



Lukas Smirek. Tagebuch meines Auslandsstudienjahres 2008/2009 an der USF - University of San Francisco /USA

A different view of America, but still a colourful...

November 2003 marked a tremendous change in my life. Due to serious problems with my macula I lost the vision of my left and only functioning eye. Nevertheless, I was able to finish school in 2004 and after one year spent on learning blind working and living skills I was able to start my studies as a Business engineer at the Technische Universität Karlsruhe in October 2005. The beginning of my studies marked an important step back to normality and it was also time when my wish to study abroad for a while started to grow. I just wanted to do the same as a lot of my fellow students wanted or still want to do.

But such a plan should be well conceived and so it took another two years before I started to work on it more intensely. At the end of 2006 I talked to the managing director of the Centre for Visually Impaired students of the Universität Karlsruhe about possibilities for studying abroad. After some discussions we decided to contact Professor Arthur Karshmer, teaching at the University of San Francisco (USF) and whose research field is, among others, in the area of assistive technologies and mathematics for visually impaired people.

After some emails and phone calls we were able to make the deal that I was allowed to come to USF in September 2008 and so I started to apply for a Fulbright travel grant, which I was confirmed for in March 2007. So I was able to prepare the final usual steps for my trip. In June I was informed that I was one of the lucky Fulbrighters being allowed to participate in the four-week-long Pre-Academic Program at the University of Connecticut.

July 11, 2009 was the big day. In the morning I took off from Stuttgart Airport to Frankfurt, Washington, and finally Hartford. Since all airlines provide assistance at the airports for handicapped people, travelling by plane wasn't a problem for me. Maybe it was even more relaxed than it is for sighted people. Relying on personal assistants, knowing the airport like the back of their hands I never had to search for the next gate in a rush and usually the assistant also had time for a quick chat which was nice after the long flights on my own.

In Hartford I was picked up by a student of the University of Connecticut who drove me over to the Campus of UConn located in Storrs. Here I had to spend the first two nights in a hotel before I was able to move into the dorm. I remember pretty well and also still a little bit proudly the moment when I arrived after a 21-hour journey in my hotel room and I was able to say that I had come as a blind person and almost on my own all the way from

Germany to America.

At the beginning I wasn't worried but of course interested and also a little bit curious how the other international students would accept a blind student. Fortunately all of them were open-minded and pretty soon first friendships started to develop.

At the beginning of August it was the first time of the year to say goodbye to some new but already pretty nice friends and I moved on to San Francisco.

At the San Francisco Airport I was picked up by my guest professor Art Karshmer and his wife Judy.

In San Francisco I stayed in a student's dormitory. I was taught all the ways to and around campus by a professional mobility trainer enabling me to organize life on my own.

In terms of textbooks I had two main sources: the university's e-library and e-learning system and Hand it's Students Disability Service.

I am reading all my literature with my laptop via a voice output or a refreshable Braille display which is connected to the Laptop and can show one line of the screen in Braille letters. The texts from the e-learning systems were directly readable and books were either scanned by the SDS or ordered from the printing houses in a digital version.

The different way of teaching at American Universities was sometimes a bit of a challenge for me. Written homework every week, participation in class discussion and the tremendous amounts of readings were requirements with which I had to deal with for the first time since I went blind. Thanks to the good cooperation with the SDS, teachers and other students I was able to handle all challenges successfully. Therefore my stay at American universities widened not only my academic perspective but also my working skills and experiences.

Due the closeness to the IIE which is located in San Francisco I got to know a lot of other Fulbrighters which gave me the chance to get a lot of insight into different cultures and again new international friendships started to evolve. Together we began to explore the Bay Area. I can tell you, if you go for a walk in the hills of San Francisco your legs will tell you much more about the steepness of the ascends than your eyes could ever imagine...

Going for a run in Golden Gate Park on a sunny Sunday morning or at Ocean Beach on a sunny November day are also quiet grandiose even without all the visual impressions and of course not to forget the international Christmas day I had with some Fulbrighters and also the wine tasting in Napa valley...

Further impressions I got thanks to my supervisor and guest professor Art Karshmer and his wife. They gave me fantastic insights into the American way of live. They have become fantastic friends during my one year long stay in San Francisco and I want to give special thanks to them for a great year.

After all it was an intense and impressive year and even without any visual impressions it still was a pretty colourful picture of America...