

Travelogue Lithuania

lovely landscape – warm hearted people – unforgettable impressions

Travel report by Gerhard Beil - with special thanks to the translators Brigitte Armbruster and Claire Skowronek

Questions upon questions

Lithuania: 65.000 km², 3,3 million inhabitants, highest hill: Aukštojas (293,842 m), capital: Vilnius, farmers, basket ball, car dealers....somewhere in the East, far away...so many clichés. Some years ago French geographers found out that Europe's geographic centre lies near Vilnius. Are we aware of this fact? Or do we think we are more important, because our part of Europe is called "Central Europe"? Can anyone understand the Lithuanian people? But we are curious and keen on getting to know this country. EU and COMENIUS encourage young people to meet and to get to know each other in a peaceful manner. The topic "water" is the ideal base of discussing scientific, literal or cultural-historical themes.

Let's go to Prienai

At the beginning of May 2011 representatives of 8 European countries met in the Lithuanian town of Prienai to continue works on the "water-Project", to cultivate European friendship and discuss further proceedings. Bettina Viertaler/coordinator, headmaster Pete Allmann, teachers Corinna Ludwig and Gerhard Beil accompanied Adriana Scherer, Luisa Pletl, Hannah Mühlheuser, Selina Brock and Migle Dimaytite, pupils of the IGS/RS Rheinzabern. The European guests came from southern Italy, from the Finnish polar circle, from Galicia/Spain at the Atlantic Ocean, from the English Midlands, from the Csepel-Island in Budapest, from Rzeszów in the Polish Carpathian Mountains, from the Palatinate-region in Germany and the host country Lithuania. A substantial working program awaited the European guests. Lithuania is no "ordinary" destination, and therefore the kids were quite excited and curious about what to expect: it was a wonderful trip, we were received by warm hearted people. The pupils' hosts made their stay most comfortable, as far for the teachers they stayed at a nearby small hotel in Birstonas. We were invited by Prienu Nemuno pradinė mokykla /elementary school, run by Angele Vasiliauskienė. Organisation and coordination were managed by Adelė Berezovskaja.

What a cordial reception

The program started in the Prienu Nemuno pradinė mokykla /elementary school with traditional dances around a campfire, sketches, songs and dances of all participating European countries. Songs like "From the raindrop..." and Mr.Allmann's song "Come on board" touched the hearts and made the children sing and dance. Optimistic signs of a small country, geographically on the border of the EU, but culturally and emotionally in the heart of Europe. Did they want to send a signal: "Give us a chance" or "Europe needs us" The lyrics of the old traditional German song: "Wenn ich ein Vöglein wär..." (If I were a little bird...), were written by Gottfried Herder who came from Eastern Prussia and who enforced the cultural self-esteem of small European nations already in the 19th century. Especially Baltics and Slaves owe Herder their national consciousness and no one could then imagine that people from the "country of poets and philosophers" could ever cause the holocaust. In 1841 another German poet, Hoffmann von Fallersleben", wrote the song of the Germans which started with the words:" Germany above everything....from the Maas to the Neman". We will talk about this later. After the opening ceremony pupils of the different schools planted and sowed flowers and plants to symbolize the growth of the colourful European idea. Our Lithuanian friends had prepared and decorated the school wonderfully for this occasion with pictures and images related to the "European idea", like umbrellas "with raindrops". The guests received matching souvenirs made of felt and buttons. Everybody – including the official representatives of the education authority - was thrilled.

Across Lithuania

We went on with activities like visiting schools, comparisons, discussions of the persons in charge, small talks, laughter. Together with the children of the host families we went on two day-trips, first to the beach of the Baltic Sea. We crossed the world once "longest bridge" in Kaunas. There is a saying "it took 13 days to cross the Neman Bridge". The reason was: in Poland which lies west of the Neman people applied the Gregorian Calendar, whereas in the eastern part the Julian Calendar was applied

which proved the evidence of the state of underdevelopment during the reign of the tsar. We crossed rolling morainal hills, it looked like 50 years backward, small villages, lovely lakes, lush meadows, stalking storks, just a bucolic atmosphere, but it is also a country of emigrants, country of nostalgia. Recently EU-working restrictions were lifted for Lithuanians, Poles etc to work elsewhere. Germans are worried about the issue how it will affect the German labour market. How can Lithuania and Poland cope with the lack of skilled workers needed in their own countries. Will even more people emigrate to seek a better future abroad? On the other hand Lithuania and Poland need the money transfers coming from the USA or EU.

