

#### **Table of Contents**

- 1. Migration & Community
  - 1.1. Roma Initiatives Office
  - 1.2. Free Word Association
- 2. History & Culture
  - 2.1. Auschwitz
  - 2.2. Jagiellonian University Museum
  - 2.3. Warsaw School of Economics Lecture on Islamic State
- 3. Eastern European Integration & Economics
  - 3.1. Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs
  - 3.2. Central European University Lecture on Transitions
  - 3.3. Businesses
    - 3.3.1. Orion Electronics
    - 3.3.2. Magyar Suzuki Corporation
- 4. Attractions
  - 4.1. House of Terror
  - 4.2. Visegrád
  - 4.3. Tea at Professor Matteo's
  - 4.4. Wawel Castle
  - 4.5. Wieliczka Salt Mines
  - 4.6. Interacting with Students
- 5. Annex
  - 5.1. List of CAPT Staff and Students
  - 5.2. List of Partner Organisations & Contact Details
  - 5.3. Accommodation
  - 5.4. Other Contacts

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### 1. Migration & Community

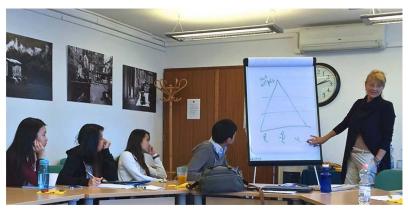
Migration and community was a prominent theme of this trip, and our professors arranged meaningful dialogues with international organisations such as the Open Society Foundation (OSF) and Free Word Organisation. Europe is a region whose countries have experienced changing state boundaries and overlapping histories, and it is impossible to categorise Europeans in a discrete manner. Even today, hundreds of thousands of people migrate across European borders, not to mention the number of people immigrating from outside of Europe for various reasons. Related topics of identity and citizenship surfaced in the midst of these conversations and we relished the opportunity to talk to people actively involved in various social causes and learn about their experiences.

# 1.1. Roma Initiatives Office, Open Society Foundation (Budapest, Hungary)

The focus of our visit to OSF was the Roma community. Arguably the largest excluded minority in Europe, numbering an estimated 10-12 million people in the region alone, the Roma, or gypsies, by which they are more well known, face discrimination from other Europeans, who mostly see them as roamers who sing and steal, and do not contribute constructively to society. A number of us came across them on the streets of Kraków Old Town, the women wearing long flowing skirts and their children (not more than 4 or 5 years of age) running around them, playing music for passers-by in exchange for coin.

We had the privilege of Kinga Rethy's presentation on the status of the Roma in Eastern Europe, and measures currently underway to empower the Roma to be active citizens. Kinga is the Deputy Director of the Roma Initiatives Office under the umbrella of the Open Society Foundation, and has been actively advocating Roma rights for years. The Office works with Roma advocates and fosters dialogue in order to

promote equal opportunities for Roma and fight discrimination. The talk shed light on the continuing difficulties faced by her team 10 years since the Decade of Roma Inclusion commenced, and the potentially discouraging results that have emerged. Although this initiative has brought the issue of discrimination against Roma to the notice of the European Union, there remains much to be done for these people. Kinga mentioned that Roma civil society tend to be disillusioned and see little point in standing up for their rights, in a society where prejudice against them is so deeply rooted. School segregation, for instance, between Roma children and their classmates is not uncommon, and Europeans have made their hatred explicit on social media platforms. There remains only an economic argument that would make governments pay due notice to Roma inclusion, but that is not a long lasting solution.



Listening to Open Society Foundation's Deputy Director, Kinga Rethy.

Community engagement being a core concept of our college, our group was naturally inclined toward the conversation, and we asked Kinga many questions about the future of the Roma and her project after the Decade of Roma Inclusion ends. Thinking back on our time in Europe, the issue of marginalization and prejudice was an interesting one seeing as we got to experience a tinge of that ourselves. Being an Asian group in a foreign country attracted a lot of attention and in Poland, especially, we received many uncomfortable stares from the younger people on the

streets. Of course, that sort of reaction to our presence is miniscule compared to what the Roma suffer on a daily basis, but it did give us an idea of what it means to be considered an outsider in a place, a first experience for many of us.

Kinga's personal background lent a wonderful layer to her presentation – she is an ethnic Hungarian, but fled with her family to Romania during the revolutions of 1989. She returned to Hungary shortly after and attended school there, but was considered an outsider by her classmates at school despite their shared nationality. It occurred to us then, that there are so many factors at play in consideration of a person's identity – it is never as straightforward as territorial boundaries, or one's ancestral lineage.

### 1.2. Free Word Organisation on Vietnamese Migrants (Warsaw, Poland)

After a long day of travelling and round table discussions at the Polish MFA, we were led to a small café behind which the Free Word Associations office was located. We were introduced to Mrs Ton Van Anh and Mr Robert Krzysztoń, a former member of the Solidarity social movement. Mrs Anh was born in Vietnam but has lived in Poland for most of her life and is a prevalent figure in Polish-Vietnamese media as well as the Free Word Association.

