



In the beginning – May 31, 2014

My twin brother, Noah, and I stand on the stage at Indiana University's Assembly Hall, delivering a joint class speech to our Bloomington High School South graduating classmates and thousands of their closest friends and family. According to the commencement pamphlet on which I am sitting, I will be attending The University of British Columbia (UBC) in the fall. On this point, however, the pamphlet and I disagree. Yes, I have accepted UBC's offer of admission, but deep inside, I feel like college is not the right step for me at this time. So with much determination but not much direction, I have decided to defer my offer of admission.

Opportunity knocks: The email – August 12

It's late summer; I am still in Bloomington with no real plan. I am working at the IU Bookstore, unloading stock. I had made a few stabs at finding a gap year program to start in September but without success. By August, my most viable option appears to be teaching English to young monks in Nepal, but it wouldn't start until January, the middle of Himalayan winter. So here I am, while all of my friends are heading off to college, I'm left wondering what the hell I'm going to do.

Then the email arrives. A friend of a friend of a friend of my aunt has some friends in Lyon, France, who want an American au pair to teach English to their two young children. The email has been forwarded and forwarded, with each recipient suggesting, "Wouldn't this be a perfect job for your daughter?" Finally, it gets to me. And I jump at the opportunity. It's better than monks in Nepal.

I'm so excited, I break my arm in a biking accident. With my arm in a sling, I go to the French consulate in Chicago to apply for a visa.

On the 37th floor of a black tower downtown, I approach a surly French woman sitting behind an inch of bulletproof glass. Her grim expression seems to say, "We have no more room for Americans in our country." Against all odds, I have all the right documents and am able to obtain a visa.

Somehow, with a command of the French language that is poor at best and with minimal child care experience, I am going to be an au pair in France.

That's me, Ethan Sandweiss, an au pair and a recent graduate of Bloomington High School South, outside of my language school, Alliance Française, in Lyon, France.



My French host family: (l-r) Chloe, 5; Jean Paul; Françoise; Leo, 3; et moi with the hood. Their English is as bad as my French.

Bonjour, Lyon – October 5

I arrive at Lyon's Saint Exupéry airport knowing no one and nothing.

My new employers, Jean Paul and Françoise, are waiting for me. Both are very friendly, but their English is no better than my French. Their kids, Chloe, 5, and Leo, 3, are adorable but shy. Leo warms up to me first when I give him a toy platypus (which becomes his first English word).

On my first full day in France, Jean Paul puts me on a bus to Alliance Française. Au pairs in France are required to enroll in a language class, which turns out to be a good thing. The school places me in level A-2, a class for people who aren't exactly new to French but would have a hard time carrying on a conversation. The makeup of the class is surprisingly diverse, both in terms of nationalities and age. At 18, I am one of the youngest students. The majority of my classmates are in their 20s or 30s, having come to Lyon for any number of reasons: work, family, education, or other.

Getting to know Lyon – November 5

I spent a lot of time in this first month just walking through the city, getting to know its neighborhoods and points of interest. A couple of Roman amphitheaters and a coliseum, which is carved into a hill overlooking the city, still attest to Lyon's classical heritage. Stones bearing Latin inscriptions from the city's ancient temples were taken to the bottom of the hill, turned sideways, and reconstructed into the foundations of the medieval city, today's Vieux Lyon. Centered on the ancient St. Jean Cathedral, Lyon's medieval quarter remains almost exactly as it has been since its creation, its streets still tracing the old Roman roads.

If Vieux Lyon is the city's most scenic district, the most active lies to the east of the Saône River, within the area known as the Presqu'île,

and further east, along the right bank of the neighboring Rhône River, where most of the 500,000 Lyonnais live. With its plaster-walled buildings and terra-cotta roofs, the city has a decidedly Mediterranean feel.

The Lyonnais are proud of their city and consider it the capital of France's silk industry, the capital of French cuisine, the capital of the French Resistance, and pretty much the capital of everything that the capital, Paris, hasn't nailed down.

