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Index of Contents

The Weimar Triangle	2
What was interesting about the Polish culture and why did I choose to participate in this program?	3
A more detailed description of the program	4
My personal experiences	8

CERTI LINGUA – POLAND 2009

In the summer of 2009 I had the chance to take part in the 9th *Jugendgipfel „Weimarer Dreieck“*, which was under the theme of “crossing borders“. I decided on writing my report for CertiLingua about the experiences I have made in our neighboring country.

The Weimar Triangle

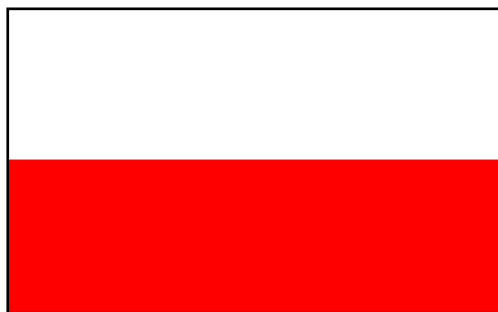
The Weimar Triangle was established in 1991 in the city of Weimar between Poland, France and Germany in order to help Poland emerge from communism and adapt to the Western world. Furthermore Germany and France wanted to help Poland in the process of applying for the European Union and the NATO, which it was finally able to in 2004.

Every year, the foreign ministers of these three countries meet and since 1998 even the heads of the states have come together several times.

In order to intensify this union even further, the three countries bring some of their adolescents into contact with each other, which is what I profited from, as well. This way, they also make the young generation feel responsible for the communication between the countries and the Weimar Triangle will be maintained. The first *Jugendgipfel „Weimarer Dreieck“* was held in 2001 in Germany.



What was interesting about the Polish culture and why did I choose to participate in this program?



Normally, students of my age are not especially interested in the Eastern cultures, countries and their inhabitants. Moving our minds with the globalization, we usually focus on the Western countries, because they are more developed and the cultures and attitudes are more similar to the ones we have in Germany.

But when I went to California in year 11 to spend some time at a high school there, I met a girl from Slovakia, who had come for exactly the same reasons as me. We wanted to see whether the American lifestyle and attitude were really what everyone thought them to be and just wanted to experience another country far away from our usual surroundings.

The more I got to know this girl, her name is Zuzka, the more I saw how alike we were concerning our view on the American high school and also in general. I had to travel to America to see, that in our ways of thinking German students are closer connected with Slovakian students than with the

ones from America. However, when we talked about our lives, I could still see many differences, which seemed very interesting to me. And that was the point from which on I was more interested in the culture of the countries lying westwards from Germany.

When I came home after my three months in California, I told my parents I had to go see what Eastern Europe was like and I made plans to visit Zuzka when her exchange year would be finished. But after the first moments of excitement, we both did not plan this trip any further, which is why I actually still have not visited her in Bratislava.

Of course, my interest in the Eastern cultures had not faded, especially not because I am generally extremely interested in getting to know people from different countries and learn about their lifestyle and their culture. Whenever I get a chance to take part in an exchange or another opportunity to get to know new people, I do it.

This is why I was very excited when I read about the 9th *Jugendgipfel „Weimarer Dreieck“* in our newspaper. At first I did not really know any details about this program, but I saw that it would be held in Poland, in Bielsko-Biala, and that it would be for people of my age from Northrhine-Westfalia, Nord-pas-de-Calais and from Silesia. Thus, I decided on applying for it and two weeks later I received a message telling me that I could participate in this *Jugendgipfel*. I also got invited for a preparing meeting in Dortmund at the IBB (Internationales Bildungs- und Begegnungswerk), which coordinated the trip for the German adolescents. The IBB is a nonprofit organization, which is institutionally and politically independent. At this meeting, I got to know the group of 15 people who were to be sent to Bielsko-Biala, representing Germany.

We received certain information on the trip and were told to already collect some data on different areas about Northrhine-Westfalia before leaving for Poland. For example, everyone was asked to find something special and typical for his or her city, which we would show to the others.

After this preparing meeting, there were only three weeks left before we would actually leave for Bielsko-Biala. In this time, I took some pictures of XXX, especially of all the bikes, because they are so typical and characteristic for our region.

But it became also pretty clear to me, that it was a good idea to participate in this program because it is simply unavoidable to get in touch with all parts of Europe as it grows more and more together. And we have to especially focus on the Eastern countries because their role in Europe and in the world will be enlarged in a very short time.