Founded in 2003, the Free Word Association (SWS) is an organisation made up of former activists and dissidents of the opposition and Solidarity underground in the 1970s and 80s. It aims to promote freedom of speech and equality in Poland. The organisation also works to achieve freedom of expression in other more oppressive countries, defends political refugees in Poland and helps them reintegrate into society.

The focus of our time at SWS was their work with the Vietnamese migrant community in Poland. The early 1990s saw an influx of anti-communist Vietnamese moving out of communist Vietnam to Poland in

favour of democracy. Today, around 50,000 Vietnamese people live in Poland. Mrs Anh and the SWS coordinate with the Immigration Aid Office to provide legal and practical advice to Vietnamese people who have just migrated to Poland to help them integrate into Polish society. Mrs Anh also actively writes articles and meets with Polish politicians to ensure that basic rights of immigrants in Poland are secured. The SWS serves as a helpline to Vietnamese migrants caught it any difficult situation.

It was intriguing to learn that unlike most migrant communities, the Vietnamese in Poland tend not to live in the same area or neighbourhood. They prefer to live their own lives independently without tight connections to their Vietnamese counterparts. Despite this trend, a resilient sense of togetherness still exists as evidenced by the Polish-Vietnamese publications and media that Mrs Anh is involved in producing. It occurred to me that in this aspect, the Vietnamese and Roma people in the region are very different. Unlike the Vietnamese in Poland, Roma people in Hungary do not identify themselves as part of a united Roma community. They do not have any formal means of communication or presence in the media like the Polish Vietnamese do either

While Mrs Anh's discomfort with speaking English made our Q&A session with her slightly incoherent, we still came away with a better understanding of immigration issues in Poland and an appreciation for the work that non-profit organisations like SWS do to safeguard the minorities in their society.

### 2. History & Culture

This was a core theme in our European travels and through trips to concentration camps and various universities; light was shed on the difficult and painful eastern European history. We were given the chance to better understand and experience the terrors of the war and thus the effects on the people today and how it shaped their thinking and actions. This was accomplished through our visits to Auschwitz and the Jagiellonian University Museum. We were also provided an insight into current events of the Syrian conflict as we sat in an engaging and perceptive lecture at the Warsaw School of Economics.

#### 2.1. Auschwitz (Poland)

The pathetic fallacy of gloomy and rainy weather mirrored the feelings we felt as we visited Auschwitz, a network of German Nazi concentration camps and extermination camps built and operated by the Third Reich in Polish areas annexed by Nazi Germany during World War II. Initially consisting of Auschwitz I, it was subsequently expanded to Auschwitz II-Birkenau, a combination of a labour and concentration camp. We visited both these compounds with the aid of a guide. The visit provided visual insight to the horror of the crimes of the Nazi, providing a view into the way they taught and lent weight to the reality of the holocaust. Auschwitz I shed light on the living conditions of the prisoners there and the running of the camp. We were walked through the process of interrogation, how they were inhumanely treated and ultimately imprisoned in horrifying conditions in a dungeon-like jail cell. One of the most gut-wrenching aspects of the tour was the accumulation of the Jews' suitcases, personal belongings, hair and shoes that the Nazis collected (and in some instances, used) after they were murdered. For instance, they subsequently used hair to make clothing and blankets, which was also showcased in the tour. Listening to the ways in which Jews were brutally abused physically, emotionally and psychologically, we saw the danger of the twisted strength and appeal of Nazi propaganda. It was an insightful but saddening form of knowledge to have.





One of the blocks featured a wall of remembrance to the victims of the camp, some of whom lasted a few days in the camp and some a few years. We also visited furnaces where the bodies of the Jews were burnt through a "railway" system that deposited bodies into the fire. Our guide also provided information on the medical testing done to the Jews at the time by Nazi scientists (however, there was no exhibit on that). It felt somewhat surreal to enter Auschwitz, to fathom how such cruelty was even possible. It left many of us with much to think about. Auschwitz II comprised the extermination camp. Our guide took us through the sleeping places and explained the harsh conditions under which the prisoners lived. We also took a look at the death railway, which from early 1942 until late 1944, was the route on which Jews were transported to the camp's gas chambers from all over German-occupied Europe. The small railway cars each housed 100-150 passengers, who had to stand the entirety of the journey due to the insufficient space in

the carriage. Upon reaching the camp they were directed to the chambers, and gassed with the rat pesticide Zyklon B.

