

Association of German Teachers Victoria

Michelle Roberts

Exchange Dates:

22nd November 2014 – 7th February 2015



I am extremely grateful to AGTV for sponsoring my exchange to Germany, which has been a life-changing and enriching experience I will never forget. I will be forever thankful for this

opportunity.

Following my arrival in Frankfurt, I was whisked away on the fastest train ride of my life. Watching the scenery flashing past the carriage window, I already knew my first time in Germany would be both breath-taking and a little scary. Although I had seen photos of the country side and studied the language and culture, it really hit home in that moment that this seemingly fantastical place truly existed. Stepping out of the main station with my host family in Cologne, I was overawed by the cathedral towering above us. Previously, it had seemed inconceivable that such an historic structure could exist. Travelling throughout Germany, my mind would only continue to be blown by the history surrounding me, and the idea that civilisations had lived and died beneath my feet.



Outside the Cologne Cathedral with my host mother (Dörte) and sisters (Ann and Klara).

Immediately, I felt as though I was part of the family. Klara and I had similar interests including history, reading and baking, and the whole family was very interested in my 'bush Aussie' style of life. Explaining some of the more eccentric Australian happenings in German was quite difficult, but with a lot of hand gestures, sound imitations and helpful word suggestions from my ever-patient family, the message eventually got across. Amongst the souvenirs I had brought from Australia, the thing that confused them most was the jar of Vegemite. My host father, Kai, was convinced it was made from vegetables.

Experiencing new celebrations with my family allowed me to discover the culture to a far greater extent than if I had been a tourist. Living with a real German family I was welcomed into

celebrations and traditions I had never heard of. On the 6th of December for example, I went downstairs to find chocolates and gifts by the fire place. St. Nikolas Tag was a new concept for me, as was the Barbarazweig and having Christmas presents delivered by the Christkind. Part of the Christmas experience included visiting Christmas markets that opened in late November, which seemed a touch early to me, but nevertheless I loved them. The markets in Cologne were stunning. My new German friends were astonished that in Australia we don't have Christmas markets. Imagine the surprise on their faces when I told them that Christmas is in the middle of summer!

Silvester was observed at home, although it was anything but quiet. During our meal of fondue, the sound of fireworks exploding provided as much background noise as could be required. I think my host family believed I was crazy, as I spent at least an hour watching fireworks from the window. Klara and I lit sparklers and stood on the front steps, keeping well away from any explosions.



My host family travels to Italy every year for a ski holiday, and this Christmas was no exception. Driving across Germany on the famous Autobahn, I saw such an incredible difference between Germany and Australia. All of the little villages, tiny farms and walled cities were a world away from dusty roads connecting towns hundreds of kilometres apart. It was dark when we arrived in Trafoi, so I was unsure of the scenery. The next morning however, opening the curtains revealed awe-inspiring Alps towering above us, the sun rising over our valley. The holiday was a wonderful opportunity to get to know my family better, as well as see such an amazing place. A week later our return journey was hampered by snow, but that didn't concern me! It was unbelievable to have snow blanketing the entire world, as far as the eye could see.



Making gingerbread houses, biscuits and Stollen added magic and aroma to the holiday spirit.

Skiing in Italy.

I fell in love with German food. Before I arrived I had decided that I would try every food offered to me, regardless of its name. Upon being offered Leberwurst however, I hesitated... Liver is not one of my favourite foods. To my great surprise, Leberwurst was delicious! Other foods sounded (and smelled) far more appetizing, such as Bratwurst, Sachertorte, Schwarzwälderkerstorte, Marzipan, Stollen and Nugat – the list goes on. Having a sweet-tooth in Germany was not an issue. The quality of food was wonderful, and every morning I looked forward to enjoying fresh bakery rolls with cheese, Speck or jam. My list of favourite foods grew to include Eisbein, Schnitzel, Brezeln and Currywurst. For Christmas, Klara gave me book of German recipes that she had made herself. Other than perhaps a well-cooked steak, I certainly did not miss Australian food. Cooking with my family was a lot of fun, and they found baking ANZAC biscuits to be quite intriguing. The taste definitely suited them far better than Vegemite. Translating recipes and researching substitutes with Klara proved to be a great bonding task, as well as broadening my vocabulary.

