

TRAVELOGUE FROM OSLO

POOR, BUT FULL OF EXPERIENCES

By Julia Szensny

I study philosophy as a bachelor student at the University of Hamburg, which is mostly characterized by analytic philosophy. After my professor gave me the advice to study abroad, I chose to study at the University of Oslo, which is reputed to be one of the best in Europe. After my application was successful, I was excited. I imagined myself climbing in mountains next to elks, walking through the wonderful nature and studying philosophy at one of the best universities in Europe.

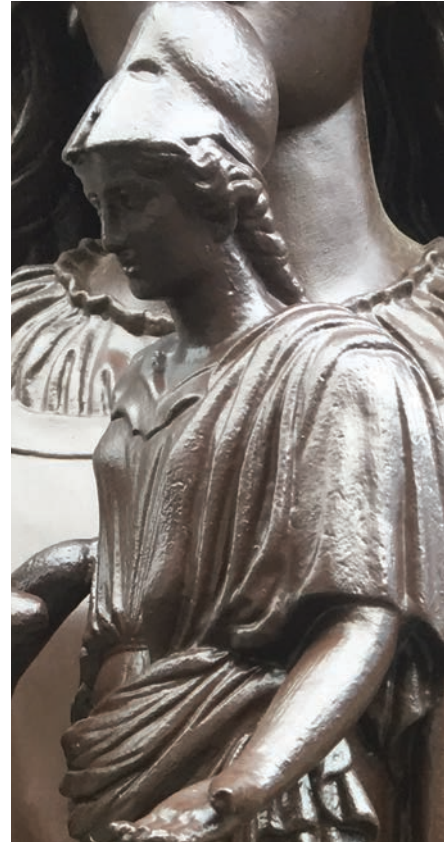
Before leaving Hamburg, I didn't think that much about the cultural differences that I might be confronted with. Maybe because I supposed that it would be very similar to European cities that I had visited before. Yet, I heard a lot about the Scandinavian perfection, nature and coldness. In some aspects, they didn't disappoint me and in others I was surprised.

Some months before all of that began, I had to apply for a student house and everything was so easy that it was shocking. SiO, the student welfare organization of Oslo and Akershus, promotes itself with the slogan 'For a better student life'. And they don't promise too much. The webpage is for applying and managing the student apartments, getting a membership for the gym, getting information about doctors and health, finding student associations and lots more. For a German who is used to run from one office to the next to get information about the very same things, the ease with which I could obtain this was refreshing and new.

SiO was the first sign of the impressively good organization skills of the Norwegians, and that impression was vindicated throughout my entire stay. In Germany, you hear that there is a rumour about the Germans that they are extremely efficient. These people have never heard about the Norwegians.

After a road trip through Denmark and Sweden I arrived in Oslo at the beginning of August. As I was told in an email, I could pick up my keys at the SiO center at the Blindern campus of the University of Oslo. Given that I arrived earlier than most of the students, there was no queue. It took 10 minutes and I left with a good description of the way to the student house. Compared to Hamburg, Oslo is a very small city and no matter where you live, everything is easy to reach by foot. There is the wonderful river Akerselva that flows through the whole city, and which I lived close to at the Nydalen station. The student house was very nice and my room had its own kitchen and bathroom.

I started learning Norwegian in Oslo by attending a six-hours-per-week seminar. Given my lack of Norwegian-language proficiency, I could only choose to attend the few courses in English. Those were 'Philosophy of Language', 'Ethics' and 'Examen Philosophicum'. The final one is a course that is composed of lectures and seminars, and is obligatory for every student at the University of Oslo, no matter what subject they study. For me, that was a sign that philosophy was taken seriously in Norway.



Fotografier av Harald Langseth Kavli

The teacher in Philosophy of Language was a German and the teacher in Ethics came from Britain. Given that, and the fact that most of the students in class came from different countries, I didn't feel a big qualitative difference to the classes in Germany. Philosophy of Language was an introduction and gave me an overview into the philosophy of Frege, Quine, Kripke, Putnam, Strawson and the debates between them. In Hamburg, the curriculum in philosophy of language is about the same as in Oslo, but there it is taught as a lecture. At the end of the lecture there is a big exam, whereas in Oslo I had to write about three essays. For the first two essays I could choose between two questions. The topic for the final essay was free to choose. The lesson was always very well structured and at the end of every class the academic took twenty minutes to give advice for good writing. I enjoyed this course very much and took a lot from it.