Lyon's large Arabic-speaking population ensures that as many kebab shops as cafés line its streets. In fact, nowhere that I've visited in Europe shows as much variation in cultures and eras: from Roman theaters and medieval houses to wide, Parisian-style Haussmannian boulevards and art deco skyscrapers. It's a great place to be on an au pair's schedule (long afternoons and free weekends), but difficult to enjoy on an au pair's salary of less than €300 [\$340] per month.

My limited French still sometimes gets in the way of communication. I was interviewed in French by two students at an art



museum and was expected to respond in kind. I ended up saying bizarre things like, "when you write too much about art, it's as if you steal its heart."

La Résistance – November 27

This morning I visited Lyon's resistance and deportation museum, located in the former Gestapo stronghold of Klaus Barbie (known as the "Butcher of Lyon"). It's Lyon's answer to Washington, D.C.'s, Holocaust Memorial Museum, with videos of eyewitness testimonies and very moving exhibits. While resistance and deportation are the main focus of the museum, I thought the most unique and revealing information was that which highlighted the experience of the average Lyonnais.

After the war, the German occupation of France is remembered as a period marked by fierce resistance to the Nazis, but for most of those in France who weren't directly targeted by fascists, it didn't seem worth risking their lives to preserve the autonomy of their nation or protect the lives of their neighbors. When the Vichy regime took over southern France in 1940, the overwhelming sentiment in Lyon was, "at least now we're not at war." And when free France was invaded, Lyon declared itself an open city, meaning that rather than fight street for street against the Germans, it would open its doors and accept occupation. For the average resident it ensured, if not freedom, peace.

Is it a sign of weakness to be complacent to injustice? Like a lot of Americans, I believe in the rights of our country's people regardless of race, sex, or religion. But when these seemingly inherent rights are challenged, what do we do? It's hard to get much further apart in terms of human rights policy than Nazi Europe and modern America or France, but the same problem persists. By not taking an active role in standing up to injustice, we allow it to take place.

Here are three photos I took as well as a sketch I drew on Avenue du Maréchal de Saxe. The top picture is a typical street leading to the Rhône river. The next one is a Haussmann-style apartment building in the chic 7th arrondissement. The bottom photo shows the Pont de la Guillotière over the Rhône.

Bon appétit – December 15

France is known for its culinary culture, but I was unaware of how fundamentally the dining experience affects the French lifestyle. When we enter a restaurant for lunch, my French companions greet the owner and servers warmly before sitting down. I find that this same sense of community can be found when I take the kids to school, riding the elevator to our eighth-story apartment, and traveling on the bus. People warmly acknowledge those they recognize and seem genuinely happy to do so. This is very unlike life in large American cities, where people are content to live apart from their neighbors and keep to themselves in public.

But back to lunch. The second major difference is the quality of the food. French chefs generally attend a culinary institute before beginning work, and as a result the country's cuisine has remained fairly traditional and, in general, is expertly prepared. Most meals include an appetizer, a main course, a cheese course, and a dessert. On top of that, it's practically expected at lunch and dinner that you choose a wine that pairs with your food and finish with coffee.

Luckily, I happen to live with a man whose father was the personal chef to Prince Rainier III of Monaco. Jean Paul's cooking is incredible. On weekends for lunch we might have truffle omelettes, rabbit, saucisson [thick, dried, cured sausage, usually pork], duck, or filet mignon. He also happens to be an expert on French cheese. But since neither Chloe nor Françoise will eat anything but Comté (a very mild cheese), and both Leo and Jean Paul have to limit their cheese consumption for medical reasons, I end up eating most of the good cheese myself.

Disturbing incidents – January 5, 2015

The other day, on the way to her dance class, Chloe and I passed a pile of discarded Christmas trees. I told her that they were being sent to the North Pole. She told me they were being turned into mulch. I guess we'll have to see who's right.

Despite the possibilities that have come my way, I begin to question whether I made the right decision by coming to France.

Living with your own family is often a trying

experience. Living with another family in a different culture can be stressful.

