

FEATURE FEATURE

Year-long tour of China, Israel, Vietnam, for peace

by Michele Greene

"One point the Chinese students were trying to make was that their form of change is Chinese. They aren't necessarily looking for a Western style society. They want change to come about in a Chinese way," said Rosalind Irwin, a York graduate student who recently returned to campus after an eight and a half month trip around the world.

Entitled "World Politics of Peace and conflict — Peace with Peaceful Means," the global studies tour was organized by students from Witten-Herdecke University in West Germany, under the direction of renowned social scientist and one of the founders of Peace Studies as a discipline, professor Johan Galtung (University of Hawaii).

With 34 other students from 10 nations, Rosalind visited 19 countries, including Germany, USSR and Israel. The York grad gained a more cosmopolitan understanding as she experienced the diverse economic, political and cultural challenges, including learning how to speak several foreign languages.

Rosalind met a lot of academics and officials (such as the Pope), but she also talked to the common people of the countries she visited. From them, she sensed a strong desire for peace.

Rosalind was in Israel during an emotional time, the second anniversary of the intifadah. She went to see children in hospitals who had been hurt during the fighting. The group stayed in East Jerusalem, but also journeyed to the West Bank. On both sides, she found that people were frustrated with the situation and just wanted a negotiated peace.

The trip was well timed historically. Rosalind witnessed many changes toward peace and reform in the world. She was in Germany when the Berlin Wall came down. She saw how Vietnam is encouraging foreign investment with a liberal policy and building itself to become a tourist spot. Perestroika came alive for Rosalind when she visited Moscow and the republic of Estonia. And, talking to students in China allowed her to understand the nature of their reforms.

According to Rosalind, the key to bringing about peace and reform is "mutual respect and understanding between cultures." Each culture has to accept other cultures and respect their right to exist. With this in mind, one focus of the programme was to familiarize students with the various cultures. They stayed with host families during the entire trip. Rosalind confessed that she and others on the programme learned the most about the country's people this way. They found the Japanese to be very



Tova Weisblatt photo

Rosalind Irwin, a York grad student in political science and history, talks about her experiences of "globalism" during her eight and a half month Peace Studies world tour.

protective of their families. Although one of the students preferred riding her bike to class, her Japanese host-mother insisted on driving behind her in the car to make sure she arrived safely.

For Rosalind, the greatest culture shock was the status of women in Egypt. "Women in the family are often relegated to the background. Often they simply can't go out by themselves and they don't seem to play much of an economic role outside of the family, the farm, or the fields."

While in Vietnam, the group noticed some women working in the fields. The bus stopped and the women in the programme

got out to help the Vietnamese women plough. Needless to say, the Vietnamese women were surprised. Regardless of how startling the cultural shock, directly connecting with people of other cultures opened their eyes and allowed them to grasp a concept of globalism for themselves.

Violence was also redefined. In Western society, we understand violence in terms of guns. Rosalind saw another form of violence termed, by Professor Galtung as "structural violence." It "describes how systems operate in favour of some and against others," Rosalind explained.

She cited the Koreans who work in Japan as an example. It is difficult to become fully accepted into Japanese society if you are not Japanese. Koreans come to Japan looking for work, take the less desirable jobs that are left over and in so doing, fill a need in industry that would not be filled by the Japanese. However, a child born in Japan to Korean parents does not receive a Japanese citizenship, nor is it eligible for a Korean citizenship as it was not born in Korea. The child is essentially left without a country to claim as its own.

Rosalind met a woman in Germany who experienced a similar denial of basic rights. She explained that before the Berlin Wall came down, exiting the first subway stop in East Germany was like going through customs. There was a West German woman with two children behind Rosalind and other group members in the exit line. The woman who had moved from East to West Germany many years ago, could never return to East Germany, not even to visit her mother who still lived there. Her children, however, could cross. So the woman asked Rosalind and her companions to take the children across for her, returning to the Western side when they had agreed. When the Wall came down, the group thought of that woman. Now she can visit her mother.

In every country Rosalind visited, she met individuals in similar positions: people who wanted to link with other people but couldn't because of cultural intolerance and disrespect. Although Rosalind realizes some people may disregard her beliefs as idealistic, she has faith. "So much of what happens and what people aspire to are ideals and it's the process of working toward a goal, no matter how idealistic, that enables people to achieve better lives. You have to remember there is always an interplay between what people envision their world to be and what really is at work."

The global studies programme is taught by over 200 lecturers at 12 universities around the world and is equivalent to six academic courses. The credits will count toward Rosalind's first year of her PhD in History and Political Science. She completed her Masters at York and received her BA in History and Political Science at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia.

"Globalism" is a term that scholars and analysts like to toss around in academic discussions. It means little to the average person although it's all about "average" people around the world peacefully living together.

Rosalind had her own ideas on how improved global relations might be achieved. She maintained that non-governmental organizations can bring people together because they operate outside of state control. "People can, through these organizations, get a more grass-roots vision, and I think it is these organizations and common people cooperating with each other who will develop a concept of globalism."

In India, the group studied Gandhism which held up civil disobedience and active non-violence as a means to bring about change. Rosalind is convinced these ideas offer a valid answer on global issues.

But, the world's problems were too complicated to solve in eight and a half months by 35 people. The programme aimed to start younger people thinking about globalism in the future and to encourage ties between countries through the next generation, today's students. For Rosalind, those ties have been established. She has collected many people's addresses to whom she can write and keep abreast of their family and countries' conditions.

After almost a year of travelling, Rosalind still had one more trip to make. There was one family with whom she needed to renew ties. So she booked her flight and set aside July to spend with her own family in British Columbia.

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