cool" when my grandparents did it. When I saw the "Traveling Americans" exhibit in the Renaissance section of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, it all made sense. The pieces in the exhibition were created by Americans abroad in Europe. The artist's work before their travels was starkly different than the paintings on display. The older paintings were duller. The artistic skill was there, but there nothing that drew me in to look at them. After these artists went abroad, their paintings became grander because their perspectives widened. Their minds expanded by seeing different things, interacting with other people, and living in different cultures. They found imagery and techniques that they could not find in the US. In his painting *Elijah in the Desert* (1818), Washington Allston uses manipulation of expressive use of color in the style of the Italian painter Titian. The drama of the work's composition is influenced by the Baroque painter Salvator Rosa. The detail and grandness of the work show that Allston did not spend his whole life studying and painting in Massachusetts. He could paint so powerfully because he studied landscapes and pieces in person.

Leaving how also lets people realize what was truly special about home that they previously took for granted. Everything mushes together into your everyday life. It is not until you leave you realize what distinguishes it from other parts of the world. Traveling made them better artists and thinkers. I hope similar things happen to me while I am abroad. Although I am not an artist, I want my mind and writing to flourish as the painters did. I want to be humbler and welcoming through interacting with other people. I hope to find beauty in the world and learn what makes The United States and New Hampshire unique.

## The Lively Mall

It's a Friday afternoon and the buzz of conversations and unoffensive modern pop music fill the stores and walkways of Alle Mall. The mall is busy. Families with young children, small groups of teenagers, homeless men in worn clothes, and women with designer purses come in and out of the glass revolving doors. Every store has neat lines at the checkout and people looking at items throughout the store. The food court has many tables occupied by young teenagers on dates, workers on their lunch breaks, and families.

The scene described above, a lively shopping mall, seems like a relic from the US Y2K era. But this scene isn't from the United States in the early 2000s. I saw it this year when I visited the mall by my dorm in Budapest, Hungary, to buy shower shoes and cooking supplies. My dorm is 20 minutes away from the city center in a residential area in Buda. Everyone in this area strictly speaks Hungarian, and tourists seldom go. Since this was a residential area, I expected the local shopping mall to be empty.

After I did my shopping, I got Thai Food at a wok bar restaurant and listened to a group of teenage girls who happened to be speaking English. One girl said Pull and Bear, a shop, finally restocked their high waist bathing suit bottoms. The girls were excited by this news. Some were asking the reporter different questions: What colors do they have? Do they have my size left? Did they restock the tops too? Others in the group were packing up their things to get to the store as soon as possible. It was a group event, and there was a palpable amount of excitement that would only grow bigger once the girls laid eyes on the physical swimsuits.

The mall closest to my house in the United States is the Fox Run Mall. The complex has room for 50 stores despite never having more than 50 shoppers in it. The hallways are bare except for the older people who are scared to order stuff off the internet and the procrastinators

who need something sooner than the two days it would take for something from Amazon to ship to their house. The mall is quiet, and whenever I go in there, I wonder how many years this mall has until it completely shuts down.

The biggest culture shock I've experienced in Budapest was when I first walked into Alle Mall. It was nostalgic, and I felt I stepped back in time to when I would go to the mall with my parents as a little kid. I could not believe how busy it was, and I could not remember the last time I saw a shopping complex that full. Even the regional malls in Massachusetts are nowhere as full as this mall in Budapest was.

Why? My biggest guess for the difference was that Amazon and online shopping is not as accessible in the area, and after doing some research, I found out this is true. Amazon does not provide free shipping to Hungary, and even if you decide to pay the shipping fee, not all items ship to Hungary. The absence of Amazon and mall culture in Hungary offers an alternate reality: what the whole world would be like without fast shipping and online shopping.

There is a potential cultural explanation as well. Communist rule fell in Hungary just a little over 30 years ago. While I was in the mall, it was visually apparent that I was observing a nation that was still generally new to capitalism. There was a sense of excitement people had in a place with countless clothing and food options and giving money to businesses that would direct their money to Hungarian employees. I talked to a Hungarian about the absence of Amazon and rapid online shipping. She does not mind it and prefers to give the money directly to the companies anyway.

The pride in local businesses, free markets, and competition was evident through the popularity of mall culture. It is a strong mentality that makes it one of the only survivors of Jeff Bezos's international conquest. There is probably a lot more to it. Still, the people of Hungary

have given their resources to one entity for almost its entire existence, which makes it resilient to a company like Amazon.