On top of that, Lyon itself can get under my skin. I took a walk down the street to my usual café and bought a croissant and café au lait. As I was ordering in my broken French, I heard a shouting conversation at the table behind me, and the word “American.” Two Algerian men were sitting at the table, one silently drinking his coffee, and the other loudly waving his hands. Their French was too quick for me to comprehend, but more than once I heard the phrase, “Tuez les Juifs” (Kill the Jews). It was a little disconcerting for me, as I am Jewish, but since I wasn’t wearing a yarmulke [skull cap] and a tallit [specially knotted ritual fringes or tassels worn by observant Jews], I didn’t think I was in any particular danger as long as I kept my mouth shut. On my way out of the café, another man came up to me on the sidewalk.

“S’il vous plaît, monsieur,” he begged in French, “Could you spare €5.20?”

“Désolé,” I responded, walking past him.

“Monsieur, please!” he yelled after me, following me down the street, “It’s to eat. Monsieur, monsieur!”



emigrated to Israel in 2014, and the number has been increasing since then.

The city’s Muslims have even more reason to feel uneasy than I do. Soon after the attacks, I spoke with a University of Lyon student originally from Algeria. “I am not Charlie,” she said, “I am French and I am Muslim, but here they don’t let you be both. You have to choose.” For Muslims who feel that they can neither support offensive caricatures of their religion nor tolerate religious extremism, it’s difficult to find a sense of belonging in French society. *Charlie Hebdo*, a magazine criticized for decades for its offensive stereotyping and antireligious rhetoric, was transformed overnight into a global symbol for free speech and expression. I still don’t know what to make of it.

Nonetheless, protesters of all religions at the demonstration voiced magnanimous support for French unity, and I like to think that they represent the majority of the population of France. The extremists here are few, but vocal and violent. The air of camaraderie and tolerance on the day of the parade was incredibly moving, and, I think, incredibly French. For most people, liberty, equality, and brotherhood still govern the philosophy of the nation. I can’t help but feel that this is far from the end of France’s religious conflict, but I’m reassured that, as a whole, the people of France have an amazing capacity for acceptance and forgiveness.

Je Suis Charlie – January 20

It’s January, and things have turned upside down — and not just for me, but for France itself.

Despite the global rise of terrorism, France had, up until Wednesday, January 7, 2015, remained relatively untouched. That day in Paris, two armed Islamic fundamentalists attacked the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. Twelve people were killed, including the magazine’s editor. Two days later, another cell of terrorists held a Jewish grocery in Paris under siege, killing four patrons. The locations of the killings were perhaps as shocking as the nature of the events themselves, not to mention that the perpetrators were, by nationality, French.

The following Sunday, I joined a crowd of 250,000 at Monplaisir — the historic site of the world’s first film, by the Lyonnais Lumière brothers — for a demonstration in support of the victims of the attacks. The rally was like nothing I’d ever seen; an endless stream of demonstrators with pencils, signs, yarmulkes, cameras, children, and

hand-rolled cigarettes stretched from Monplaisir to the Presqu’île and beyond.

The demonstration was intended to send a message of peace and inclusivity, but the mood in the streets changed considerably in its wake. The day after the parade, the government dispatched 10,000 troops across France to guard Jewish schools and synagogues.

In my local café, where I often nurse a coffee and read, I heard another man, the barista who always greeted me with a smile, say in French to other customers “Kill the Jews!” Here in France I’m a bit of an invisible Jew; I don’t wear a yarmulke, I don’t go to synagogue, and I don’t keep kosher. I see anti-Semitic graffiti on the streets and I hear unkind words in cafés, but I feel a little like a ghost, invisible and watching.

