

On the Other Side of the Tracks: Account of Traveling Refugees

by Jinyoung Chung Lee

We find out, after a series of wild gesticulations between my friend and the adamant “Czech Only” ticket lady, that we’re at the wrong station. Supposed to have left that very afternoon, we find ourselves pushed to another train for later that evening. Not enough time to go back to the flat, we find ourselves playing the waiting game – on cold, hard benches at Hlavni Nadrazi.

I’m feeling ill to my stomach, intense gut pains that could be a result of the cold — being scantily clad in shorts, hooded zip-up and heels (with only one pair of shoes to save space) — hunger, or a combination of both. I lay down on my side; shortly a policeman walks by and taps me with his nightstick, telling me that I can’t sleep on these benches. Do I look like a bum?

At 11 p.m. we make our way to board on the platform and our tickets aren’t matching up with the platform signs. We hail down both conductors, and in broken Czech ask, “Which train”. They both claim that they aren’t going our way. In haste, we get pushed onto one of the trains – we walk through each car, looking for enough space for all 4 of us and finally plop down in a compartment with an elderly couple.

It’s bloody cold. Approaching midnight we think, where will our final destination be? We’re hungry and cold — our compartment is Harry Potter-esque, except there is no heat, no hope for magic food. My friend offers her scarf to me to use as a blanket. As we frantically scan our maps to see where this train would take us, a young Czech man walks in. Immediate suspicion. He tells us that we need to get off at 2 a.m. and there, a train will be able to take us to where we need to go. Hopeful, but still cautious. One of the conductors, a woman, whom we had spoken to earlier walks by to confirm — making his advice that much more trustworthy.

Nervously we try to sleep, but we don’t want to miss our stop. We try taking turns – its too cold to stay conscious and too cold to not. In

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limbo we keep watch for our stop. At 2 a.m. we're here. We get off — there's a man walking closely to us, maternal instinct take over and I watch him cautiously, to protect my three friends, sisters. He passes. We find our way into the station. Praise God — it's open.

One of our girls immediately heads to the vending machine and proceeds to buy everything her change will allow. Starts munching. We dig our pockets for coins to buy hot chocolate — it's so cold. We huddle together in anticipation for the next train. 3 a.m., the train has to be on its way. The platform ticker changes, we read Vienna.

Immediately we're on our feet, we gather our belongings and rush outside. We see the train, two platforms away! To catch the train, we run — down from the cement platform we were on and run across two train tracks, through the rocks, bits of glass, in my heels, and climb the cement platform to get on the train that will take us to our final destination.

Frightening, stressful, challenging — yet an adventure. All this just to get to Vienna from Prague for a weekend.

As I finally drift off to sleep on the second train — still cold, still hungry — all I can remember from our nighttime adventure is the face of the Czech policemen as I ran across the tracks — jeering at us in amusement and I'm just thankful they didn't arrest us.