

The American People's College Abroad---Oetz, Austria

July, 1936



Note: The American Peoples' College Abroad was affiliated with the [University of Michigan](#) Graduate School.



Arealistic
view of Oetz, Austria
(below).

The train ride
through Switzerland
into Austria was one
of the most beautiful
I have ever enjoyed.

The Swiss Alps

raised their jagged teeth up from fields of grain, grasses, and colorful wild flowers. Many lakes dotted the country side. The mountains are much like our Grand Tetons of Wyoming—so rugged

and snow capped. Gushing mountain streams tossed their way down rocky slopes while the clear lakes reflected shadows of the cliffs.

We had no trouble crossing the border into Austria. In fact, the friendly Austrian officers who boarded the train to check our passports spoke English and offered to change our money into Austrian coins. Since it was the dinner hour, officers passed from table to table in the diner to make their transactions. All the while, we enjoyed a festive meal.

Everyone else on the train spoke German, so it was impossible for us to understand what they said. We finished dinner just as twilight fell in the Tyrol. Sunset brought “evening’s holy hour”. Sky and snowy peaks turned pink-- then violet—then golden and faded into evening.

At the train station in Oetz we were met by school officials in big open touring cars to take us on the fifteen minute ride up to the Kassl Hotel, headquarters of the college. As we drove into the hotel yard, Austrian music sounded from the huge veranda, people cheered, and friends came out to greet us. The hotel was quite unique. It was built with large verandas on all sides, huge pine-paneled rooms with fireplaces, large dining halls to accommodate many visitors and sunporches which were used as classrooms. It was indeed a very inviting, cheerful sight and we anticipated with joy the week-long visit.

Students were housed in homes of the peasants in the little village of Oetz, which is nestled at the foot of the beautiful mountains. All meals, classes, and festivities took place in the Kassl Hotel.

My roommate and I were housed in the home of a leather worker in the village. The quaint cottage was spotlessly clean and simple, and our room was very comfortable. We had

twin beds—with feather beds, of course—a dresser—a night stand hand carved of wood—a table and chairs—a couch and a closet. A very plain but private bathroom adjoined our room. Of all the furnishings in the house, the window curtains delighted us the most! They were made with lovely insets of handmade lace, and were truly beautiful. Several pictures on the walls had hand carved wooden frames.

It was amazing that in spite of the language barrier, we were able to communicate with our hosts. The family included the father, mother, 12 year old son, and 8 year old daughter. We discovered that a smile and sign language convey many words! They were so happy to welcome us into their home and did everything to make us feel comfortable. Every morning we were awakened by the little boy of the house driving his goats from the barn. Each of the animals wore a bell around his neck, and the tinkling of the bells awoke us. My roommate and I agreed it was the prettiest alarm clock we had ever heard. In Austria, all of the women and children helped in the fields, oxen were used in farming, and life was very simple. Each day we marveled at how happy and contented the people seemed, when they had so little!

Breakfast was served at 8:00 in the hotel, followed by our first lecture of the day at 9:00 am. The lectures were presented by prominent people from all parts of Europe. Topics were varied, however each day the first course was a German class which Dr. Heinz Fleishman conducted. We tried to learn phrases and sentences that would be helpful to us. Topics of the lectures included “Youth in Utopia” and “Recreation in Europe” and “Politics in Central Europe”. The very interesting and informatively presented programs were conducted by a Hungarian, a Swede, a German, and an Austrian.

After dinner each evening, there was folk dancing and then afterwards an orchestra played for dancing—American style.

One beautiful afternoon a Dr. Koehr and his string quartet from the University of Vienna presented a program of Schumann, Schubert, Dvorak, and Mozart. But instead of having the concert in the hotel, we went up a hillside and sat among the wild flowers and listened to the lovely music. That was an unforgettable time, indeed. In the evening Dr. Koehr gave a lecture on Mozart and presented a concert of his music.

We enjoyed walking through our quaint little village. Some of the streets were quite steep. Usually the days were warm and sunny; nights were very cool. The town pump was the center of activity in Oetz. It was fun to watch life passing along our street each day—priests, sisters in their habits, children of all ages, workmen, tourists and house wives mingled with the students.

Sunday was special in our village. The church bells calling people to early mass, awoke us. Peasants were all dressed in their Sunday best—stiff hats, fancy aprons, bows, and homemade suits. After church the mayor, or “burgstrassar” read the news from a newspaper as people gathered around the Town Pump to listen. Old men sat and smoked their pipes. It was a special day of rest.

That evening we heard lectures by a lawyer from Budapest and a very sad-looking German refugee. One of our finest speakers was Mr. Andre Philippe, a member of the French Chamber of Deputies. Many of his political statements about France and Germany in the turmoil of 1936, were startling.

It was no wonder that Nazi officers in twos and threes would wander into the sunporches as speakers were lecturing. They walked around, and listened a while and then left. But every day armed soldiers walked up and down the village streets, quiet, but very much in evidence.

Suddenly, on our last morning in Oetz, our German class was cancelled, and we were told that our tour into Poland had been cancelled because some of Hitler's troops had marched into that country. War was coming closer. A somber atmosphere pervaded the hotel that day.

Our week in Oetz had been such a wonderful experience, we hated to leave this beautiful country. One more lecture that evening concluded our program at the American Peoples' College Abroad. We had made many friends from all parts of the United States, but it was now time to say "Good Bye".

As we left for the train on a cold, rainy day, the clouds hung low but the mountains were still lovely in the dim, gray light of early morning. We wondered, as we drove away, if these gentle-hearted people of Oetz would be ignored by Hitler if he swept across Austria—or if they would be crushed by Hitler's boots.

We said a prayer for our kind Austrian friends.

Esther Myers Wenzel