Finally the sky cleared and we anticipated the sea.

Approaching “Ännchen von Tharau”

Destination Klaipeda, formerly called Memel on the Courland Lagoon. Cruel fate of a border region, war destruction, expulsion, occupation... Still scars of the bombing war, even some written German words can be found. The region of Klaipeda/Memel was military area for a long time. Today it's Lithuania's gateway to the world. The best known memory of the German past is the Simon-Dach-fountain in front of the theatre with the famous “Ännchen von Tharau”. Only a few still know the song, but photographs are taken here. It used to be a lovely poem by Simon Dach (1605-1659) translated into German by Herder and set to music by Friedrich Silcher. It was once the most popular German ballad.

On the beach of the Baltic Sea

Palanga ist the most famous holiday resort of Lithuania. Even poet Adam Mickiewicz was here. A stroll up the botanical garden leads us to the sculpture of the queen of colubrids by Eglė. Her story is part of the COMENIUS project. The founder of the resort, Earl Tieskiewicz, built the amber museum in the neo-renaissance style. The treasures and curios from the magic world of the “Gintaro” amber, the gold of the Baltic Sea, are flushed from the depth of the sea to the shore by rough winter storms. At regular intervals the sandy beach and the famous bridge are destroyed by elemental forces and therefore need expensive repair works every year before the beginning of the new season. The wind blows heavily and we can imagine the feeling of an evening stroll along the promenade towards the sunset. But tourism here is more threatened by cheap all-inclusive-offers from the southern parts.

Candies instead of vodka

The next day two more highlights awaited us. But first we started on a “sweet” tour in the AJ Sokoladas in Trakai. The “little” ones were taught how to produce several kinds of chocolate candies and tried to come behind the art of candy-making while the “taller” ones enjoyed capuccino and succumbed to the displayed “sweet temptations” of the counter. Chocolate candies instead of vodka as a souvenir from Lithuania? How times have changed!

Wonderful Trakai

A real jewel of the Lithuanian tourism is the castle of Trakai, the only water castle in the middle of fantastic landscapes. Here was the first place of the principality of Lithuania before Gediminas moved the residence to Vilnius. A touristical and historical must-see. We passed original houses of the Karäer and reached a unique inn where we ordered tasty “zeppelines”, potato dumplings similar to the Palatine speciality “Hoorige Knepp”. From here we have a beautiful view to the red-brick-castle over the blue water. The sun is shining, the white clouds in the sky... Everything looks like a painting. Finally we reach the capital.

Vilnius, the capital

How many titles does this town have: UNESCO world heritage, the new town of Prague, Rome of the northern hemisphere, jewel of the baroque, city of churches – European cultural capital 2009 and boom town. Vilnius (ca. 550.000 inhabitants) is very beautiful and full of history, melting pot of many nationalities and religions. The heart of Vilnius is the place around the cathedral, a church like a temple and a detached bell tower surmounted by the Gedimas-hill. Since it is “European week”, we see everywhere the blue European flags with the ring of stars. We presume there will be pizza instead of zeppelins! After a short visit to St. Peter-and-Paul-church, we stroll through the old town with some significant churches, pass the former Jewish Ghetto. And then we arrive at the “gate of the dawn”. Pope Paul II - he had a Lithuanian mother – prayed here in front of the most famous icon of Virgin Mary,

mother of mercy, called the “Black Madonna of Wilna”. This place of pilgrimage is very popular with Catholics and members of the Russian Orthodox Church. The May-prayers are broadcast to the people outside by loudspeakers. Our Polish friends are deeply touched. Who knows that from the circle of stars around the Madonna’s head originated the idea of the ring of stars on the European flag.

