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By Eli Cohen-Gordon

Missing milestones such as prom, getting her driver's license and a sweet seventeen was a small price to pay for senior Veronika Jaster in order to spend her junior year studying abroad in France, where she dove headfirst into a foreign culture to get a greater glimpse of the world.

Jaster has been bilingual her whole life. With her parents being first generation Polish

immigrants, she learned Polish and English at the same time and started taking French in seventh grade.

“I don’t remember a time when I only spoke one language,” Jaster said.

After going to Paris on the bi-annual trip organized by French teacher Lauren Osepchuk as a freshman, Jaster knew she wanted to return to France to study.

“That experience was my eureka moment,” Jaster said.

Jaster’s difficulty was finding an exchange program, because all of the options were too expensive. She eventually ended up going abroad through personal connections, as her father’s employer had an affiliation with a Catholic school in France.

Jaster spent 10 months in the city of Nîmes, located on the south coast of France, living with the Enriques, her host family. It was difficult at first because of homesickness, Jaster said, but she eventually became close to the Enrique family. According to Jaster’s host sister Clara Enrique, the family felt likewise.

“At times, it was difficult, but despite that, I appreciate her a lot, and she has become a little sister to me,” Enrique said.

Jaster attended the Lycée Institut Emmanuel d’Alzon, which combines elementary, secondary and post-secondary education.

“[In France] your last two years of high school, you choose between three concentrations… I chose the literature and humanities one,” Jaster said. “I had rigorous courses in literature, theater, history and languages … and absolutely no math!”

Even with her exceptional language skills, Jaster noted that she still struggled in the beginning, but eventually overcame the language barrier through hard work and dedication.

“In the beginning, it was very hard to participate in the courses at the same level as the native speakers,” Jaster said. “We were assigned an excerpt to read in five minutes, and the whole class finished, and I was still on the first sentence.”

“After absorbing the French around me more and more, I ended up being capable to participate fully in class,” Jaster said. “I actually had the highest average of my class during the third trimester. Of course, my French wasn’t perfect, and my writing had many ‘Americanisms’ but that’s natural, and I was still able to analyze and think critically in a foreign language.”

In addition to her studies, Jaster traveled to areas all around the country, including Paris. She said her favorite place to visit was The Cévennes Mountain Range, where she went camping with her friends.

Jaster says France eventually became home to her just like America and Poland.

“I’m as American as apple pie, but I’m also as French as *tarte aux pommes*, and I’m also as Polish as *jabłecznik*, ” Jaster said.