At least 1.1 million prisoners died at Auschwitz, around 90 percent of them Jewish; approximately 1 in 6 Jews were murdered in the Holocaust. Others deported to Auschwitz included 150,000 Poles, 23,000 Romani and Sinti, 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war, 400 Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, and tens of thousands of people of diverse nationalities. Many of those not killed in the gas chambers died of starvation, forced labour, infectious diseases and individual executions. We walked along the remains of the gas chambers that the Nazis had burnt down to try and erase evidence of their heinous crimes. Beside it, a monument has been erected to honour the victims of Auschwitz, each tile of it representing a person who died there. All in all, a crucial part of history and the horrors inflicted upon humanity were concretised on our visit to Auschwitz. We all left rather pensive, the mood slightly sombre. It reminded all of us of the importance of acceptance and integration within a community, and was a strong lesson that the hatred of man should never be taken to such extremes ever again. It was truly an experience of great impact.

## 2.2. Jagiellonian University Museum - Collegium Maius (Kraków, Poland)

We took a short trip to the second oldest university in Central Europe, the 650-year-old Jagiellonian University. Formerly known as the University of Kraków, it was renamed in 1817 to commemorate Poland's Jagiellonian dynasty, which was responsible for establishing the university. The university has known many notable alumni, none more notable than Nicolaus Copernicus (1473 – 1543), who first advanced the heliocentric model of the universe, thereby revolutionising scientific thought and launching the Copernican Revolution.

Our visit was focused mainly on the museum exhibit in the university's oldest building, the Collegium Maius (Latin for "Great College"). There,

we were guided through a gallery of priceless artifacts, ranging from paintings, furniture and tableware, to scientific instruments. Of note were 16<sup>th</sup>-century astronomic instruments used by Copernicus, and several of his manuscripts, as well as the oldest globe in existence – one which depicts the American continent erroneously. The highlight of the gallery was the Aula, a hall with impressive Renaissance décor, still used today for graduation ceremonies.



A statue of Copernicus in front of Jageillonian University

The Jagiellonian University is impressive for its sustained dedication to a tradition of learning, despite many interruptions due to war or politics (the Nazi invasion, for example).

# 2.3. Warsaw School of Economics – Lecture on Islamic State (Warsaw, Poland)

We sat in for a small and intriguing Political Science lecture on the Syrian Civil War while at the Warsaw School of Economics (SGH). The lecture – given by Associate Professor Krzysztof Kozłowski from the Department of Political Science, who had only recently done extensive fieldwork in the region – provided a unique take on the Islamic State (ISIS) that ran contrary to the overwhelming majority of media reports. It was perhaps ironic that we chose to attend a lecture on ISIS while in Eastern Europe, but in addition to educating us about the situation in the Middle East, it also provided a perspective on the European response to the conflict – a perspective both insightful yet troubling.

The lecture began with the controversial thesis that the state of Syria had never existed. As a product of decolonisation, Syria had been established as a nation with arbitrary territorial boundaries, with a likewise arbitrary collection of ethnic and religious groups as its citizenry. Using a simplified form of the social contract, Professor Kozłowski described how the Syrian government, dominated by the Alawite sect – an ethno-religious minority in Syria – had never provided for "Syrian citizens", a majority of whom were Sunni Muslim. As a whole, "Syrian citizens" consequently do not regard themselves as such, retaining their traditional ethno-religious and tribal affiliations.

The professor then pointed to the Lebanese Civil War (1975 – 1990) as a key factor in creating the climate of conflict in Syria. The migration of Lebanese refugees into Syria produced a great deal of sectarian friction between previously isolated ethno-religious groups. This aggravated existing tensions between the Sunni Muslim majority and the ruling Alawite minority, with the explosive consequence of a general Sunni protest against the backdrop of the Arab Spring. The ruthlessness of Assad's response to his "fellow countrymen" – most notably his use of chemical weapons – supports the thesis on the fiction of Syrian "statehood" and the significance of sectarian friction.

Professor Kozłowski then began to describe ISIS in terms particularly unfamiliar to Western media. He suggests, firstly, that the creation of the Islamic State is thus the first true process of state formation in the region. In fact, while ISIS appears to observers as horrifically violent, Professor Kozłowski describes how the state has actually provided – for the first time in the region – basic amenities, medical support, and (religious) education; all marks of a responsible state. To reinforce the point about sectarian conflict being the cornerstone of the Syrian Civil War, the professor then illustrated that major fighting in the conflict corresponded to areas where tribal minorities were found and had to be protected by their respective patrons (Sunni by ISIS, Alawite by Assad); in essence, ISIS has in reality been fighting to protect and evacuate the Sunni Muslim community.

With this revelation, discussion naturally shifted toward the Western, and specifically the European, response to the conflict. The West has expended considerable efforts to fight ISIS, a fact that, from the perspective of this thesis, now seems not only absurd, but counterproductive. Professor Kozłowski added that the Western obsession with defeating the "terrorist group" which is ISIS – in effect the Sunni state – has freed Assad to concentrate on fighting other rebels, perpetuating the conception of the West as a champion of tyranny rather than of freedom. Moreover, the West's war against ISIS stifles the natural state formation process in the Syrian heartland. A student asked the question that is on everyone's mind: then, should the West simply not intervene? The professor replied by describing the general humanitarian crisis, and the host of human rights violations conducted by ISIS, suggesting plainly that, because of its ideals, Europe cannot leave the conflict alone.

