

Immigration Aid in Belgium

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When I saw the flyers advertising a Winter Term project in Belgium where I would be speaking French and helping in the immigration process into Belgium, I was immediately intrigued. I had wanted to do a Winter Term project pertaining to French and hadn't made up my mind what to do and this seemed like the perfect solution. After some initial debate of whether or not I was ready for such an experience, I applied and hoped I would get in. Much to my surprise at the time, I was accepted and made the preparations to get to Rixensart, Belgium a small town about 45 minutes outside of Brussels by train.

Belgium, along with a few other European countries, has an immigration process in place that accepts asylees from all over the world and houses them in Fédasil centers across the country. These centers can be either open or closed, meaning that residents are either free to come and go from the centers as they please, or are required to stay at the center until their asylum process is complete. The Rixensart center was an open center and also housed many families, compared to the other centers across the country.

The atmosphere was much nicer than I had expected. One hears "refugee center" or "center for people seeking political asylum" and thinks of the terrible events that must have occurred to make people flee their home. I had been a bit hesitant and intimidated by the prospects of working in such a center before I actually got there. The center housed 130 residents and was full to capacity while we were there for the month of January. There were many families, primarily large families, as well as people who had come on their own from various countries. Many of the residents came from Eastern Europe, Africa, or the Middle East. Many had spent many years or many months living in the center and were hopeful to be living in Belgium someday soon.

Overall, it was a wonderful experience that allowed me to improve my French skills (my listening comprehension at this point is amazing!) and gave me the chance to help people in the process. I was able to take a weekend trip to Paris to further use my French skills and as a group we went to Brussels a few times, and for a different change of pace, went to Bruges. The program exceeded my expectations and, being new to the Winter Term experience, was certainly something that I will remember for the rest of my life!