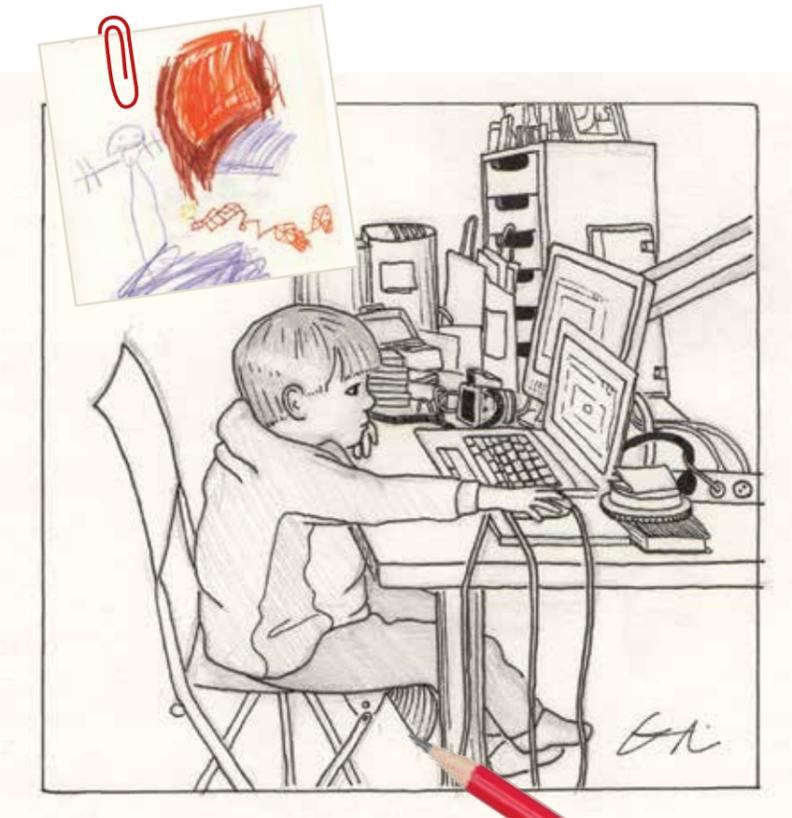
As a Jew, I have never felt my own life being threatened. I keep a yarmulke in the pocket of my leather jacket, but my café experiences have me inclined not to take it out.

Despite President François Hollande’s efforts to make Europe’s largest Jewish community feel secure, record numbers

(left) After the murder of 12 people at the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and the killing of four shoppers at a Jewish grocery, I took part in a Lyon demonstration of support for the victims of the attacks.

(below) “Kill the Jews.” I heard people say this on two occasions while having coffee at this café.

(bottom) Leo and I drew pictures of one another. I was supposed to be teaching him English.



Turning the corner – March 17

If my first four months in Lyon were about branching out, the last four are about going deeper: finding the things I enjoy and pursuing them. Instead of spending my Friday nights listening to Pink Floyd and playing *Dwarf Fortress*, I am exploring the city at night with other students.

Although most of us are in Lyon for no more than a few months, we’ve gotten to know each other as if we’d lived together for years. I have friends from Spain, Germany, China, Columbia, Libya, and Kazakhstan. In a way, as a speaker of only English and French, I have an advantage. Everyone speaks English, usually very well, and just having two languages to keep track of makes things easier for me. While I have become confident enough to speak in French most of the time, English remains the language of choice for many foreigners. About the only people with whom I communicate exclusively in French are the ones who hired me to teach their children English.

Parlez-vous anglais? – April 27

My success in my job with the kids has been pretty mixed; Chloe knows all of her colors in English, can count to 20, name many animals, and politely ask for water before saying, “I love you, Mum.” Both children, and their parents, now know the phrase “couch potato,” although they prefer the French translation “patate de canapé.”

On the other hand, having long since figured out that my main job is to teach them English, the kids have devised their own ways to undermine me. If I ask, “What would you like to play?” one of them will respond, “Nothing in English.” So I’ve moved teaching to the back burner for now, but still find myself impressed with how they’ve changed in the months since I arrived. Chloe has become an independent reader with a basic grasp of multiplication, and Leo has learned to dress himself, which in some ways, I find more impressive.

Future plans – May 5

The outline for my future is hazy and full of blind curves, but at least now I have some idea of what lies ahead. I leave Lyon in June to hike with my brother in remote areas of northern Scotland. When I return to Bloomington, I’ll intern at *Bloom Magazine* before leaving in August to attend Reed College in Portland, Oregon. This time, I will not defer.

I’ve started planning ahead instead of letting myself get swept up in the current. This year abroad has taught me that moving forward in a meaningful way requires a good deal of planning and intent, though spontaneity has its merits as well. Being open to the possibility of chance has taken me to foreign shores. ✨