The lecture made a particular impression on me for several reasons. Firstly, the lecture was a good opportunity to reflect on the effect of our media on our perception of current affairs. Many of us went away from the lecture feeling significantly enlightened – but only because our media has offered only a one-sided perspective on the conflict.

Secondly, the European perspective is shaped first and foremost by their historical experience from Abyssinia to Kosovo, and in some cases — with regard the Syrian Civil War, for example — European history hinders rather than aids politicians in their formulation of informed policies and decisions.

### 3. Eastern European Integration & Economics

Perhaps the most discussed and examined theme during our reading groups was that of Eastern Europe's economic transition and integration. As relatively new members of the EU (both Poland and Hungary acceded into the EU in 2004), the countries we visited could be easily compared and studied in terms of the economic transition they have gone through since their transitions into the market economy and EU accession. In line with this theme, we visited two manufacturing corporations in Hungary, which highlighted two different business models that have been successful in Hungary's transitioning economy. We also got to listen to an interesting lecture on the complex issue of transitional political and economic systems at the Central European University in Budapest. In Poland, we had the pleasure of visiting the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and engaging in lively discussions about Poland's current and future economic and political prospects with senior Polish diplomats.

#### 3.1. Visit to Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Warsaw, Poland)

Our visit to the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MSZ) in Warsaw was an opportunity to learn about Poland's place in the European Union a decade after its accession. Hosted by Ms Katarzyna Rybka-Iwańska from the Department of Foreign Policy Strategy, the roundtable also addressed pressing issues, such as the Eurozone crisis and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The hosts first provided a short introduction to the Polish economy and its gains since joining the European Union in 2004. Notable statistics include a doubling of Poland's GDP between 2003 and 2013, and a tripling of exports following the implementation of the European Union's common market. With an exception of losses through immigration due to the Schengen Agreement, the overall effect of EU membership on the Polish economy has been markedly positive,

boosting the trend of Polish economic growth and revival since the collapse of the Communist bloc in 1991.

The introduction gave way to questions from the floor; it was a valuable opportunity to learn the opinions of Polish diplomats on matters of security and economy plaguing the European Union today. The initial queries dealt with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the consequent change in the security landscape of the EU. Our familiarity with Polish history (Poland had historically been subject to Russian aggression) motivated pointed questions on whether Poland was ready for open conflict with Russia. In response, Ms Katarzyna provided an overview of Polish defense policy, which revolves around three pillars: the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), and the Polish Armed Forces; in short, Poland conducts its security policy mainly within cooperative frameworks with other European nations. Mr Wojciech Unolt, also of the Department of Foreign Policy Strategy, added that Polish foreign policy involves maintaining a stable Ukraine, as the sovereignty of Poland is only secure when the sovereignty of their eastern neighbour is secure. To that purpose, Poland had a significant partnership with Eastern European countries such as Belarus and Ukraine – to aid their sustainable development and stability - before the Russian invasion. Despite these initiatives, the Polish reliance on cooperative alliances, as well as on a strong and stable Germany ("we fear German inactivity more than we fear German tanks" – Mr Unolt) limits the possibility of their leadership amongst the East-Central European countries within the EU, a possibility we had discussed before the trip.

The Eurozone and European integration was the next topic of interest to surface. Poland's accession to the EU included terms mandating an adoption of the euro, although it has been delayed due to practical concerns. As Mr Unolt relates, the Greek debt crisis has surfaced several fiscal policy weaknesses which Poland would have to correct before their entry into the Eurozone. On the other hand, the currency change would require a change of the Polish constitution, possible only through

a two-thirds parliamentary majority – a majority impossible to obtain in the current political climate. The discussion then shifted to the subject of the Brexit – the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union. Considering the positive impact that the UK has had in promoting single market policies, Mr Unolt opined that their loss would certainly be felt by the European Union; although the UK would feel the loss more sharply. The roundtable also addressed at length the difficulty that British politicians will face in keeping the country within the Union, since British citizens do not commonly regard themselves as part of the European identity.

As a concluding note, the representatives from the MFA noted the slow work of integration, and how it generally progresses by crises. In attempting to construct a unified European identity, the EU has had to manoeuvre amongst its 28 members to obtain consensus despite each nation's historical baggage. While security and economic crises are unsavoury, they have been useful in pushing for greater partnership within the European Union; as Mr Unolt guarantees, the European project will only cease upon complete integration.

# 3.2. Central European University, Lecture on Transitions (Budapest, Hungary)

Our day at Central European University (CEU) was the longest day of the Hungary strip, mostly because Matteo packed it with so many activities, in order to maximise our time at the university. We started the morning with a presentation on transitional models of government in Germany, Poland and Hungary, and had the honour of Professor László Csaba's expertise and background in broaching this complex subject. A professor of international and political economy at Central European University and Corvinus University of Budapest, his many accolades seemed unlikely in the humble figure who stood before us that day.



