

Austria – Czech Republic
Sharing experiences in the heart of Europe

In May 2011 CIF Austria and CIF Czech Republic organized an absolute superb exchange program and gave the opportunity to five people from different parts of the world to have an unforgettable experience. This group included three social workers, **Almudena** from Spain, **Vije** from India and **Ketri** from Estonia, **Nazira**, a physician from Kirgizstan, and me, **Ioanna**, an administrative manager from Greece.

The first two days were a breaking-the-ice weekend at the countryside, where the President of CIF Austria Judith Lamatsch introduced us to the members of the Austrian branch. On Sunday we had the honor of having an introductory lesson about the Social System in Austria by Professor Wilfring.

Monday morning was dedicated to sightseeing and the main program started the same afternoon. I wouldn't attempt to describe each of the 20 days in detail. Yet I would like to share my impressions and to invite more professionals to join in the CIF Exchange Programs.

During my stay in Austria I had the chance to learn about various aspects of the social system. The first week we visited social and educational institutions that focus on the protection of the families and children, the integration of the immigrants, the AIDS prevention, we were informed about the financial support services and - last but not least - we went to the House of Parliament. The week ended with a really amusing party, where we presented our own countries, got a glance at foreign cultures, including an exclusive performance of a professional opera singer, and opened up with our new friends.

Next week we continued with individual appointments. Manfred Beigel (his family was my host family) organized a detailed and tailor-made schedule according to my professional interests, so I visited institutions that provide services to disabled people and link them with the labor market. I want to thank Manfred Beigel with all my heart and on behalf of my colleagues I would like to thank all the host families, because if they didn't open their houses to us we could not learn all those things. The end of the journey in Austria couldn't be more excited. The CIF members invited us to a "Dialog in the dark". In an absolute absence of light adventure, we drank coffee and learned to rely on our non-visual senses.

Our journey continued for the last 9 days in the Czech Republic. Prague is a fairytale city and people are very gentle. Hana Zikova was the best host mother; she even taught me how to cook knedliki! Our program was very well planned and we got acquainted with social services of many fields. I was impressed by the modern equipments that are being used as aids for handicap people and took a lot of pictures of the buildings and the special apparatus. I also learned that the first special school was founded the 1910s.

The unique situation with this dual exchange program is that we learned about two different social systems of two European countries. The first is an old democracy, connected with historical events of a great empire, where human rights are not negotiable. The latter is a relatively new established democracy. The law on Social Care came into force in 2007. So in Czech Republic you see how the social services are organized from the scratch.

I have really warm memories from all the people I met during the CIF Exchange Program in Austria and the Czech Republic, I will treasure the knowledge I gained and I will try to spread it to as many as I can.



Out of the House of Parliament in Vienna from left to right: Nazira (Kirgizstan), Almudena (Spain), Ketri (Estonia), Vije (India) and Ioanna (Greece)



During a meeting at the Town Hall in Prague