## On Ukraine

It was Friday morning, and a small group of us were going to Vienna for the weekend. When our train reached the platform, hundreds of people rushed toward the doors. It was unlike anything we've seen on any other of our train trips. People young and old were running, pushing, and disregarding any line or sense of personal space. My friends and I were confused. The train did not leave for another 15 minutes, and you needed seat reservations to get tickets for the train. When I got to my spot, I found a woman in my seat. She was sitting with what seemed to be her family. I didn't want to have her, so I asked which seat she was so we could switch. "I don't have a seat. I am a Ukrainian refugee," she responded. Suddenly, the rushing and anxiety of the people on the platform all made sense. These people were coming from a place where getting a spot on a train was life or death. My weekend trip seemed unimportant, and I felt incredibly guilty.

Like much of the world, I woke up on a Thursday at the end of March in disbelief. I saw that Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to invade Ukraine, a country located a three-and-a-half-hour drive, or 200 miles, away from Budapest. My professors tell me that Budapest is safe. Logistically it is. Hungary is a small European country and does not hold much global political power. It is also part of the European Union and NATO alliance, two organizations with mutual defense treaties. The Hungarian government has little to do with the creation and enactment of the United States and European Union sanctions. Putin has no reason to attack Hungary, especially considering an invasion of the country would activate a military response from all of NATO, effectively starting the widely feared World War III.

Although I tell myself these facts throughout the day, this conflict forces me to reflect on the purpose of my daily life. My life in Budapest is pleasant. I listen to music on the metro in the morning when I head over to my classes. My friends and I drink a cappuccino outside at Benito's

coffee shop among other students and the occasional street cat. The part of the city where my classes are, Kelvin Ter, is clean, calm, and young. After class, I usually return to Benito or Lumen to do homework. Other times, I go to Margaret Island or Hero Square and sit outside in the sun doing homework or reading. Student life in Budapest is similar to student life in the United States, except for the language difference.

But when I go on my phone, I get a glimpse of the lives of people nearby. I see images and videos of entire families sleeping in subway stations, mile-long lines at the border, NICU wards crammed into small bomb shelters, grandmothers making Molotov cocktails, and cities with a population of millions of people in complete rubble. I wonder why I get to sit in the park and read while others shelter from air raids?

There is a big nightlife scene in Budapest. People from all across the continent come to the city for its nightlife. It makes for a lot of busy dance clubs. The business of Budapest clubs on peak nights creates a sensory experience that is so powerful that it becomes numbing. The music is so loud that you can feel the pulse of the base in your fingers. A building so tightly packed that it has an energy of its own. Each person is an organ inside the creature, the crowd. Moving from one place to another requires one to take a path entirely at the mercy of others' dance moves and pushes. Personal space is something that you leave at the door. I pay to do it. It is something I do for fun.

In three or four hours, the typical time I spend out dancing, I could end up in a country where people are also part of crowds larger than themselves. But there isn't EDM music playing. It is the sound of sirens, families crying as they say goodbye to each other, and people screaming about why they deserve a spot on the next train instead of their neighbor. People just a few miles awake are up in a panic, praying that they won't die in an air raid.

Sometimes when I am out, I think about this, but the majority of the time, I don't. It is only times that I am sitting alone on the metro or walking back to my room that I think about these things with immense guilt. I've donated some money to non-profits sending medical supplies to the area, hoping that most of the money will reach Ukrainians instead of the organizers' pockets. The war makes me incredibly sad and angry, but the only people I've shared these thoughts with feel the same way. I feel disappointed in my existence and that I am misusing my privilege. Why am I spending my money traveling and studying abroad when it could go to help the victims of Ukraine?

Living during tragedy is an issue our generation needs to deal with. My first memories occurred during the 2008 financial crisis when families dealt with economic collapse. The pandemic happened right when we were in our late teens and early twenties. Climate change and the accompanying climate dread have been two words that our teachers and parents integrated into our vocabulary before we could remember. Now, there is the war in Ukraine and the inflation accompanying it, not to mention the five other major conflicts throughout the world. It is discouraging to see that not much has changed. No one has found an effective way to deal with this inevitable coexistence of dreadful events. I hope I'll be the first to know when such a solution comes out. Until then, I'm going to try to be kind to the people around me because I never know where they have come from or if they are impacted by the world's tragedies more than I am.

## Busójárás Festival

At first glance, the Busójárás festival appears to be like a regular winter market. The savory and sweet aromas of funnel cakes, langos, mulled wine, sausages, and paprikash fill the streets. Conversations between friends mix with the upbeat tunes of Hungarian folk music. Some booths sell jewelry, while others sell homemade tote bags and hats. I am walking toward the stage when a strong force hits me. All I see is beige and feel a warm but scratchy material pushed against my entire body. A 7-foot girthy figure covered in matted sheepskins traps me in his arms. His grasp around me gets tighter as he shakes me back, forth, up and down. The firm squeeze I feel on my butt before I am released cemented that I was not at a typical American fair.