Water – elixir of life and source of energy

While kids and coordinators are busy in classes the other participants continue their tour to get to know the country and its people. Birštonas is proud of its new waterworks, mainly sponsored by European funds: latest standards, camera controlled, stainless steel, protected against sabotage, but at a corresponding price: 1m³ of drinking water costs 6,28 Litas (ca. € 1.80!) while the monthly average pay is about € 345,-- . Lithuania has few natural resources and so water is very important as source of energy, especially because the atomic power plant Ignalia was shut down and there is a lack of adequate replacement. That’s why the visit of the pumped-storage hydropower plant Kruonio at the Neman is very interesting. This hydropower station does only work at peak hours. We pass some industrial ruins dating from the Soviet past, reminding the former unilateral dependence of the unloved neighbour. Today we see company logos like Siemens and Vattenfall.

Praise the village school

In the village Asmintā we visit a “mini”-school of only 25 kids. But what a great reception! We attend a play about the life of the highly esteemed St. Linas performed by kids, teachers, parents and grandmothers and interpreted into English by Airina. The children of all ages are taught in one class supported by the village people. The children still learn traditional handicrafts, cultivate seasonal traditions, paint, dance, sing and act. School is an important cultural institution and a symbol of the future. We enjoy a traditional snack with regional delicacies and a lively exchange of ideas. And now is time for Gerhard Beil’s mayor’s speech. He praises the small village school and stresses: small is beautiful.

Tradition and bread

Prienai has a museum, a real treasure regarding history and tradition. Agricultural industry and culture are highly regarded in Lithuania. For centuries flax growing and processing, linen weaving, growing of cereals were the main sources of income. We got a good and solid snack with an excellent VORUTA black currant-wine from local blackberries, cherries and black chokeberries, recognized as a speciality and European heritage of local products. Anele Razmilaviciene shares her knowledge about Lithuanian customs with us. Rye is grown here and dark rye bread plays a great role in the nourishment business but also a gift when meeting with people and friends. There are even performing rituals concerning bread. Therefore the European teachers are encouraged to bake their own bread, try delicacies which is a basic lesson in Lithuanian tradition. Some guests knead sour-rye dough for the first time and watch it baking in the oven. We enjoy the smell of freshly baked bread and we all know the proverb: “the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach”!

Welcomed by the mayor

Because of the extraordinary commitment of the Prienu Nemuno pradinė mokykla Mayor Juozas Krikstolaitis gets involved into the European week (meanwhile Vytas Bujanauskas has been elected mayor) - and he is obviously proud of “his people” and his guests. He welcomes the European teachers in the town hall, presents his town in a film and thanks all those who have helped to make the stay a success. He speaks about the Nemunas/Memel as “Father of all Lithuanian rivers”, and Mayor Gerhard Beil speaks about “Father Rhine” and his importance in past and present times. G. Beil gives a statuette of Roman Mercury from Taberna (Rheinzabern) to the Mere of Prienai. The press and TV publish detailed reports of this European event. Juozas Krikstolaitis invites us for dinner - partly sponsored by the local bank - at the restaurant BERZAS. It is worth mentioning that the dinner takes place in a house where the party central office of the KPd SU including the torture chamber used to be. Stalin’s heirs could not imagine that at this location people would propose a toast to Europe’s future. By the way, Lithuania was the first Soviet satellite Republic that tried to get away from the USSR to move towards human rights, free elections, Europe. This movement was called “the singing revolution”. Thanks to Gorbatschev’s Perestroika it couldn’t be stopped, not even by the temporary occupation of the TV tower in Vilnius by Soviet troops in January 1991. In contrast to the western countries Lithuanians are on bad terms with “Gorbi”. Finally in 1993 the Soviet army left for good, Lithuania has been a member of EU and NATO since 2004.