The library in CEU

He talked about the changes in political systems in Germany, Poland, and Hungary in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Germany constructed what most would term a 'model democracy' in Europe, assuming the role of leader in matters economic and political. Poland instituted bold economic reform and demonstrated great fighting spirit after the Cold War in their efforts to write a new future for the country that for so long fell at the hands of the Nazi and Communist regime. Professor Csaba felt, however, that the peaceful process of change in Hungary was vastly different from that experienced in Germany and Poland. It was more accurately a 'negotiated revolution' where there was an absence of emotional legitimisation of the democratic regime. There was no catharsis after liberation, and this is the difference between Hungary and Poland in the post-Communist era. The people remain apathetic, and though there is a high level of dissatisfaction amongst them, they are of the mindset that they have to live here because there is nowhere else they can live. A depressing notion, and one that leads me to think about Singapore and our supposedly strawberry generation. The people of CAPT are people of action, and go out of their way to make things happen, start projects and engage communities. We have seen much of this in our 2 years here (some, longer) and been surrounded by so much activity that we forget this it may be a misrepresentation of the youth in Singapore. Not everyone stands up and takes action, and that is worrying if we feel that someone else is always going to be there to take the reins.

#### 3.3. Businesses - Orion Electronics & Magyar Suzuki Corporation

#### 3.3.1. Orion Electronics (Budapest, Hungary)

The very first item on our itinerary in Budapest was a visit to Orion Electronics, a subsidiary of Thakral Group, which in fact, is a Singapore-based holdings company. At Orion, we were introduced to Dr Toth, the Honorary Consul-General of Singapore in Hungary and Mr Arora, Orion's managing director. Mr Arora first gave us a brief look into the company history, it's acquirement by Thakral Group and Thakral Group's unique business philosophy.



Orion Electronics was first founded in Hungary in 1913 and specialised in the production of consumer electronic goods such as radios. Today, it produces a full range of household products as well as other primary electronic parts.

What interested me most about Orion was the fact that the company has adapted itself well enough to live through two major economic systems - the command economy of the communist era and the market economy that we are familiar with today. While the brand name of the company remains the same, its management has changed hands several times over the years. Before the economic liberalisation that followed the fall of communism in the early 1990s, Orion was a state-owned business. As a result of rapid economic liberalisation and privatisation efforts, Orion's business struggled until it came under the management of Thakral Group in 1997.

The Thakral Group itself has a rather unconventional approach to business in that it does not specialise in any particular industry. Instead, it opts to focus on almost any promising business opportunity in very early emerging markets. Mr Arora explained that Thakral group sends pilot teams to live in emerging economies for up to a few years in order to understand the country's work culture and assess its business potential on the ground. This is perhaps a surprising business philosophy to most of us as we are more familiar with a top-down approach when it comes to overseas expansion and mergers. Few businesses would take the care and effort to fully immerse themselves in local work culture before jumping in. The key feature of Thakral Group's business strategy that made the transfer of Orion's management successful is the fact that they assured that their company was adapted to local work culture. Mr Arora noted that a Hungarian worker is a "thinking man" and his culture has to be appreciated and respected in order for him to be an efficient worker. It was interesting to hear Mr Arora's thoughts on this matter as Orion's uniqueness lies in the fact that the company has managed to survive the Hungary's rapid economic transition from command to market economy.

It was rather heartening to listen to Mr Arora speak fondly of his Hungarian colleagues, the company and its work culture. Although he is Indian by nationality, he admitted that he essentially considers himself Hungarian.

#### 3.3.2. Magyar Suzuki Corporation (Budapest, Hungary)

The day after our trip to Orion Electronics, we visited another major manufacturing business- Magyar Suzuki Corporation, a subsidiary of the well-known Suzuki Motor Corporation. Located in Esztergom, this colossal manufacturing plant was founded in 1991 and has a production volume of up to 850,000 vehicles. After a short briefing about the history of the factory, it's facilities and production process, we were given a walking tour of one stage in the long and intricate assembly line of a Suzuki vehicle.



Our group at Magyar Suzuki

It was hard not to feel a sense of wonder as we watched countless bits and pieces of a motor vehicle being fit together to create a piece of transport technology that we take for granted in our everyday lives. We watched screen wipers and car doors being seamlessly attached to the main frame of a car at different stations where teams of workers moved swiftly to lock the parts in place and check for any faults. The tour reinforced the importance of human involvement even in a highly technological manufacturing process. We tend to believe that automated robots do most of the complex manufacturing but the tour reminded me that there is a need for people to inspect and troubleshoot the process as well

Interestingly, our tour guide pointed out that many, if not most of the workers in the Magyar Suzuki factory were from Slovakia and cross the border every day to come to work. This gave us a first-hand look at how EU accession and being a part of the Schengen Area has affected business in Hungary. If not for Schengen, such convenient movement of labour from one nation to another for everyday work would not be possible. This also raises questions about Hungary's employment rate and the brain drain that it suffers given that travel across nations in the Schengen Area is so simple making labour in many parts of Europe extremely mobile.