The Busójárás Festival happens the weekend before Ash Wednesday in Mohács, Hungary. The event's main feature is the hundreds of local women and men who dress up. The men dress as Buso Monsters. These characters wear wooden masks, horns, sheep fur, and trousers stuffed with straw. Each Buso carries noisemakers and handmade wooden weapons. Women wear traditional Slavic dresses and embroidered masks. The Busos spend the festival day drinking and attempting to scare visitors. Unsuspecting teenagers and adults get spooked as they walk through the stands or listen to music throughout the day. The scaring ranges from a gentle poke with a hand-carved stick to three different monsters wrapping their arms around one unlucky visitor, screaming and using their noisemakers. Many Busos appear to be walking in one direction before abruptly jumping in front of someone to yell or play noisemakers in their face. One could hear the occasional yelp from a visitor who was successfully startled by a Buso monster.

The celebration originates from the South-Slavic Šokci population of Mohács. Originally a pagan tradition designed to scare off winter and welcome spring. Locals say the giant Buso

costumes date back to when Slavic men wore masks and made loud noises while hiding in the swamps to scare off the invading Turks. Historians question the accuracy of this origin story, but no matter where it came from, the tradition now puts the event and Mohács on the list of UNESCO World Heritage sites. The festival transitioned from a pagan ritual to a catholic one to accommodate the Christian Monarchy of the Habsburgs.

The festival is resilient, much like many Hungarians. It survived not only the recent Covid-19 pandemic, but also occupation by the Soviets, Nazis, Hapsburgs, and Turks. The pride of the locals was visible to the casual onlooker. An immense amount of joy was present in the square, streets, and parks occupying the festival. Older men and women sat on benches drinking mulled wine and laughing as younger people got spooked. Parents smiled as their small children walked up to the Busos and asked to play with their noisemakers. Usually, I would be upset with people aggressively shaking me and grabbing my butt while I walked to grab fair food. It would never be allowed in the United States. Even at haunted houses, where people pay to have characters scare them, the patrons are rarely touched. However, the overall atmosphere made these actions excusable. Everyone around me was having fun, and the Busos' intentions were fun, traditional, not sexual. Everyone at the event also was fully aware that these types of actions could occur at any moment. It is not for everyone, and I would not recommend the event to those uncomfortable people with constant touching and crowds. However, I was personally surprised by how I did not find the event abrasive but fun and happy.

## The mental strains of Hungarian volleyball

The minutes before my first volleyball practice at my new university in Budapest were the most nervous I've felt in years. My stomach hurt, and my hands were shaky. I called my sister a few minutes before I headed over to the gym, and she said it sounded like I was sitting on a vibrating bench because my voice wobbled so much.

My time in Budapest, before this practice, had been in the company of Americans and other international students. All my classes, tours, and excursions were in English. The women's volleyball team was made up of entirely Hungarian students and ran in the Hungarian, a language I barely knew. I could barely order a coffee at a cafe. To make things even more complicated, I had not played volleyball since my senior year in high school, four years earlier. The coach invited me to play without knowing how my skill compared to the other women on the team. I was decent in high school, but that was high school volleyball in New Hampshire. I had no idea how my skills compared to a collegiate team in a new country.

While walking up to the gym, I tried to take big deep breaths to ease my anxiousness. I knew I would not play well if my hands were shaky from my nerves. The coach was standing right by the door. He introduced himself and pointed me to the locker room. The locker room was small but similar to those I've been to in the United States. There were lockers and a set of showers and bathrooms. The women inside were changing and talking in Hungarian. I am a social person, and if I were at home, I would introduce myself to these new people. However, my ability to read social cues plummeted since I could not understand the language. What if they were having a serious conversation and did not want to be interrupted? What if they talked about how they were not in the mood to socialize? I didn't want to stare at these people changing to

read their body language to find a good time to talk. Instead, I quietly changed before heading back out into the gym.

I stood in an empty spot on the court, trying to remember warmups that players could do by themselves. Players behind me were starting to pair up, but again I was shy, and my mind was racing. What if they have established partners? What if I pair with them, but my poor skills mean they can't warm up properly before practice? Then I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around to find a woman smiling and saying something in Hungarian. I smiled back and said, "sorry, I don't understand you. I'm an exchange student from the United States, and I don't know a lot of Hungarian." I found out the woman's name was Eszter, and she wanted to warm up with me. Eszter's kindness calmed me a little, but now it was time for the real test: seeing if my volleyball skills were compatible with hers. She tossed me the ball, and I passed it back to her, she smiled and set it back to me, and I gave it back. After a few minutes of passing back and forth, Eszter complimented my skills, and we talked about my exchange program and how I was enjoying Hungary. I was relieved; My volleyball skills were fine, and I seemed to have made a friend. My biggest challenge was not hitting or passing the ball correctly but understanding what was going on in a practice run in a different language.