A European festival

Two days before leaving our host held a farewell-party in the cultural center. We were - for the 3rd time - honoured by the mayor with presents for the coordinators and the special guests. A range of local delicacies enjoyed parents, special guests and school officials. The favourite dish was Shakotis" or commonly called "bankuchenas", a kind of layered cake. Adele told us that her home town Stakliskes is very famous for this delicacy. The COMENIUS-guests took part in a splendid program of sketches, dances, pictures and games – representing a "miniature" Europe. Parents and guests joined the dances like the Italian dance "Bellissima" and the Spanish dances or were just taken away by the joyful atmosphere of the traditional Lithuanian dances and songs. The girls of the Rheinzabern school, directed by Bettina Vierthaler, also performed a dance encouraging the guests to participate. While sitting with his guitar on the floor in the middle of the cultural centre headmaster Allmann surprised the audience by performing the "water songs" which were rehearsed in all participating schools. Learning with the heart, looking politically forward, counting on the young generation, working for peace and Europe, this is the meaning of the COMENIUS-project, the issue "water" is just part of it. One week long Prinaï radiated real European flair. And the Mayor took the opportunity to ask Gerhard Beil for support in arranging European contacts. District Administrator Dr. Brechtel has already offered help.

River of destiny: the Neman

You cannot leave Prinaï without a memorable boat ride (oder cruise) on the Neman which we did on this cool afternoon with "Vytenis" starting from the well known resort Birstonas in the region of the "National Park Sinuosity River Neman". It was a very romantic ride along the most beautiful part of the Neman. Young people of 8 nations and guests moved to the warmer inner part of the ship where - in some kind of "symphony of languages" - they perfectly understood each other.

"From the river Meuse to the Neman river..." is a verse of the former German national anthem. But the Neman was not only a German river, it was also called Nemunas, Njemen, Njoman and Niemen. Many nationalities and religions could be found here and still are in this region: Lithuanians, Poles, Belorussians, Russians, Germans and Jews. The Germans were expelled, the Jews nearly completely erased by the Holocaust followed by more than four decades of Soviet communist era: Furthermore a disastrous nationalism was to blame for self-destruction, border shiftings and division. Three countries claim a poet, born at the Neman: Adam Mieckiewicz, called "Poland's Goethe". In his great epic work Pan Tadeusz he writes: "Lithuania, you are my homeland/fatherland" and is a symbol of this multi-ethnic region (and like the Neman river where he was born: an ambassador of European ideas

Nobel-prize winner for literature Czeslaw Miloz was born in Lithuania and would have had his 100th birthday on June 30, 2011. Although born "in the midst of Lithuania" his ancestors spoke only the Polish language and therefore he became a Polish poet. One of his most famous works is "Seduced Thinking". This parable tells how Milosz – after taking the Mongolian pill Murti-Bing – is able to unmask the communist totalitarianism and describes how it attracts writers and intellectuals.

Milosz did never align and became the initiator of the movement to abolish the system behind the Iron Curtain. He got a lot of support by the Polish neighbours and among the nearly one hundred ethnic groups of the former Soviet Union the Lithuanians were the first to insurgé. His lifelong utmost concern was the reconciliation between Poland and Lithuania in a unified Europe. Like the Palatinate region on the Rhine the region along the Neman-river was always a European transit country, a military road for Swedes, Russians, Poles, Napoleon, German Emperor Wilhelm II and later Hitler. With him the anthem "Germany, Germany above all in the world" got a fatal denotation. About 70 years ago on June 22, 1941, German invasion of the Soviet Union started under the codename of "Enterprise Barbarossa". At the end Europe was devastated, it was a horrible apocalypse. The scars can still be seen and the pain and sorrows are not forgotten.

In remembrance of Pren

On August 27, 1941, the little Lithuanian town of Pren on the Neman river suffered a destructive fate.