Having just visited Orion Electronics and hearing about their business philosophy the previous day, it struck me that Orion and Magyar Suzuki were completely different in business strategy. While Orion's priority was adapting their production process to suit the tastes of the local workforce, Suzuki's factory with all its assembly lines and machinery was simple a copy of any other Suzuki factory in the world. Suzuki's tried and tested Japanese technology and production process was simply replicated in Hungary. While this difference might be amounted to the differing access to labour and international success of the two companies, it was a striking difference worth pondering. Despite this difference, both companies remain extremely successful.

All in all, our visits to Orion and Suzuki were certainly memorable. It isn't everyday that you get to walk through an automobile manufacturing factory in hard hats or meet the managing director of a large electronics corporation.

#### 4. Attractions

The time we took off to experience the city was what gave us a better opportunity to look into the things that shapes Eastern Europe's culture. From the painful war history to the grandeur of the castles, the long history has seen its prosperities and trials. We also had time to live the life of the locals, gaining insight from speaking to students and also trying out local food. We even got the chance to visit the home of our professor. We also saw the things that the various countries were proud of such as the Visegrád Castle and the Salt Mines. These things are not found in Singapore and it was a great experience for us to truly broaden our horizons and see the sights that are uniquely European.

#### 4.1. House of Terror (Budapest, Hungary)



Of the countless museums we visited during this trip, the House of Terror in Budapest of the more powerful ones. The museum building itself was originally the headquarters of the Hungarian Nazi Party, the Arrow Cross, and later, Communist Hungary's secret police. The museum focused on the double oppression of the Hungarians by the Nazis and Communists.

Interestingly, the museum did not depict Hungary's history as a linear series of events. Rather, it was sectioned into rooms, each featuring a specific aspect or theme of the Nazi regime in the early 1940s or Soviet rule thereafter until 1956. Some of the more captivating rooms include one on Gulag life in Hungary, a propaganda room and a labyrinth of lard bricks (lard spread on pieces of bread was basic sustenance during the occupations). There was also a room on religion during the time of the regimes where joining a Church was considered a form of dissent. Each room made creative use of photographs, interview footage, artifacts and audio recordings to create an evocative atmosphere suited to the theme of the room. There were also sheets of paper available detailing the room's theme. While many of us attempted to fully read the information sheet in each room, it proved to be far too much information and we resorted to simply collecting the information sheets to read later and immerse ourselves in the exhibits themselves.

Perhaps the most chilling part of the House of Terror was the final exhibit on the route – a reconstruction of the 1950s prison basement. A video of a Communist official explaining the execution procedure in detail was played as the lift descended at an eerily slow pace down to the basement. The video ended just as the lift doors opened, leaving us with a taste of the immense foreboding that the prisoners in the 1950s felt as they entered the prison basement. We explored dozens of tiny and cramped prison cells, torture rooms and even gallows, each containing portraits of Hungarians who were once imprisoned in them.

Personally, this visit was memorable as it reminded me that while we tend to blame or victimise entire groups of people in our understanding our history, a grey area always exists. For example, many could have come away from the museum completely sympathising with Hungarians as the victims of the Nazi and Communist regimes. In fact, the first and most prominent exhibit as we entered the museum atrium was a 2-storey high wall filled with portraits of victims who died in the building. Towards the end of the museum route however, were walls of

victimizers. They depicted Hungarian members and supporters of the Arrow Cross, many of whom were never brought to justice, reminding us that while the human cost that the Hungarians suffered is certainly tragic, they were not all victims but victimisers as well.

#### 4.2. Visegrád (Budapest, Hungary)

A small castle town situated on the right bank of the Danube, Visegrád is famous for being the meeting place of the Hungarian, Polish and Czech rulers in 1335, where a subsequent breakthrough in relations in Central Europe occurred. Amidst tenuous ties and conflict over the Polish throne, an anti-Habsburg alliance was formed, and founded upon entirely new principles. The events at Visegrád defined a new era for politics in Central Europe at the time, and demonstrated the possibility of a peaceful alliance forged in the midst of differing interests. In the years following this historic meeting, multilateral meetings amongst monarchs would continue to be held, a previously unprecedented occurrence at the time. The place has become a metonym of unity and development of diplomatic relations.



The view from Visegrád

Today, Visegrád is open to the public, and one can purchase medieval weaponry and other small souvenirs from small wooden push-carts within the grounds. One of the sellers of such merchandise also owned a horse, which was stabled just at the foot of the castle. The horse was calmly feasting on stacks of hay, and its presence added to the medieval charm of the town. The view from the castle was stunning – houses

dotted the hill that spilled out from the foot of the castle, and the view expanded to a road and of course, the calm waters of the Danube.

