World travelers

SIU international law programs take students to Germany, Cuba, Ireland, Australia and Africa

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On a table in a courtroom in the Palace of Justice in Munich, Germany, sits a vase filled with white roses. It’s next to a window — when the sun shines, rays illuminate the petals.

Hanging on the wall next to the table are photos of six German youths executed during World War II for their opposition to the Nazi Party.

Led by Hans Scholl, 24 at the time of his death, and his sister Sophie, 21, they were the White Rose, a group that distributed anti-Nazi leaflets throughout Munich in 1942 and 1943.

For the Southern Illinois University School of Law students who visited the courtroom last month, the deeds of the White Rose activists spoke volumes.

So did their youth.

“What struck me the most is that these young people had stood in this very room and been sentenced to death,” said second-year student Margaret Szewczyk. “They were very young, but they looked even younger than they were.”

Szewczyk is one of seven students who traveled to Germany with Cynthia Fountaine, SIU’s law dean, for an 11-day trip as part of her course, Legal Globalization and Comparative Law: Germany and The Development of International Courts.

Another 13 students spent eight days in Cuba with professor Cindy G. Buys for her course, Legal Globalization and Comparative Law: Cuba.

Both trips are part of SIU’s ongoing Legal Globalization & Comparative Law Program. Launched in 2011, the courses have also sent students to Ireland and Australia, with an upcoming trip planned for South Africa and Botswana.

For Szewczyk, stepping into the courtroom in Munich was like walking into her textbooks.

“That was an overarching realization in Germany,” she said.

“You can learn about these things in the classroom, but when you go see them and stand in the room where they happened, it has a much greater impact on you.”

Looking like a democracy

Chelsea Kasten knew she would be crazy to pass up an opportunity to travel to Cuba.

A self-described “travel bug,” the second-year student has been intrigued by Cuba ever since she heard glowing stories about the country from her grandparents, who visited before the U.S. embargo against it was in place.

“It was Cuba,” Kasten said simply, describing her desire to visit. “I wasn’t going to say no to that.”

Not long ago, students such as Kasten didn’t have the option to say yes or no to Cuba. The answer was made for them.

So when President Barack Obama loosened the embargo’s restrictions in 2011 to allow some short-term educational trips, Buys created a Cuba trip at SIU.

“While the window of opportunity was open, I wanted to take students to Cuba to experience it for themselves,” Buys said.

Because Buys’ course focuses on the relationship between business and law in Cuba, students met with small business owners to learn about the process of starting a business in a country that did not allow such enterprises for more than 50 years.

That lack of business sense has led to an experimental approach to business and law, Buys said.

“We learned from many small business owners that they are now paying taxes to the government for the first time,” Buys said. “They pay 10 percent tax every month on their income and pay another 10 percent on their total yearly income at the end of the year. This is all done through self-reporting.”

What happens, the students asked, if they don’t honestly report their income?

The government will send an employee to the person’s business to conduct separate record keeping for a year, the business owners said.

At the end of that period, if there is a significant difference between the government employee’s records and the business owner’s records, the government will tax the business for the difference and impose penalties.

White roses in the Palace of Justice in Munich, Germany, memorialize the trials of members of the White Rose, an anti-Nazi group whose leaders were eventually executed. Photo courtesy of Paul Scudder
“That seemed like an incredibly inefficient system, to have a government person stay with you for an entire year,” Buys said. “It’s an experiment to see how to make this work when you haven’t done it before.”

For Kasten, the trip to Cuba was an eye-opener. She enjoyed seeing the respect Cuba grants to women, the 1950s cars still in circulation and learning about the differences between the country’s operations under former President Fidel Castro and his successor, his brother Raul.

“Under Raul, you have small businesses opening very quickly, new small business laws coming about and private home ownership being allowed,” Kasten said. “And they also have started to allow the importation of new cars into the country. I think what you’re quickly seeing is a move away from Fidel’s rule to Raul’s, which is looking a lot more like a democracy.”

A sense of pride Following World War II, Germany underwent its own law-related seismic shift.

The world did too. International law has its roots at the trials at Nuremberg, another city Fountaine’s class visited.

“As soon as you walk through the gates — which say in German, ‘Work will set you free’ — there’s a feeling that you can’t describe,” Thomas said. “It’s very eerie. You know horrible things happened here.”

For Szewczyk, the horror of walking through a concentration camp was balanced by the patriotic feelings stirred in her at the role the United States played in prosecuting Nazi war criminals.

“I felt a sense of pride, I guess, in the United States that they took such an active role in making sure that a proper trial was executed,” Szewczyk said. “The U.S. didn’t want to perpetuate the practices of the Nazis. They didn’t just want to kill them for their wrongdoings. They wanted to make sure they had their day in court.”

The importance of having a fair trial was also apparent to the students during their visit to the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg, which is responsible for interpreting the laws of the EU.

There, the students said, they understood the true impact of globalization as they watched representatives from the EU’s 28 countries translate cases.

“Resolving disputes between countries is just an appealing concept,” Szewczyk said. “When I see people who have such an impressive career, know 10 languages and are resolving disputes between countries — if you can do that, I think I can ace my commercial law final if I just work a little harder.”