A large Jewish community lived in Pren – the name is Yiddish - since the 17th century. It was a typical Jewish "stetl" as described by Elias Canetti or Isaac B Singer, with synagogue, small merchants, religious Jews, Jewish cemetery ...some of them worked as raftsmen on the Neman in order to ship the logs from the Russian woods to the seaport of Klaipeda/Memel to be exported to other countries, i.e.. to England. The Jewish population always suffered from the pogroms with the tsar's knowledge and approval in order to appease the poor Russian people. We know of a pogrom of Polish juveniles in 1882. During World War I Lithuania belonged to the German administration district

“Upper-East”, a pilot project to exploit the east. It was such a poor region and used as German propaganda campaign against the “dirty Poles and Russians” and it was absorbed and exceeded by the Nazis. After World War I Lithuania became a state whereas the region of Vilna remained Polish. In 1940 Lithuania was annexed by the USSR. In August 1939 Hitler and Stalin signed a satanic agreement which enabled Hitler to act deliberately regarding the invasion of Poland. Immediately most of the Jewish shops and factories were nationalized by the USSR and many Lithuanians were deported to Siberia. On June 24, 1941 Pren had about 1900 inhabitants when German soldiers invaded the town and right away the Lithuanian nationalists took over the command. Nationalistic students killed the Jewish intelligentsia of Pren, other people suspected of collaboration with Soviets were put into prison or shot. The Jews were kept isolated, no contacts to non-Jews, no smoke from their chimneys, no cooking warm food! On August 14, 1941 and under surveillance of members of the German occupying forces Lithuanian police rounded up the Jews of the region and herded them in the former soviet barracks under worst hygienic conditions. On August 25, Jewish men were forced to excavate two mass graves of 20x4 and 10x4 m. The next day 1078 Jews: men, women and children were shot with machine guns, many buried alive and as told by eye-witnesses still moving under the soil for hours. There were only a few Jewish survivors. The Yiddish Pren no longer exists. In no other country of Eastern Europe the holocaust was implemented to this extent. At the site of the destroyed former Jewish cemetery there is a small memorial stone bearing the inscription: “Our Jewish inhabitants were buried here till 1941”. Not far away is the Prienų Nemuno pradinė mokykla /elementary school. Pren means Prinai in the Lithuanian language. In 1944 Prienai came again under Soviet command. The party headquarters, town hall and cultural centre were now the centre of power. An all atrocities started anew, this time against partisans or Lithuanians responsible for German crimes or collaborators. But it was never possible to deny the citizens of Prienai their faith of which the local church devoted to the Epiphany proved evidence. It will take a long time to come to terms with this complicated past. Nowadays Europe’s young people live a quite easy-going life and should not be stressed regarding the past. But the present can only be understood when knowing the past and this enables us to cope with the future. Both our countries cannot dare say: We don’t care about the past!

Aciu Prinai and iki pasimatymo

What will remain out of the COMENIUS-meeting in Prinai? The element water as “elixir of friendship and peace” is an excellent topic for “entente cordiale” and peace. Is Lithuania far away? Only about one and a half hours by plane – but in the middle of our hearts. We could talk to each other by signs or in English. We encountered a country with all senses and learnt a lot, but most important how to live with less. The hospitality was warm-hearted, and surely not because of our presents like home made sausages and local delicacies from the Palatinate butcher Scherer in Hatzenbühl. There were so many smiles on children’s and teachers’ faces. And what counts most are the human relationships, friendly and supporting words and gestures. Contents count, not wrapping. Further COMENIUS meetings will follow in Finland in November 2011. The medium facebook will see new friendships, e-mail-addresses will be exchanged, further contacts and visits planned. To celebrate the end of this project we will meet again in Rheinzabern in May 2012. “Aciu Prinai, iki pasimatymo!” thank you Prinai for your hospitality and “auf Wiedersehen!” Aciu, Adele for the organisation. And I will invite all friends to Rheinzabern, in the lovely region of the Palatinate, in the middle of Europe. Sveiki atvyke and welcome!

Snapshots (by G. Beil) give some impressions of these wonderful days.