After a short walk about the grounds and exploring the Upper Castle, we hopped on the bus and drove across the bridge to Štúrovo, Slovakia, for a grand total of 20 minutes to get a photograph of Hungary across the river, before making the trip back to Pest!

I regret to say that Visegrád and its significance is somewhat distant from us, and many of us approached the visit with our jolly cameras snapping away at the scenery. It did feel surreal to be standing on the same path upon which great kings of old trod, to be where many important decisions regarding the future of Central Europe were made hundreds of years past.

### 4.3. Tea at Matteo's (Budapest, Hungary)

We began our first weekend in Eastern Europe with tea at Matteo's, and was assured of good food and generous hospitality. The exterior of his apartment building gave the impression of an old ruin; yet upon entering his apartment the simple elegance and warmth dispelled all previous notions, and we made ourselves comfortable on the sofas and the floor, playing with his dog, Yates and getting to meet his lovely wife who so kindly purchased a crate of the best strawberries in the market that morning. Roses grow outside on the windowsill, and his home overlooks the streets of Hungary, the ebb and flow of traffic a rushing hum in the background.

A table was laid with the most scrumptious grub - poppy seed and fruit tarts, small cakes, a selection of juices, coffee and tea. Matteo has truly been the supreme host - he has played a pivotal role in ensuring our trip involved a diversified programme. As Associate Professor at CEU he organised a day at the university for us and made possible a presentation by OSF. He also was guest speaker in two Master's Teas at CAPT, one of which revolved around Eastern European issues. He recommended

the hotels at which we stayed and took into account the distance between the hotel and our destinations. He is very approachable, funny, and always game to share his experiences and thoughts on any subject, from discontent at the wait for his burger at the ruin bar (he insisted some form of discrimination was at play) to international relations and his idea of selfhood, being someone who has lived away from home for so long.



Most of us spent the time exploring the cosy apartment, and we were allowed into his study, whereupon I pounced on the books on his shelf. Others were playing with Yates, talking to his wife, or had formed a circle around Matteo, eagerly listening to his stories of his home in Italy and European integration. It was a beautiful beginning to the day and we will miss Matteo! Hopefully if the opportunity arises we can all meet again.

#### 4.4. Wawel Castle (Kraków, Poland)

Wawel Castle was built in the 14th century, at the request of Casimir III the Great. It was the residence of the great kings of Poland and acquired additional buildings and structures in the successive reigning monarchs both selected exterior and interior areas have since been restored and repaired. Today part of it stands as an art museum, housing Gothic and Italian Renaissance paintings. Other rooms open to the public for viewing are the Crown Treasury, Oriental Art and State Rooms. One is actually able to buy an all-encompassing ticket that grants one access to all the exhibitions, but due to the limited time we had in the afternoon we had to be discerning about the rooms we decided to visit.

A group of us headed to the State Rooms, and every single room in this exhibition held its own unique charm and character. Many of them had sprawling tapestries hung on the walls, stretching from end to end, and floor to ceiling. They depicted Biblical or mythical scenes, and the meticulous attention to detail in the handiwork was simply stunning and incredible - people do not, and cannot make work of this quality anymore.

After the exhibition we made our way to another part of the castle - the defence tower. It was amazing that we had to pay 3 PLN to ascend the tower - literally paying to work our way up there. The walk up proved to be rewarding when at the topmost level we were greeted with a view of the entire city - finally we understood the strategic location of the tower.

Wawel also boasts a mythological figure that makes a good story to tell foreigners in the land. According to legend, dates back further than the construction of the castle - according to legend it was the name of a dragon that terrorised the locals and pillaged their homes. One day a man living in the village decided to rid the town of the dragon, and he stuffed a lamb with sulfur, leaving it outside of the dragon's cave. The dragon consumed the lamb and became thirsty, drinking continuously from the Vistula river. Yet its thirst could not be quenched and the

dragon kept drinking from the river until it exploded. Joel's Polish friend told us this story, and I remember thinking how odd! and how fairytale-like it sounded. The castle actually had a 'dragon's den' underground - a few of us were really excited at the prospect of this den and descended a dimly-lit, stone spiral staircase that probably disregarded many major safety precautions. In the end we were met with disappointment - the den was nothing more than a cave hewn out of rock and there was nothing wondrous or fantastical about it. We ended up exiting the den on the other side and emerging on the street, whereupon we encountered the famous status of the Wawel Dragon. This dragon actually emits fire at certain intervals, and if you are lucky enough at the moment you are taking a photograph with it! That eased the dissatisfaction at the den earlier. Kraków is truly a city brimming with culture and fascinating origin stories.

