



**Rachel
from Tillsonburg
to
Switzerland**

“Make a pizza!”

Has it already been three months since my last Beaver Tale? How am I already halfway done my exchange? In my last Beaver Tale, I talked about how fast time had gone by for me since arriving. Time hasn't slowed since. A lot has happened since my last Tale, Christmas, Silvester, learning how to ski, school, more school, little trips around Switzerland and even some skating.

For me, one of the biggest differences so far in cultures was at Christmas and New Years. Here in Switzerland Saint Niklaus comes and brings presents to kids on December sixth in the night and they open them the next day. The tree was put up two days before Christmas eve, decorated with cute little ornaments and instead of Christmas lights, real candles were put on. On Christmas eve my host family all came together, and we had a family dinner and then we all sat by the tree and lit the candles and sang Christmas carols in English and German and then opened presents. In almost every city you would find an amazing Christmas market, they were often in parks with amazing lights and little fires for warmth. I went with friends and family to different ones all over Switzerland and even one in Germany. New years eve isn't really celebrated in Switzerland, here they call it Silvester and for this, my host family and I got together and ate dinner.

During Christmas and New Year's, we had a two-week break from school; the weather was foggy for over a week, so we went higher up in the mountains to get away from the fog. One day we visited Krattigen, a small village just above the fog and another day my host family took me to Jungfrau, the highest point in Europe, it was absolutely breathtaking, and a little colder than I'm now used to.





Another thing that's really different here is the climate, around this time in Canada there is snow, here in Switzerland there is a lot of snow in the mountains, which is amazing for skiing and looking at, but where I live there hasn't been any snow that has stayed. Just last week it was 16 degrees which is unheard of here, the average day the temperature has been 3 or 4 degrees and some days I don't wear a coat to school which automatically comes with comments from classmates like "oh look at

the Canadian who is immune to the cold". It's almost funny to see people's reactions when I tell them I've made and slept in a quinzhee (snow fort) outside in Canadian winter. The most common questions I am asked are "aren't you cold?" and "Is Canada cold in the winter, does it have a lot of snow?"

Another common question I am asked a lot still is where in Canada I live, I tell them Toronto because it's a major city and no one is going to know where the little town of Tillsonburg is. Some people follow up with questions like do I actually live in the city, when I say no about a two-hour drive, they are so shocked by the time, but for me, a two-hour drive feels like no time at all. A lot of Swiss can't grasp how big Canada is, I don't think I really realized until I arrived here either. You can go from Geneva to Zurich (one side of Switzerland to another) in two hours by train.

Since my last Beaver Tale my German and even Swiss German has improved (I am still nowhere near speaking Swiss German but understanding it has become easier). I'm finding it easier to hold conversations about different topics. I am also able to participate more in my classes and even answer questions. Now if I am talking to someone and there is a word that I don't understand I am usually able to figure it out by looking at the context of the conversation. Leaving Canada I almost thought it was crazy, the idea of learning an entirely new language in just a year and I still think that it's crazy, I am able to be involved in conversations in a language I didn't know just six months ago.



This past week I was with my class for a school ski trip in a place called Elsiggen-Metsch. Unfortunately, the first two days the ski lifts were closed because of the weather but fortunately, everyone was able to get to know each other and on the second day I was even able to play hockey at the local arena! Wednesday is when I started to learn to ski, everyone else was in the "middle" and "advanced" groups while I was one of three people in the beginners group, the others being another exchange student who had never skied before and one Swiss girl who knew how to ski but had not gone for a while.

We started with the basics, how to put on the skis, how to turn and how to stop. My ski teacher kept telling me to “make a pizza” with my skis because it is an easier way for beginners to learn. After about two hours of practicing on a small hill (I’m pretty sure it was a pile of snow made from the restaurant cleaning off their deck) it was time for the big leagues... the kiddie hill. Imagine my embarrassment when a group of three and four-year-old kids passed me. After about another hour of that my ski instructor decided it was time for us to go down an actual slope, it was about a twenty-minute ride with the lift and about 30 minutes down because I needed some breaks. The view from the top was so amazing, the pictures almost don’t look real. I only fell twice. The first time I fell off of the ski lift, it was a standing one where you put the bar between your legs, I didn’t have my skis straight so when I started to be pulled by the lift I tripped over them. The second time was right after another girl in my class and I had gotten off the ski lift on the big slope, she fell off it and I fell because I was laughing so hard.



Right now, Switzerland is having a ski break, yes- Switzerland really has a week dedicated to skiing, my host family is taking me to Leukerbad for the week to go skiing which will be featured in my next Beaver Tale in May.

Soon it will be a year since the country announcements and it seems like just last week I was nervously standing in front of Rotarians, friends and family, eager to find out where I would be spending the next year of my life. I still remember the moment when I opened the envelope and saw SWITZERLAND written in bolded letters, the memory still brings a smile to my face when I think about it. I still can’t quite fathom how much I’ve grown as a person since that moment. Two years ago, I wouldn’t have been able to imagine myself being able to go and live 6000km away from my home, friends and family, if you would’ve told me that I probably would’ve laughed.

My exchange has taught me so many important things I never would have learned if I didn’t have this experience. It has also given me more confidence than I thought would be possible. Before I left for exchange I could barely stand up in front of my classmates and give a speech, now I am comfortable standing in front of 70 plus people talking about something in a different language. I think the most important lesson exchange has taught me is that I am capable of so much more than I thought possible. All of this is because of the amazing exchange program Rotary has. I owe a huge thank you to both my home and host clubs and districts for all the amazing opportunities, I wouldn’t trade this experience for anything.

Bis zum nächsten Mal,

Until next time,

Rachel