Ethics was more open for students that didn't come from philosophy, and I think it can be of value if people from different subjects are debating about a topic. But unfortunately, the teacher failed to give instructions about how an argument is constructed. That resulted in a very loose way of using arguments. Sometimes it felt more like people just uttering their feelings without bringing up arguments. But there are some other differences I would like to enumerate:

Credit Points

In Oslo one seminar gives you 10 credit points, whereas in Hamburg it is only 5 for the same amount of time and effort. I felt that the motivation and the quality one could reach was way more significant, knowing that it was worth 10 credits.

Associations

Another thing that was very new for me was the amount of student associations that I found in Oslo. There is literally an association for everything and the people that take part in them take it very seriously. My impression was that the Norwegians meet for more of a reason than just drinking coffee.

Heidegger

I found out that Heidegger seems to be more popular at the University in Oslo than he is at the University of Hamburg. Heidegger was mentioned not in the classes that I attended, but in a lot of talks held by master's students. And it was because of this that I felt the urge to read Heidegger in Norway. Thanks, Oslo!

Libraries

I thought that it is common that you are forbidden to eat in libraries and that you have to sit on uncomfortable chairs. Not so in Oslo. The first step I took into the wonderful library building of the UiO was with an open mouth. My friend from Hamburg studies architecture and her miniature projects look very similar. I always thought that no one would build a public building that is so welcoming. In Norway, they do.

The library has several floors with different areas. There are areas in which you can relax on futuristic looking sofas, you have big tables with green stylish lamps for reading, you can also work in groups in little extra rooms with comfortable sittings. And the most shocking thing was that I was allowed to take all of my stuff to the place I would read and write. I caught myself looking to the librarian, expecting to be admonished every time I took a bite into my sandwich. I only received a friendly smile.

Access to papers and books

For the Norwegian students, this is probably something that comes naturally. But it is incredible that the University of Oslo has contracts with so many publishing houses. I had free access to almost every paper or book I searched for, something I am definitely not used to.

Sport and activity

The first thing I saw when I left the subway in Oslo were a bunch of joggers. Joggers and people that do sports are literally everywhere here in Norway. Even when I climbed a mountain with friends in Bergen, some Norwegians just jogged past us. In Oslo, everywhere in public there is a place with sports equipment and people who use it. In Hamburg, you have to search for that kind of stuff and rarely find it.

Prices

Here is something you probably hear from every foreigner that has lived in Norway: it is super expensive. A beer in Hamburg costs about 25 kroner, whereas in Oslo you pay between 85 to 120 kroner. The money I got from Erasmus was about 4500 kroner and from the German government I got an additional 4500 kroner as well. My rent for the flat (I have to say that I didn't share a room, kitchen or bathroom) was 6300 kroner. So, there wasn't a lot left for drinking coffee or beer and I searched for a lot of activities that were free of charge.

Another good thing that happened was that I got to know *Filosofisk supplement*. In Hamburg, I founded

a student philosophy journal some weeks before I left. Therefore, I was very interested in knowing whether there was a similar student journal in Oslo as well. That was how I found *Filosofisk supplement* and I decided to write them an email. After a very good talk they voted me in to be the first member from abroad. I got the chance to learn from their way of working and was impressed with how much energy and seriousness they run the journal.

My tasks were to read texts and decide if they are acceptable for publication. Every text is read about four times by different people of the journal. Two times is about the content and the last two times is about the grammar.

It was very interesting how the work there was structured and how the meetings, which took place every week, were held. The meetings were conducted in Norwegian, which I couldn't understand at the beginning, but after a while it got better. Unfortunately, I left Oslo too early to be as good in Norwegian as wished to be.

Right now, I am sitting on an uncomfortable chair back in Hamburg, writing this. I miss Oslo a little, but I am also happy about being back, enjoying some beers in a deserted public sports place.

Takk for alt, Oslo! Vi ses snart.



Fotografi av Harald Langslet Kavli