During practice, I needed to be aware of my surroundings in ways I never had before. When the coach explains an exercise, I concentrate on every movement, hoping they indicate what he is saying. I stand in the back of the line at the beginning of drills. The line of girls is like an hourglass, and each person who goes and performs the drill is like a piece of sand falling away, counting down the time I have to figure out what to do. All the women I play with learned to play in Hungarian. They never learned how to talk about the game in English, which means some commands get lost in translation. A command like "pass the ball to the setter and then hit

from the outside" is translated to "overhand touch to the player with hands and then swing hard far to the left". The translation is grammatically correct, but it takes me a second to figure out how the English words they are saying correlate to the movements I know.

After every practice, I do not feel a lot of physical fatigue, but my mind is utterly exhausted. The thought of sitting down and doing homework, reading, or even mindlessly sitting on my phone gives me a headache. After practice, all I can ever find the energy to do is get a quick dinner, shower, and go to bed. This fatigue made me realize how I've taken my English for granted. I have easily communicated with people around me because I usually live in a country where people speak English. Even in Hungary, almost everyone speaks English. Volleyball has taught me that immersing yourself in a different language is incredibly draining. I only go to volleyball practice once a week, but there are people everywhere who need to navigate their whole day in a language they do not speak. My appreciation and admiration for people who do this have grown. I now understand how impressive is the mere existence of millions of people who interact with English speakers every day is.

## The silence of Hungary

I am on the metro on my way to my morning class. My dorm is in a suburban area, 30 minutes by tram outside the city. I share my morning commute with other students, workers, and families who utilize the reliable yellow Budapest trams to start and end their day. People don't talk on the trams. Most sit on their phones scrolling through social media, the news, or text messages. A few shift through the newspapers handed out at the stops. Others look out the window. Conversations between people are hushed to respect this moment of tranquility that these Hungarians have before they start their day.

One morning, my professor showed up to class a few minutes late.

"Hi everyone, sorry I am late," she said. "I was voting. The presidential elections are today."

My American friends and I looked at each other in shock.

"The elections are today?"

We were all confused because everyone in the city and everyone on the commuter tram acted like it was just a typical day. There were no "I voted" stickers. No one was campaigning at different tram stops. There were no giant cardboard cutouts of candidates' faces around the city. I didn't see one "get out and vote" bus, student canvasers, or voter registration tables. None of us even knew where the voting was taking place. It was the exact opposite of what we experienced at our college town in an American swing state, where the entire week leading up to the election is one big political festival.

Many people seemed uninterested in the election and acted like it didn't exist. It didn't seem like anyone believed that their vote could impact Orban's position in Hungary. In many ways, they are right.

The Hungarian government has become more and more authoritarian over the past few years. Authoritarianism is a form of government that requires strict obedience to authority at the expense of personal freedom. The current Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, was reelected during the elections that we did not know were going on. He has been the Prime Minister of Hungary since 2010 and served a term from 1998 to 2002. His government has been creating rules that limit freedoms. Major journalism networks (TV, newspapers, radio) are all government owned (or controlled by wealthy oligarchs loyal to Orban). The Hungarian news on television only allowed the opposition to have five minutes of screen time during the entire election. Those five minutes were sandwiched between two 2-hour-long Orban speeches. The opposition had five minutes while Orban had four hours in just one day. The government-owned post office refused to mail out political postcards unrelated to Orban. Private mail companies refused to send out opposition mailings in fear of retribution from the current administration. Reproductive and LGBTQ rights are also starting to be restricted.

The presidential election only had one opposition candidate. Every single person who wanted Orban gone, the neutral, extremely conservative, and extremely liberal, all banded together to get someone in the middle ground nominated to oppose him. That candidate, Marki-Zay, sole purpose was to break the cycle of Orban and put someone else into the Hungarian leadership position. It would be like if Mitch McConnell and AOC decided to work together to get Mitt Romney elected. That is how different the people in the opposition party were.

My friends and family ask me what it is like living under an authoritarian or near authoritarian regime. Before this experience, it was hard for me to come up with an answer. As a white student who is financially stable, being in Budapest felt like being a student in any other

city university. But I realized that the signs of authoritarianism do not come from what people do. But instead, signs of authoritarianism are shown through what people don't do.

You can only understand it is happening based on the things you don't see. "Elections" happen quietly. No one talks about politics or other political events in public. You don't see many journalists reporting on the street. There are no anti-vaccines or anti-masks protests. Everyone wore a mask without complaint until the day after the mask mandate lifted, when everyone took them off without any real conversation or debate. These conclusions are drawn from my observations and conversations with Hungarians. However, since I do not speak Hungarian, I cannot really know if there's debate about politics in bars, cafes, or opposition press.

It is this silence, this subtleness, that makes authoritarianism so dangerous. I, along with many others, fear that things in Hungary will build-up without the population even realizing it. I hope I can visit Hungary in a few years and find the country and the people I enjoyed so much when I was studying here. I want people to be able to use their voices and enjoy freedom.