Editor’s note: We asked several RBC students to write about their European Study Tour experience. A group of 32 travelers, 23 of them RBC students, visited sites of interest in Holland, France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Italy from April 25-May 16 this spring.

What surprised you? Why?

Brittany: I was surprised by how I was affected by my inability to speak any of the languages that were native to the countries that we visited. I had never imagined that it would bother me, but I found that I felt very isolated from the people around me. Before the trip, I didn’t realize how much it meant to simply be able to hear parts of casual conversations going on around me. In America, I always took overhearing about someone’s pet cat or grandchildren for granted. I missed that small connection to the random people around me while I was in Europe. It also made me feel very ignorant because I was only able to speak English fluently. So many people over there could speak at least two languages.

What moved you? Why?

Brittany: I was very moved when we sang hymns together in the Anabaptist Cave. I had a rather trying time getting to that cave. The group ended up taking the wrong trail, which meant that we had to walk quite a ways uphill, only to realize we were at the wrong spot. Once we came to this realization, we had the option to go back down the wrong trail and up the correct one or we could cut through the forest, which had many hills and drop-offs and things like that. I ended up going with the group that cut through the woods. I was one of the last to arrive – muddy and out of breath after sliding down quite a few hills. Something about that experience allowed me to appreciate the time of worship in that cave more than other times on the tour.

Justin: In Anabaptist History we talked about Felix Manz, the first Anabaptist to be martyred by fellow members of the Reformation. He was drowned in the Limmat River near Lake Zurich in Zurich, Switzerland. A month later I was standing in the rain next to the Limmat River. Water was streaming over my glasses so that everything was a blur, but when I removed them I could see a plaque. Most of it was indecipherable for me, as it was in German, but I could read the name of Felix Manz. Jon Showalter translated the plaque for us, and explained how the public officials of Zurich had placed this plaque as an apology to the descendants of the Anabaptist martyrs in Zurich from 1527-1532. Even in the unrelenting elements I was touched by this vindication of one man’s sacrifice for God.

During the first half of the trip we saw a lot of sites that were related to the development of the Anabaptist movement. In Switzerland we stayed at Schloss Mittersill in Austria (Schloss is the German word for “castle”). In the castle’s recently excavated dungeon our school group gathered to listen to Jon Showalter’s historical commentary. A number of centuries ago it had been a holding place and a place of terror for Anabaptists, but on that day it was a place of celebration for those of us who have also been taught about the love of Christ.

Kimberly: I think one of those moments would have to have been at Trachselwald Castle (in Switzerland). Anabaptists were held at this castle in the 16th-18th centuries and tortured before appearing for judgment in Berne. As we roamed the stairwells and looked into the torture chambers, thoughts of our forefathers flooded my mind. I wondered about their families. Where were they? Had they been tortured here as well? But what really
impacted me was knowing that these early Anabaptists were willing to risk their lives because they felt so strongly about their beliefs.

After the group had explored the remains of this castle, we all gathered in the lowest room. It was like a deep pit, and the only light was from the open door that did not exist during the time of the torturing. As we gathered we sang hymns, one of them being “Faith of our Fathers.” After the hymns, Jon Showalter closed in prayer. I, too, prayed silently for a faith as strong as those who have gone on before me.

For me this was probably one of the most influential parts of the trip. It brought to life what we had read in books and been lectured on. When we were sitting in the classroom these men and women were simply characters in a story, but standing in some of the very places they stood gave them a pulse, a name, a face. – Kimberly Miller

What made you uncomfortable? Why?

Brittany: Many times, I felt a little uncomfortable and left out on the tour because I wasn’t born a Mennonite. Physically, I did not have the same heritage as the other people on the tour, and in my time at Rosedale, I never felt that division more strongly than when we were visiting the many Anabaptist sites. However, in that cave, after trying so hard to get there and being helped and cheered on by other people along the way, I felt like some of those walls were knocked down. I was able to connect with the people around me in a new way. As I stood there at the edge of the cave, surrounded by people from an Anabaptist heritage, I found myself not focusing so much on the fact that they were born into that heritage and I wasn’t. Instead, the greatness of our God came into focus. He was the reason that so many Christians before us risked their lives to worship Him and to follow Him. Spiritually, we all had the same heritage.

