

Coming to Hogwarts

“This is what happens when you eat American food.” Selina wrestles back her bushy brown hair and points out red bumps scattered across the side of her face. “You see this?” Her words are fired in rapid succession, a German accent glossed over each syllable. The chipped, nude nail polish taps on the spots repeatedly. “You see?” Demanding yet coaxing. Realizing that she’s made her point, Selina bursts out in a laugh liken to Fran Drescher, albeit a fair bit hoarser and lower. The tan, freckled face reddens to scarlet as she snickers about the horrors of cafeteria food, namely Lucky Charms cereal and toast.

Selina Maria Pazen is twenty-five years old, but her cheery face and toned features allow her to blend in with the young undergraduate students at Texas Christian University where she works as a teaching assistant. The handful of times I’ve seen her she wears a black shirt, black pants, and black sneakers; a startling contradiction to her lively personality, but a style fairly normal for Europeans. When she tells stories, the majority of her phrases end with asking, “you know?” which draws an affirmative nod from the listener. Her English is nearly perfect, but she occasionally struggles to find a word (“The muder, murda, mindertor...” “Moderator?” “That’s it!”). She has a habit of complimenting strangers as she walks down the street to the slight embarrassment of her friends. If you were to see her strolling through campus, you’d know there was something different about her- not by her appearance, but by the determined yet carefree air with which she carries herself.

Currently, Selina lives in the French and German House at Texas Christian University. She shares a small apartment with a young woman named Larrisa who traveled from Rwanda to study English. Unlike her roommate, Selina didn’t come to the U.S. to study but rather to work as a teaching assistant. While the majority of American teaching assistants are graduate students, Selina has yet to finish her studies back in Germany. She believes that Americans rush through each stage of

life, while Germans take their time with education. The position at TCU provides Selina with a scholarship that covers living expenses, and she can audit one class each semester. In order to expand her language skills (beyond the German, English, French, and Arabic that she already speaks), she decided to audit introductory Spanish classes for the fall and spring semesters.

Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 11 a.m. to 12 p.m. Selina teaches German for Beginners 2. After teaching her class one Monday, Selina meets me in Scarborough Hall where her office is located. As we pass by the bustling students, she details her initial weeks on campus in the fall of 2017. Expecting to hear about the trials and tribulations of international students struggling to adapt to American culture, I'm stunned to learn about her eye-opening first day.

Like the majority of schools in Germany, Selina's university back home doesn't have a central campus as with TCU. Upon researching schools in the U.S., she was instantly drawn to TCU's lively community, scenic buildings, and flower-covered landscape. After spending less than a day on campus, the inclusive nature and pleasing aesthetic of the university instantly became Selina's "paradise." The night after her first day teaching, Selina called her mom and sister back in Germany and rambled on and on about the miracle of having a gym, cafeteria, and library all within walking distance of her apartment.

Multiple studies conducted on international students have concluded that the majority of foreigners greatly struggle with integrating into American society. According to U.S. News, course rigor, different professors, and culture shock can leave international students with enhanced feelings of depression and homesickness.

Selena does not match any of this criteria. When asked if she had difficulty adapting she immediately responded, "No, not at all." The people at TCU were instantly welcoming, and she felt comfortable the moment she stepped on campus. Her boss,

professors, and dorm mates were welcoming and treated her no differently than any other student. She instantly realized this was the experience she'd been missing in Germany.

After teaching her first German class, Selina's boss met with her and asked how she enjoyed TCU so far. "You know what I said? I told him, I feel like Harry Potter coming to Hogwarts."

After she finishes studying philosophy and teaching German as a second language at her home university, Selina aspires to teach German to people in underprivileged countries. Her great passion in life is helping others and learning about different cultures. In 2015, Germany's Vice Chancellor, Angela Merkel, announced that the country would take in more than one million refugees due to the European influx of Syrian immigrants. Selina applied for a position and spent the next two years teaching German to refugees. The inability to speak German hinders thousands of refugees from obtaining jobs in the countries where they seek safety. Selina was one of the hundreds of teachers who helped the refugees acquire the proper skillsets to succeed in a foreign country.

"I never wanted to cry in front of them because I was their teacher and I tried to never cry in front of them. It seems this is so far away because you see it on the news and stuff, but you teach the people and it's not that far away. That was pretty horrible for me."

One early morning, Selina began teaching a group of Syrian refugees various conjugations of complicated German verbs when she noticed an eighteen-year-old boy reach for his phone. The boy, the youngest of all the refugees in the class, slid out of the room returning ten minutes later with tears running down his cheeks. Selina walked over and delicately whispered he could leave if he needed time alone. "No," he stuttered, "I want to learn German." However, during the class's next ten-minute break, the boy disappeared. The next morning, he returned with a German

translator. He approached Selina, ashamed for leaving class early, and used the translator to explain that his mother phoned him yesterday to inform him that his cousin and aunt had been killed in a bombing.

Since the Syrian Civil War, more than five million refugees have fled the country, resulting in a mass migrant crisis throughout Europe. Millions more have fled from other war torn countries like Afghanistan. Many countries, such as Greece, lack proper resources and funds to help, leaving the refugees to spend months or years stranded in rundown camps without the ability to contact their families back home. Other nations, such as Austria and France, have closed their borders altogether.

