

Participation in the Promoting Tolerance 2012

program exceeded all my expectations

Thanks to my affiliation with Liberalni institut, an independent, free-market oriented think-tank based in Prague, Czech Republic, I got a great chance to participate in a distinguished program named *Promoting Tolerance*.

The program, managed by a cooperation of both the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom and the American Jewish Committee, celebrates 20th anniversary this year and I am more than happy I can say: *"I was there"*.

The program Promoting Tolerance 2012 had started with a preliminary on-line seminar (11th March – 21st March). The main topic of this phase – i.e. of interesting readings and discussions moderated by Stefan Melnik – was the issue of minority rights and (in)equality of opportunities that various members of our society can meet. Such a great intro to the subject of the program!

The program continued in May 2012 (from 23rd up to 26th May in Berlin) when chosen participants from both Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia passed through the block of workshops and sessions at international seminar *"How can we ensure that minority rights do not undermine equal opportunities?"* That was the first (and by far not the last) time when I found out that my knowledge based on economics, econometrics and mathematics does not have clear answers on the topics we as participants were analyzing together with Stefan Melnik, René Klaff or Rabbi Andrew Baker.

The schedule of the program culminated in the Annual Visit to the United States; the country where a word "tolerance" means more than everything else. As far as I hadn't been to the US before, the trip was a real peak of the program as a whole.

The process of preparation for visiting the USA was, especially due to the perfect support I got from people from the FNF (one more *thank you* to Marta Peroutkova, Neli Kaloyanova, and Vaclav Bacovsky) and from people from the AJC (one more thank you to Sara Beth Levin Weller and Rabbi Andrew Baker and all others), as easy as possible. Before the departure, I

really appreciated the schedule we got, especially the fact that we were supposed to use almost every minute in all destinations we were going to visit (Washington; New York; Miami or Dallas or Saint Louis; Los Angeles). And I am happy to say – it looked great and now I can say my expectations were right.

After a trouble-free arrival in the USA and a warm reunion of participants during the welcome dinner, we passed through interesting seminars and gained information about social issues, diversity and ethnical integration in the USA. For me it was really a welcomed background for the whole stay in the USA. I also enjoyed a chance to listen to the policy analysis of Jacob Heilbrunn (Senior Editor at The National Interest) as well as to the lectures at Young Diplomats Reception (U.S. Foreign Policy & the 2012 Presidential Election).

But already in the first destination of our trip, Washington, I experienced one of the most impressive moments not even from the trip, but also from my life – visiting of The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Closeness of the exhibition and intensiveness, which is sometimes almost brutal, just comes through you and forces you to generate questions: How something like this could even happen? What makes human threats other humans this way? Are we sure it cannot happen again? Dealing with these questions and finding answers can be marked as a very difficult process, which is still running in my head since the visit.

It was impressive to compare The Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington with our first stop in the next destination, New York. We visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Two museums, two breathtaking places, but so different feelings a visitor has. As far I can say New York is so special place that it could be enough just to walk on the streets, to breathe the air and to have eyes open. But we had even a better schedule. From my stand, the seminar at the AJC office with Steven Bayme (The Jewish Community in America: Social and Political Trends) and with David Harris (American Jewish Committee: Public Advocacy at Home and Abroad) were highlights of the stay in New York. To meet and to hear a speech of David Harris, AJC's Executive Director, was impressive especially if we take into account what happened in Israel about month after our meeting.

At the end of our New York stay, the whole group of participants split into three groups for visiting Dallas, Miami, and Saint Louis. I was a proud member of the St. Louis group (together with my friends Egle Markeviciute from Lithuania and Dmitry Dubrovsky from Russia). An

occasion to see *this kind of America*, totally different from both New York and Washington, exceeded all my expectations. Families that warmly invited us to their tables and share with us their opinions, Shabbat Services at Congregation Shaare Emeth, visiting of the St. Louis Museum of Art and St. Louis Holocaust Museum or sightseeing walk across the downtown with Benjamin Hulse... We spent the great time in the great city, mainly thanks to our kind guide from the local AJC office, Nancy Lisker.

The final part of our US trip was located on the West Coast – we visited Los Angeles. One of the freest cities in the world shares with us a piece of a positive approach to a life, about which people without personal experience (me) just had heard from TV or from media before. I really enjoyed the meeting with AJC officials at home of Cole Ettman, the tour at City Hall or the discussion about diversity in the media. Nevertheless, one moment was stronger than the others – the visit at Homeboy Industries.

This visit was the top of our LA schedule and –for me personally together with The Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington the top of the Promoting Tolerance 2012 program as a whole. Homeboy Industries is the place where people from gangs and difficult environment related to organized crime get another chance to live peaceful life. We saw people who don't give up and really want to live in a better world, outside of the specific environment of gangs, drugs and crime and with all risks resulting from a situation when you say to your gang-mates: *I wanna quit*. This spectacular experience based on trust and endless hope in better tomorrows however a better tomorrow meets only a smaller share of participants in the Homeboy Industries programs was one of the deepest and most motivating moments in my life.

When one participates in a program like this one, people usually want to know what was the best part of the program and whether there is anything to improve. Well, considering the Promoting Tolerance 2012, I would probably welcome much information about one of the most serious case of intolerance the world remembers, by which I mean the issue of racism against African-Americans in the USA. That is because this issue could be applied in our European countries where we have similar problems with non-integration of minorities. But that is only a desire to improve something that is excellent...

The first part of the question is more important... During the Festive Reception on the occasion of the 20th Anniversary of the program "Promoting Tolerance in Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe" we attended in Berlin, we were listening to speeches of participants from previous years. All of them were very similar and had the same conclusion:

"Regardless to the fact how tolerant or safe we feel, the Program must continue at least for another 20 years."

Now I understand why they said it. To highlight the best part from the program after its participation seems to be quite simple. Namely, the best and most valuable thing about the program really is that a program like this one does exist and does give opportunities to people like me to see that getting of skills and education, no matter whether on a field of economics, medicine, politics or engineering, is not sufficient – one should understand them as a tool to find an individual way how not to stay apart but how to promote tolerance among our closest friends, in our neighborhoods and in our countries.

Until the end of my life, I will remember the quote by Pastor Martin Niemöller (1892-1984) I saw at The Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington:

FIRST THEY CAME FOR THE SOCIALISTS, and I did not speak out because I was not a Socialist.

THEN THEY CAME FOR THE TRADE UNIONISTS, and I did not speak out because I was not a Trade unionist.

THEN THEY CAME FOR THE JEWS, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me, and THERE WAS NO ONE LEFT TO SPEAK FOR ME.