A more detailed description of the program

The *Jugendgipfel* in Bielsko-Biala lasted a week and was held under the topic of “Crossing borders“, which we dealt with in many projects throughout the week. But it was not only the actual border between Germany and Poland, but also some other borders, which we had to cross, as for example mental ones.

In the means of the Weimar Triangle, each part of it, Nord-pas-de-Calais, Silesia and Northrhine-Westfalia, sent 15 boys and girls to Bielsko-Biala, who were to represent their regions.

We stayed in a „*Kolegium*“, which is usually used by students, but within summer break it was free for our use. Every country had its floor with two apartments – one for the boys and one for the girls. At the beginning of the week, every region got presented by the people coming from it in order to make everyone else familiar with the background of the others. We, as the German group, presented how we celebrate carnival in Cologne, for example, and gave some typical food to the others like Haribo. It was also very interesting to see what the regions of the others are like, especially because we had talked about Nord-pas-de-Calais shortly before in French class in connection to the movie „*Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*“, which deals with the prejudices about the people living there.

Afterwards we were split into language groups, a German one, an English one and a French one, which I was a part of. Within these groups we got the task for the whole week to take pictures with the theme of „Crossing borders“. My group had to take pictures of people and the other groups' tasks were to photograph places and objects. Every night we met with the language groups and presented which pictures we had taken throughout the day. Over the week, every group chose their best 15 photos, which were presented in a vernissage in a gallery of the city on our last day. At the vernissage, there were some politicians as well as our whole group. From every country there was one who presented the photos of his or her language group. I think this was supposed to help us to gain more self-confidence because we all felt proud when the others looked exhaltedly at the pictures which we had taken or on which we could be seen.

The week's other program was pretty diverse and varied. After having breakfast in the „*Kolegium*“, we usually came together and had a workshop, as for example on European identities or prejudices against other cultures. We got mixed up and created posters on the different topics, which we explained to the whole group later on.

One workshop, for example, was about prejudices. Being split up into small groups, every group got a poster and a nationality. We had to draw someone from the country of which we had been given the nationality and the others had to guess who it was. Surprisingly we could directly see which poster was meant to represent which nationality because we all seem to have the same thoughts about the same foreign nationalities. But when I saw what the others had drawn about Germans it was pretty astonishing, because neither did I really feel like the person we could see on the poster nor could I see any correspondence between that person and any of the other Germans I know. Through this workshop, everyone from the group realized, that probably most of our prejudices are stupid and not at all agreeing with reality.

Furthermore we went on several excursions, which were connected with the theme, as for example to the city itself. This was interesting and very fitting because Bielsko and Biala once were separated cities but in 1951 the two cities crossed the border and became one: Bielsko-Biala.

Another excursion was to Cieszyn, a city which is on the border between Poland and the Czech Republic and therefore belongs to both countries. This was another chance for us to literally cross a border and we had some time to discover the Czech part of the city.

But we were also challenged to actually reach our own physical borders when we went to a High Ropes Course. In the beginning, some of us were afraid of climbing on the trees and following the parcours through the air on the ropes. Although we were secured by safety-ropes, it felt strange to really feel a mental border and not directly being able to make it disappear only with convincing us of the parcours not being too dangerous.

For lunch we usually went to a restaurant together, depending on where our program had let us during the morning. In the afternoon, there were more workshops, as for example one where we worked on assimilation through a game and freeze frames. Every group had to work on its own freeze frame which should express assimilation. When we presented it to the others, they had to describe what they saw and to try to interpret this image. Even though we all had the same theme, the freeze frames were very different and all of them were really meaningful and significant.



We also had discussions with politicians from Silesia on the history concerning the Weimar Triangle and the cooperation between the regions. On our last day in Bielsko-Biala, we had another debate with a Polish politician, a French one and one from Germany on the European Union. In these debates, everyone talked in his or her language and we had interpreters who translated everything simultaneously. This was a very interesting experience for me, because I am usually used to have to be able to communicate on my own even with people from foreign countries. It showed, that even though we have to work ourselves in order to let the European countries grow together, we still have some kind of help for this task if it is for example endangered by the diversity of languages.

For dinner we nearly always returned to the „Kolegium“ and afterwards we got together to sum up and evaluate the day as a group before going into our language groups in order to prepare the vernissage. When the program was over, we all met in one of the apartments and got to know each other better and had fun.