### 4.5. Wieliczka Salt Mines (Kraków, Poland)

In the very heart of metropolitan Kraków lies the Wieliczka Salt Mine which was built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and produced salt until 2007. We went deep into the mine and our guide provided insight into the History of salt mining and also the process of it. Simultaneously, we were exposed to the great spirituality and the strong thread of the Christian belief that lived in the hearts of the miners.

The legend of the salt mines states that Princess Kinga was about to be married to Bolesław V the Chaste, the Prince of Kraków. As part of her dowry, she asked her father for a lump of salt, since salt was prizeworthy in Poland. Her father King Béla took her to a salt mine in Máramaros. She threw her engagement ring from Bolesław in one of the shafts before leaving for Poland. On arriving in Kraków, she asked the miners to dig a deep pit until they come upon a rock. The people found a lump of salt in there and when they split it in two, discovered the princess's ring. Kinga thus became the patron saint of salt miners in and around the Polish capital. Within the mine, that reaches a depth of 327 metres (1,073 ft) and is over 287 kilometres (178 mi) long, there are

many tributes to the Princess and her heart for the people, exhibited when she chose a salt mine as dowry rather than jewels or palaces.

The salt mine itself structurally is held together by lots of wood which is preserved by the salt. The tour we went on gave us a chance to try out pushing logs along a pulley system, which brought up pillars of collected salt. We also learnt about the animals that served in the mines, of which the miners adored and took extremely good care. Within the mine also held many carvings and states which the miners had chiseled on their own. The walls and even the floors were completely made of salt. Many of us had an enjoyable time licking salt of the walls, thoroughly amused by the sheer amount of it that was all over. We were also educated on the dangers faced by the miners such as hydrogen explosions where the air caught fire due to the irregular percentages of air and carbon monoxide. Our guide also showed us salt pools where salt used to be farmed from. It was a really rare chance for us to understand salt production and also gave us a peek into the values that the Polish valued such as diligence and generosity.

The mine is also a highly spiritual place; there were many altars and places of worship found in the mine. These places were allocated as many of the miners were superstitious turned to religion to seek comfort in the dark and dangerous mines. One of the churches in the mine is an active church and services are held there every Sunday. It is also a hotspot as a wedding venue. Along the walls are chiseled pictures of the life of Jesus from his birth in a manger to the last supper. Catholicism is central to the identity of Kraków as the late Pope John Paul II moved to this very city at 18, and was a student at Jagiellonian University.

The mine was definitely an eye-opening experience for us and its vast history that was rooted both in folklore, spirituality and primitive science gave us an adventure below ground that none of us could ever have experienced back home. It was truly a unique experience that we will remember fondly.

#### 4.6. Interacting with Polish Students

After a long and fruitful day in Kraków – one of our last – we proceeded to a restaurant bar on the outskirts of the city, on the opposite bank of the Vistula. Here, we were scheduled to meet exchange students studying at the Jagiellonian University under the Erasmus Programme, an experience quite unlike our formal meetings and visits. The Erasmus Programme is an EU-wide student exchange programme benefitting from the mobility afforded by the Schengen Agreement, bringing together students from all over Europe into a singular learning community. The programme not only fosters a sense of community amongst European students, but is also a valuable opportunity to learn about and immerse in their host country.

With a couple of friends, I met two master's students in International Relations: Tanya from Macedonia, and Emily from France. International Relations is becoming a popular field of study, as Emily notes that the European Union project would need more skilled diplomats in the future. Eager to learn more about Poland, we discussed food places, such as the milk bar – a Soviet-era relic serving decent, yet heavily-subsidised food. Emily was interested in visiting Singapore someday, and asked about the food in Singapore; we mentioned that Singapore's food was very international – even pizza, which Tanya and Emily were sharing, was a common sight.

Having heard about the similarity of the Slavic languages, we asked Tanya whether she could read Polish (Macedonian is a South Slavic language, while Polish is a West Slavic language) – and she told us that there were several common, comprehensible words. I inquired whether the lingual similarities and comprehensibility was like that between Chinese dialects – to which both responded with confusion, as they didn't know that the Chinese spoke dialects other than Mandarin! We then explained the Chinese dialects, and even noted – to their further surprise – that Cantonese was one of these dialects.

As students, we were also interested to know about student life in Europe, which we had the impression was considerably more relaxed than in Singapore. Emily mentioned that despite being "very busy", European students had significant time outside of academic commitments – even during peak periods – to spend socialising. Even to us students from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, their typical week – as master's students – seemed considerably more carefree; a phenomenon reminiscent of European working hours. Emily added that she was baffled when she encountered a Taiwanese student that spent the majority of his time, even his free time, studying; by the end, we were agreed that Asian and European students had vastly different attitudes towards work and studying.

The session ended with a promise to have a meal in Warsaw, where the student community was to organise a follow-up dinner with us - a prospect which, however, failed to materialise. Nonetheless, the interaction we had with these European students - the first opportunity I've had - did enrich us with new perspectives on European student life, if not with new food places to try.