

# Where in the world is Robin?

Story by Amanda Dahling  
Photos by Robin Hoecker

**Photojournalist Robin Hoecker takes snapshots of the world to showcase cultural diversity.**

It was a simple family trip to visit relatives in Europe that forever altered Robin Hoecker's perceptions of the world around her. Hoecker, MA '07, was 5 years old. Even at age 5, her curiosity — the same curiosity that would lead her all over the world — was piqued.

"People told my mom she was wasting her money on a plane ticket for me. [They said] I wouldn't remember anything," Hoecker says. "But I did. It was like realizing there was a whole other world out there, where nothing that I knew was true anymore."

As Hoecker grew up, she never lost the ambition to explore the world, and now she uses that ambition to educate and induce change all over the world. Hoecker, with the help of a Fulbright Beginning Professional Journalism Award, is now in Germany working toward her goal.

In high school, she took a photography apprenticeship and fell in love with the craft. She loved the work so much she planned on majoring in it, but people "who I thought knew better," such as advisers, counselors, teachers and her family, advised against it. So Hoecker played it safe for a while.

Hoecker reluctantly spent the next two years in the College of Engineering at Penn State University. But when she lost a very close friend, only one year her senior, to a heart attack, the tragedy turned her life upside down.

"When I realized I had outlived my friend, I started asking myself some serious

questions. If I died tomorrow, could I say I died happy, doing what I loved?" Hoecker explains. "Sitting there, surrounded by engineering textbooks, going to classes that I wasn't at all interested in, I knew the answer was no."

Hoecker made a conscious decision to live the life she wanted and to take the chances her friend would no longer have.

"You never know what's going to happen, so make the most out of life while you have it," Hoecker says. "I started taking more risks. I want to learn and see and experience as much as I can."

She began taking courses that interested her and formulated her own degree in international development. She traveled abroad to France and Senegal. She also "cut through a lot of red tape" to get herself into a photojournalism course where she could further investigate her love of photography. The course provided her with the confidence to

move forward with her work.

In 2000, at the time of Hoecker's photojournalism class, Penn State was experiencing severe racial tension. For a class project, Hoecker documented student demonstrations against racism. As the unrest grew, so did her project. What started as an assignment evolved into her final project, an independent study and finally the subject of her honors thesis. Many of her photographs are still on display at Penn State, and her thesis was given to the deans of various colleges within the university. For the first time, Hoecker learned that photos could make a difference.

After her Penn State project, through an internship with the Washington, D.C., Unitarian Universalist Association, she got the chance to travel to Iraq. Hoecker had been working for some time to get people to understand the humanitarian consequences of the pending war in Iraq, but it wasn't until she had photos of Iraqi mothers, children and teachers that people

Robin Hoecker's travels have taken her across the globe to Germany, Iraq, Senegal, Israel, Palestine, Turkey, Italy, Greece, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Peru and China.

Hoecker's love for travel began on family trips, such as this stop in Austria in 1986.





Children look out a window at a Baghdad elementary school in Iraq in December 2002, just months before the United States invaded the city.

A nurse at a Baghdad hospital uses natural light as she tends to an infant. Power outages are common in the city because of continued damage to its electrical infrastructure.

started to pay attention. The experience further cemented her notion that pictures can change the world, and after she got paid for several of her published photos, she learned that she could actually make money with photography. Her new goal was to learn as much about photography as she could and to become a better photographer. That led her to Mizzou.

"I knew I would regret it for the rest of my life if I didn't give photojournalism a try," Hoecker says. "I am still not sure if I want to be a pure photographer, but I know

that no matter what I do, photography will be an important part of my life, both personally and professionally."

Hoecker's ambition and dedication left quite an impression on those who worked with her during her time at Mizzou, and it also garnered her a Fulbright Award to Germany from the U.S. Department of State and the J. William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board. The Fulbright Program started in 1946 as a way to promote international understanding and education. It has funded more than





279,000 participants, all chosen for academic merit and leadership potential. Hoecker's 10-month program from September 2007 to July 2008 allows her the opportunity to work and study abroad in Germany. Few professors were surprised when she was selected.

"Robin is among the most creative, courageous and innovative students I've been privileged to meet," says Michael Grinfeld, associate professor of magazine journalism. Hoecker worked with Grinfeld as a research assistant. "She's a skilled photographer and writer with a penchant for getting things done."

Zoe Smith, photojournalism professor who was the chair for Hoecker's master's project, agrees. "She's unique because she does both writing and photography well," Smith says. "Not many people do."

Hoecker arrived in Germany in September 2007 and methodically split her time into three phases: learning, photography/multimedia and writing. She spent her first three months in Osnabrueck in northwestern Germany, where she took classes and learned about German media.

Next, Hoecker moved to Frankfurt and worked as an intern for the *Frankfurt Rundschau* newspaper. Her work included

creating a multimedia presentation for the paper that combined interactive graphics, sound, photos and video revolving around musicians in Frankfurt. She showcased about 20 musicians in various genres, such as jazz, opera and hip-hop.

The project fell perfectly into Hoecker's goal of promoting cross-cultural dialogue by showcasing cultural diversity. She likes combining music and photography because they have a way of overcoming language barriers.

She is currently freelancing articles and photographs for English-language media. This work allows her to travel throughout Germany and its neighboring countries.

For Hoecker, the political is personal. She wants to promote mutual understanding between cultures.

"I guess I'm kind of a mini-diplomat, trying to get people in other countries to better understand the United States, and for the people of the U.S. to learn more about the rest of the world," she says.

Throughout her travels in Europe, Senegal, Iraq and Germany, Hoecker has developed an appreciation of various cultures. She is drawn to places that are out

of her comfort zone, and she enjoys learning about the idiosyncrasies of other cultures.

After traveling abroad, Hoecker returns with a better appreciation of home. For all of the good and bad of America, she knows this country offers the ability to learn and travel, to educate and discuss.

"I am a poster child for the different stages of cultural adjustment," Hoecker says. "At first, I love everything, then I get annoyed by small differences, then I get really homesick. Eventually, though, I come to terms with where I am and appreciate the good and the bad. No country is perfect. Each one has its positives and negatives."

Hoecker's maturity and education have gotten her through many difficult trips, but it is the same feeling she had as a 5-year-old that keeps her going back for more.

"I still have a feeling of wonder when I travel. Everything is new, everything is exciting, and people do funny things. Figuring out the new culture and language becomes a puzzle that I want to solve."

In her work with the Fulbright scholarship in Germany, Hoecker continues to assemble the puzzle of cultural diversity, one photo and one project at a time. ■



Facing page top:

An Israeli soldier watches over the return of Jewish settlers to their outpost in the city of Hebron.

Facing page and this page, from left:

Tavinho Tavares, a guitar player, is one of the 20 musicians featured in Hoecker's multimedia project about music and cultural diversity.

On opening day of deer season in Columbia in 2006, a father congratulates his son on his kill as a Bass Pro Shops staff member tallies the antler score.

MU crew Coach J.T. Quin waits for his rowers during a rowing practice in 2005.

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