The entire trip made me think a lot about not being born into the Anabaptist world. There were definitely times when I really struggled with that and wondered why I was even on the trip. However, in hindsight, I really appreciated the time to learn more about the early Anabaptists, who, while they are not my physical ancestors, are my spiritual ancestors. I have chosen to align myself with Mennonites because I agree with their doctrine and what they stand for. It hasn’t always been easy, but it’s been good and I know it’s been the way God has been guiding me. The trip helped me face some important questions and challenges and helped me to become much more knowledgeable about Anabaptism.

Justin: Towering cathedrals became blurred after we had seen so many. The high domed ceilings and awesome stained glass windows looked identical. But at Notre Dame a new thought was brought forth. Many students were angered by the selling of souvenirs inside the church. We thought of Matt. 21:12 where Jesus chased away those who were selling sacrifices for profit….

What made you shake your head and say, “Wow!”?

Brittany: The cathedrals were one thing that made me just shake my head and be amazed – and a bit perplexed. They were so huge. Everywhere we looked we could see magnificent pieces of art in the architecture, sculptures and stained glass of the cathedrals around us. I was impressed, but I couldn’t help but wonder why so many elaborate images of the Christian faith were necessary to worship God. There is definitely room for beauty and art to be involved in the worship of God, but it seemed like building the biggest and best cathedral simply became a competition of sorts for Christians living in Europe during those time periods. It reminded me how easy it can be to get caught up in worldly things that don’t really matter in the big picture of the Kingdom of God.
Justin: My favorite location of the whole trip was probably the scenic canal town, Geithoorn, in the Netherlands. The town was centered on a series of canals, which had smooth waters that moved little electric-powered boats from one place to another. Geithoorn had an old Mennonite Church, which was bordered on the front and one side by two canals, and had no parking lot. The members were all locals who had walked from nearby to attend the Dutch (Sunday morning) service, which included some singing in four-part harmony. Rosedale students made a valiant effort to sing along from the back corner where they had grouped themselves. After the service some of us went to the back of the sanctuary to the organ loft, where the organist allowed us to experiment with the instrument. I pulled out stops for trumpet, flute, and harpsichord and then played it like a piano. The resonance was awesome and I was very excited and impressed.

Kimberly: I was a bit excited to see the Alps, but it was not really on the top of my list. I am from the hills of Kentucky and I think it is the most beautiful place on earth. That was until I was riding in a train along the Swiss Alps. I was sitting next to the window looking out onto snowcapped peaks and luscious green trees and grass, all at the same time. I could do nothing but sing. Several others joined in the hymn “How Great Thou Art.” Now every time I sing that hymn I see that beautiful snowcapped scene.

How did what you learned in the classroom at RBC (not necessarily just the courses connected with the tour) help you connect with what you experienced in Europe?

Brittany: It’s really hard to put my finger on one particular thing. So many of my views and opinions have changed and been refined during my time at Rosedale, and I know that many of them helped me connect with what I experienced in Europe. I never would have been able to appreciate the artwork that I viewed without having studied it in humanities. I wouldn’t have been able to appreciate or understand the richness of the Anabaptist faith had it not been for many of the classes that I took, such as Peace, Justice and Simplicity and Anabaptist History and Theology, which presented the theology of Anabaptism and allowed me to wrestle with some hard questions.

Kimberly Miller is from Clayhole, Kentucky. She is in her second year at RBC and is also a women’s RA. Justin Yoder is from Bay Port, Michigan, and is in his second year at RBC. Brittany Tull is from Nashville, Indiana, graduated from RBC with honors in 2007, and is enjoying further study at the college this fall.