Being submersed in the German language, my speaking and listening skills grew quickly. The first week or so I found it very difficult to understand the accent, and struggling to decode German all day made me rather tired. But as my ear adjusted, I found it increasingly easier to comprehend what was being said around me. Having my first full conversation without assistance from my host sister was a satisfying achievement. My host family was very disciplined in only speaking German to me, which I appreciated very much. They were always patient, even when repeating words five or six times so that I could remember them. This additional practice has been so far invaluable to my Year 12 German study.

Winter Camp began on New Year's Day, in the town of Lindlar. The camp was the perfect time to get to know the Australian and German scholarship winners, as well as previous exchange students and organisers. During this very busy, exciting few days, the highlight was making friends with the Germans who will be visiting Australia this year. Winter Camp was an experience unlike any other, and it was full of anticipation for the much-awaited free travel week. Three new friends and I formed a group and decided loosely on an itinerary for the journey, which would prove to be at once the greatest struggle and most rewarding week of our exchange. Navigating from the north of Germany to the south, we relied heavily on one another to understand signs, communicate with shop keepers and waiters, and not get lost! It put our language skills, patience, and teamwork to the test, but as a result we experienced personal growth and a tighter bond of friendship.

Our first destination was Cologne, and of course we visited the Cathedral and purchased the famous No. 4711 eau de Cologne. Our next stop was Düsseldorf, with its stunning Altstadt, river-front setting and even a temporary Ferris wheel. Watching the sun setting over the Rhine from the top of the Ferris wheel was both breath-taking and relaxing. We pressed on to Hamburg, and the next day viewed its sights as well as those of Lübeck. Further destinations included Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Schloss Neuschwanstein, Munich and Salzburg. Each amazing place was different from the last, and in each we experienced the unique culture and sights. It was a euphoric (although somewhat sleep-deprived) week that I know we will treasure for the rest of our lives. We fell in love with each new place that we explored, and enjoyed looking very much like tourists while we did it. Naturally, we tried the local foods in each place that we visited, discovering delicious local breads and sweets.

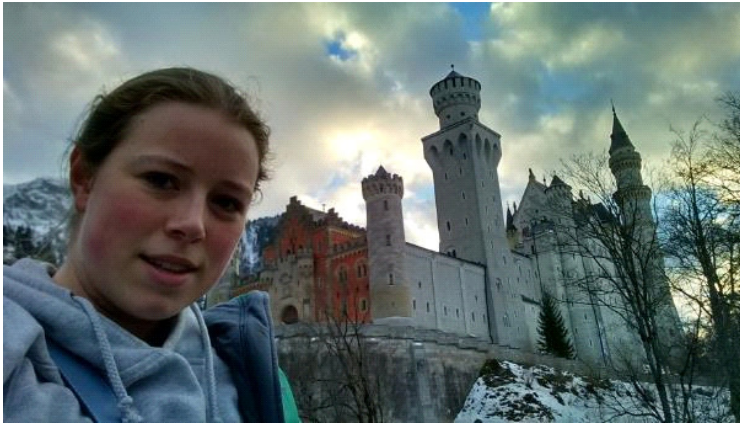


two members of my group.

Beside the Rhine in Düsseldorf, with

*Lübeck gate, at the beginning of our
tour with a local scholarship winner.*

*Enjoying
Munich.*



Schloss Neuschwanstein at sunset.

Following free travel, we returned to our families for our final few weeks in Germany. This meant returning to school with many new things to talk about. The first few weeks of school had been difficult, as I was fighting jetlag, adjusting to a new schedule and trying to think in German. My first week was spent in Klara's classes, which included confusing subjects such as Latin. However, once I relaxed and settled into a routine, I was given my own timetable and made new friends. Our school was bilingual, so many of the classes were available in English. It was fascinating to consider the level of English spoken by these students. I was only in German subjects, other than one advanced English class. The teacher was overjoyed to have a native speaker in the class, allowing her to clarify colloquial terms and difficult pronunciation. This was my favourite class group, as all the students were very friendly and allowed me to practice my German without fear of embarrassment. On my last school day, they surprised me with a card and gift. Although the idea of attending school throughout my usual holiday break was not one I relished, it proved to be a very valuable experience, both in terms of understanding the school system and connecting with my peers. Through school, I made friends that I intend to keep for life and hope to meet with again in the future.



