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I Am American by Vera Jordan

What does it mean to be an American? Is there a moment for most people when the realization that “I am American” bursts like a lightbulb in the mind? Or is it a gradual thing, a concept that roots itself subtly without notice. I imagine it is different for each of us.

For me, that realization came during my junior year of college while studying in Vienna. During that year, I traveled extensively: on weekend excursions to other countries (have thumb will travel); on organized trips with art professors to England, France, Italy; or backpacking to Turkey, Greece, and Spain during a five week semester break. All of these experiences changed me, broadening my perspective about other peoples and cultures. However, out of many, many amazing experiences that year, one stands out because it changed my perspective forever on what it means to be American, in a way I could not have anticipated.

It was the spring of 1967. With five of my friends, I took a train from Vienna to the partitioned city of Berlin, to sightsee in the free part of the city. On the way home, we piled into the train compartment, an individual compartment that seated 8 people comfortably, in benches facing each other, the kind of train compartment you only see today in old movies like *Murder on the Orient Express*. Two boys from E. Germany, about 19 or 20, entered the compartment, sat down and started talking with us. They were fascinated to speak with Americans and delighted to be offered our apples and snack foods, and even more, their first ball point pens! We, of course, asked what it was like to live in East Germany, and at first, they seemed to be at a loss for words. In retrospect, I realize that we must have seemed like other-worldly figures to them, traveling freely from place to place, having an abundance of food (and ball point pens). Finally, one of them stood up. Wrapping his arms tightly against his chest, he said “In Germany, we are like this.” Then, extending his arms as wide as he could, he said, “In America, you are like this.” Fifty years later, that image is still as fresh as if the conversation had happened yesterday.

Our next actions demonstrated even more clearly what it means to be an American student, 20 years old, and raised in a free country. We smuggled those boys across the Iron Curtain. Extending our legs across the seats, and putting a blanket over them, we directed the boys to crawl under them. When the police entered our cabin as we approached the border, we each adopted a role. One couple snuggled together, making out. Four of us played cards over the blanket, yawning and affecting boredom. The police saw what we intended them to see and were done with us in minutes.

On the other side of the border, the two boys exited. We never learned their last names, or what happened to them. It was not the end for us, however. Once the American consulate found out what we had done, we were given a stern talking to. Did we not realize we could have been arrested and thrown into a Communist jail? Did we not realize we could have sat there for months or years?

The short answer was no. It was a lark to us in some respects. The concept of prison was unimaginable. Whatever happened, we automatically trusted that our government would call their government and we would be instantly released. How naïve, and yet - how absolutely wonderful. How privileged we were – and remain – to live in this country, with a police force we trust, and a long history of freedom of speech and right of assembly.

We are Americans.

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