For example on the last night that we had together with everyone else, we went to a Polish restaurant where a typical band played traditional music and we had some Polish food.

After the official program in Bielsko-Biala was over, we as the German group went to Krakow for a last day, because there was no other possibility to fly back. This trip was especially interesting for us, as Krakow is a really beautiful city and because it resembles southern cities as I would only have imagined in Italy or France.

My personal experiences

Even though I did not know what to expect from the other participants, especially not from the Polish ones, I guess I had thought that they would be a little more different from us. But throughout the week with all these different activities in different groups, I could see, that even though we all live in different countries and not under the same circumstances, we are pretty similar. The only difference I could see was that the educational background influenced everyone according to the country that we come from. For example in the discussions, you could notice that the German participation was higher, than the one of the others, which is probably an effect of the methods used in school. In Germany it is more expected from the students, that they participate orally and they do not only have to know everything for tests and exams.

The problem of the language was very interesting in this case. Nobody besides the Polish people spoke Polish, a few besides the French spoke French as it was the case with German, but nearly everybody spoke English. We had a few advisors of which everyone spoke at least two languages, which made it easier to give instructions for the workshops and so on. In the groups during the workshops we always tried to find a common language or someone translated it for the others. This experience was really impressing, because we saw what it was like when three different nationalities try to communicate with each other. Normally, when I am in another country, it is obvious for me to try to talk the language of the people living there, but in this case this was impossible for most of us. Usually we were able to overcome the difficulties of communication, but I remember that once, in one of the political discussions, where we had ear-phones through which someone translated everything, there was a misunderstanding. One boy of the German group said something on the differences between the attitudes of the people and at first, I did not even notice, that there was a problem, but somehow, the interpreter must have translated it in a way that made the others think that the German boy wanted to offend them. Of course, we directly explained what he had intended to say, in English, and it was alright. But this shows, that communication between different cultures with different languages is not only a problem of knowing the words of the other language, but also understanding what they mean, as for example in figures of speech.

About Poland as a country, I can say that I experienced it as poorer than Germany, which can also be seen in the cities and the buildings. This leads to the fact, that most goods are a lot cheaper than here, too. A girl from our group whose family comes from Poland, explained to me, that the country

suffers from Westernization and that it would be horrible for the Polish economy if they introduced the Euro as the new currency, because Poland would not be able to compete with the other countries for a long time.

Besides the financial aspects, Poland and Germany are rather alike. There are slight differences in the attitude of the people. For example, I think the Polish people are more open towards us than we are towards them. This is probably connected with globalization, because we are really orientated towards the Western cultures, but not towards the Eastern ones.

Additionally to the realization, that we are very similar to the Polish people, I overcame the prejudices that I had unconsciously had towards them. They are really nice and open-minded and they welcomed us with open arms and seemed to have no prejudices against us. And there is really more that unites us, than there is what separates us. I guess there is some kind of a European Identity, which we all share.

What was especially positive for me is that I won many new friends, not only within Northrhine-Westphalia, but also in Silesia and Nord-pas-de-Calais. I am still in touch with them and have also met with some of the Germans several times, we really have built up a great friendship. All of the people were broad-minded, interesting and really nice, but they were still themselves. I got to know many different personalities and characters, of whom some really taught me a lesson for life. Hopefully I was able to help them, as well.

One of our last activities was, that everyone got a sheet of paper on his or her back and we all walked through the room with a pen and wrote nice things about the persons on their backs. With this, we could tell people what we thought about them and we could also see, what the others thought about us. For all of us, this was enriching and encouraging, because we would not have had expected all those things that were written all over the sheet.

It was a really good opportunity for me to widen my horizon in many ways. In this week, I learned much more than usually and what I learned was not only actual knowledge as information on different topics, but I also learned a lot for my personality which will hopefully help me in the future. I will probably be even more open towards new cultures, especially the ones about whom I do not know anything, yet.

In addition, now I am sure, that I want to go to another country for a year and maybe participate in a social project or just experience the country. I want to get to know a lot more interesting people and

XXX – CertiLingua – “Crossing Borders“ - Poland 2009

their cultures. For my future job, I also imagine it to be something with different people and in different countries, not only because this becomes really important in our globalized world, but also because I think, that this is the right thing for me.

All in all, this week in Bielsko-Biala has really been an extraordinary experience and an enrichment for me. If I was able to decide again whether to take part in this or not, I would definitely do it again!