Before I farewelled my host family, they suggested that I visit a few places nearby. I found the walled city of Bad Münstereifel stunning, with hardly anyone around. The castle and gardens in Schwetzingen were also beautiful and similarly empty. These day trips were a test for my language skills, and

provided an opportunity to trust myself to a greater extent.

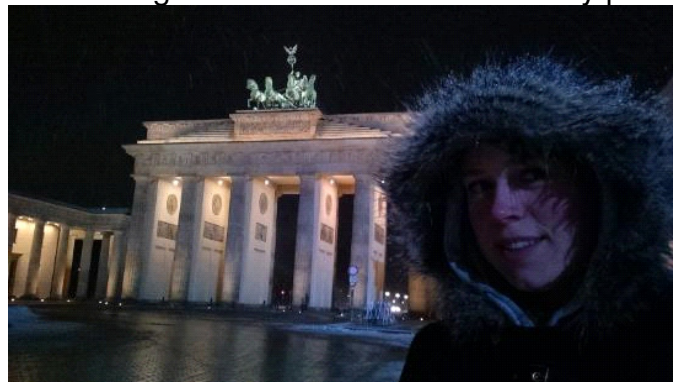
Dinner with my English class.



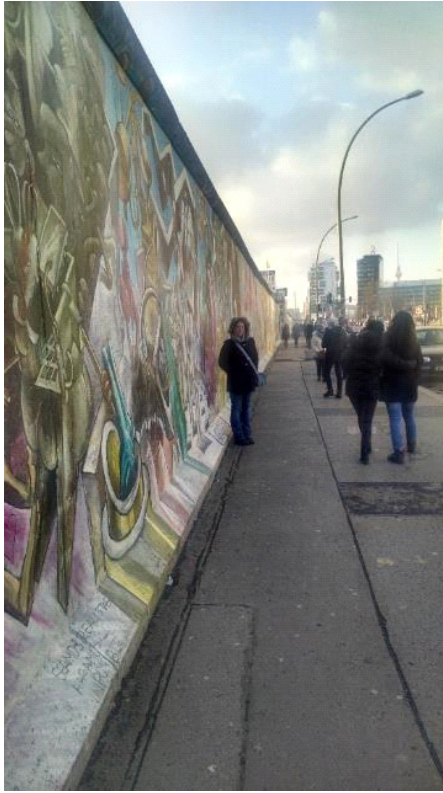
Walking the city wall in Bad Münstereifel.

Castle and gardens in Schwetzingen.

After saying goodbye to my wonderful host family, I was ready for my final adventure in Germany – Berlin camp. Having read much about the history of Berlin in the 20th century, I had high expectations and this fascinating city did not disappoint. I was stunned to walk through the streets and realise that the thin line I'd just stepped on used to divide the city in half. Visiting Checkpoint Charlie, I was visiting a place I'd studied years earlier in my language course. Seeing these historical places in person created a connection between the horrific stories in my mind with the hopeful, welcoming people I'd met in Germany. In particular, the Stasi Prison was a point of interest, as it had been functioning until just over 20 years ago. Walking through this scene of such dark happenings, one cannot help but hope these things will never be repeated. In this way, visiting Berlin at the close of my German experience imprinted on my mind the original reason for the SAGSE exchange: to promote friendship and understanding amongst the new generations so that future tragedies could be avoided. Many paintings along the Berlin wall



spoke of hope and a bright future, illustrating the triumphant spirit of a scarred but triumphant people.



Brandenburg Gate in the snow.



Beside the Berlin Wall.

In conclusion, I cannot thank the AGTV enough for providing me with the experience of a lifetime. I will never forget my first time in Germany, the amazing people I have met, and the overwhelming places I have visited. This exchange has broadened my horizons and changed my perspective on the world, an opportunity for personal growth I will always be grateful for having been granted.

Thankyou,
Michelle Roberts, *February 2015*



Painting on the Berlin Wall.