“One guy from Afghanistan, his wife just gave birth, and he’s never seen his second baby. He thought he didn’t deserve to be in Germany and be safe because he left his family. I was just sitting there and I couldn’t do anything but cry. We cried together. Thirty-five grown people in one room and we cried together. But we needed that, you know? Even I needed it. They just needed someone who tries to understand them. That was really hard for me. But that’s the memory I love. That we cried together.”

Selina and I walk out the front doors of Scarborough and she traces a pathway throughout the commons. Every day (if it’s not too cold) she walks around the entire campus; past the iconic Frog Fountain, across the street to the football stadium, around to the bookstore and library. She wants to absorb everything before returning to Germany this summer.

As she often greets people during her daily strolls, she inevitably meets students in awe of her accent. Selina laughs off their awkward questions, and finds the attention flattering- for the most part.

“Sometimes people are not well-educated and smart so they ask about Hitler.” Her hazel eyes flicker with annoyance, and she begins gesticulating with her hands in an agitated manner as she speaks.

“They say, Oh you’re from Germany, what do you think about Hitler? And you know what I say?” She waits for me to shake my head no, then she cracks a grin.

“I say I don’t know, I haven’t met him yet.”

On normal weekdays, Selina returns to her apartment after lunch. TCU’s French and German house (which is in reality an apartment-style dorm, located within TCU’s Tom Brown complex) contains both international and American students seeking a language immersion experience. Throughout the lobby and hallways, flags from various countries hang from the ceiling, and posters of historical German landmarks such as the Brandenburg Gate are pinned to the walls. The doors of the apartments are decorated with flags and memorabilia from the student’s home country, showcasing the numerous nationalities represented within the building.

Selina’s apartment is fairly large with a kitchenette, a leather couch with two matching chairs, two bedrooms, and two separate bathrooms (a detail which Selina is particularly fond of.) Upon walking into the living room, you’re immediately greeted by a chalkboard sign saying “Wilkomme im Deustchen Hous!” (Welcome to the German House!) Hanging prominently on the cream-colored living room wall is the black, red, and yellow striped German flag. A smaller Texas flag flies above couch. Three matching red, green, and blue signs hang in the kitchen:

Bleib Ruhig und Sprich Deutsh= Keep Calm and Speak German

Bleib Ruhig und Schreibe Substantive Gross = Keep Calm and Write Nouns

Bleib Ruhig und Konjugiere= Keep Calm and Conjugate

Selina explains the phrases are humorous for German teachers.

We sit on the couch, relax, and drink green tea, Selina's favorite beverage. Every day around this time, she calls her mom and sister. Months of separation have been difficult for her family, so she tries to facetime them on a daily basis. She tells them every detail of her day, and occasionally comments on the cultural differences she experiences:

Water served at restaurants here is free, as are public restrooms. Nightclubs close at 2 a.m. rather than 6 a.m., which is annoying. People don't carry cash, but use plastic cards. Everyone is obsessed with sugar and there's no proper, fluffy bread, just flimsy squares that are basically toast.

After discussing her day with her family, Selina will wait for her roommate, Larrisa, to return home so they can go to the cafeteria together. I ask Larrisa about her experience living at TCU with Selina, and her face brightens. She says that Selina is always finding events for them to attend, and they've helped each other navigate life in a foreign country. I ask if she's learned anything about German culture, and she laughs. "We're too busy learning about American life!" She pauses then adds, "But maybe later this semester we'll talk more about our home countries."

Over the winter holidays, Selina's family believed she would remain in the states. However, she secretly booked a flight and surprised her family at the annual Christmas Moments concert in Germany. The festival is held in an arena with upwards of 4,000 people who huddle together to sing Christmas hymns and hear a brief sermon. Selina coordinated with the moderator, and halfway through the festivities, her mom and sister were called onstage, much to their astonishment. The moderator announced that if the two answered a question correctly, they would win a special prize. The question: "Is there someone who will be missing from you this holiday?" Her mother nodded yes, but the moderator said her answer was incorrect. She wouldn't win the prize because in fact no one would be missing from her Christmas this year. At this point, Selina walked onstage, and her mother broke

down in joyful tears. Selina called it one of the happiest (pronounced “heppiest”) days of her life. That’s what Selina lives for- making people happy.

While at TCU, Selina hopes to expand her teaching skills and her ability to connect with others. She knows that learning here will eventually propel her towards greater endeavors in the future. At some point, she plans on visiting India and Mexico to help underprivileged children grow to succeed in life. Being separated from her family is strenuous at times, but she knows that improving the lives of those less fortunate will be well worth it in the end. To remind herself that she’s working at TCU for this reason, Selina scrolls through pictures of her family on her phone as the sun begins to set every night. She looks out the window as the sky changes from blue to orange to black behind the football stadium. In the years to come, she’ll travel throughout the world and help those in need, and she hopes to collect as many memories possible at TCU before that next chapter begins.

“I’m so proud of the person I’ve become here and it’s not even the end. There’s more to come, you know? And I’m super excited.”