

Erfahrungsbericht EFA 2008

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When I arrived to Alpbach on August 14th of this year, I did not quite know what I was about to experience. I was a little afraid, of course, and when checking in at the Congress Center they gave me a package of papers and an ID card, which I lost immediately, by the way. I noticed that everyone was as curious as I was and we were all about to start into something new, something that would last for two weeks and that would influence our lives, or at least it did influence mine.

Every day at Alpbach was a challenge. The days went by so quickly – it's incredible! We got up, had a funny breakfast at our "super Austrian" house and went to the seminars or symposiums. There was so much to do, we sometimes felt our head would explode. We constantly had to choose between fireside talks, walks to the mountains, symposiums, seminars, film evenings or – for a change – going to bed (which was the last option always). I was driven by this kind of feeling that I wanted to do everything, hear all the interesting information and see all those people who did so many interesting things in their lives or talk to those who are still about to and will certainly live extraordinary lives. We sat together and talked, went to see the sunrise from the Gratspitz or danced in the breathtaking Clubbing at Alphof (mainly due to the lack of air conditioning, windows or anything like that). I lived so many different experiences in these two weeks in the mountains and what struck me most was that I learned so much – not only about different topics which we treated and discussed in the sessions but also about life as a whole and me in particular. The heaps of information we received every day, either by attending seminars or symposiums or by talking to each other, gave me so much input to rethink everything. It gave me impulses for thinking about my future, for planning what still is to be done and enlightened recent issues.

The excess of information resulted in frustration. After about ten days of constant thinking (well, this sounds great, of course you know what I mean haha), constantly trying to broaden my mind, widening my horizon I felt something like blankness. Or frustration. Or enoughness. Or something. I just couldn't bear any more information. It's like travelling through a foreign country, trying to soak up all the new elements of life and after some time you find yourself shouting "enough!" because your head is so full with new impression, it cannot bear any more. This was how I felt. And this was when I started taking it a little easier, not rushing from one event to the next, falling into bed after midnight and getting up early in the morning, eager not to miss anything. This is one thing Alpbach taught me: You cannot do everything (in the sense of "all the things"). Even if you really want to.

After discussing my feelings about the Forum in detail I would like to focus on a few matters that impacted me most. Firstly: the people! I was so amazed by the people attending the Forum. No matter whether you talked to a politician, a scientist or a student – I always found myself in interesting discussions. Talking seems to be different up here in Alpbach, it is far more tolerant and open, people talk about everything, people know so much, people listen to your opinion, even if it's a strange one. Maybe this is what we were told to look for – the spirit of Alpbach. Sitting together with people and discussing recent issues. But it didn't work as I had expected. I thought it would be more formal and strict. In fact we didn't plan to

discuss current politics and economic matters, we just happened to when having dinner, sitting in the grass or brushing our teeth (for giving an example).

Secondly: the hierarchy! I was really amazed by the not existing hierarchy in the communication with each other. I am used to presenting a kind of necessary respect to people who have a university degree or who “reached something”. In Alpbach I felt that all are equal, there was no need to build up this barrier between genders, ages or students and professors. This kind of respect, which I think is real respect, impressed me a lot!

Thirdly: the method. When attending the seminars I suddenly thought that this is what school should be like! I enjoyed it so much, discussing thrilling topics with enthusiastic people! The professors did not moan when having to answer another question, they seemed to like the reflection and the challenge of discussing their work with all the students. For me it was marvellous getting an insight in the work of people who deal with those topics they presented to us in their everyday lives.

I did notice a certain bias in the fields of study of the scholarship holders. It was better not to ask “What are you studying?” but: “Do you study law or economy?” When a student told you he studied some exotic thing like geology or literature people couldn’t help asking what s/he was doing here. I think there was a lack of students and professors of social and natural sciences!

To me Alpbach was a unique experience giving me the opportunity to encounter and get into an interdisciplinary and intercultural dialogue with very diverse people. I wouldn’t want to miss it and I am very glad I could attend and live those challenging days. When I wrote postcards to my family members I tried to summarize my stay and experience in Alpbach to a very short message. I wrote the following: “Greetings from Alpbach where we can discuss diverse ideas in a traditional mountain atmosphere with very interesting open minded people.” I think this is what it all comes down to.