



**Rachel  
from Tillsonburg  
to  
Switzerland**

**“The lessons you learn on your journey towards a destination will always be more valuable than the destination itself.”**

Welcome to my last ever Beavertale, so much has happened since my last Beavertale I had forgotten how these were supposed to go, so I went back to my first two tales. Reading them was so bittersweet, the girl who wrote the first ones seems almost unrecognizable now. This year has truly been the best year of my life, I have learned so much about different cultures, ways of thinking, and most of all I have learned so much about myself. Leaving for my exchange, I had heard over and over that the girl leaving and the girl coming back were going to be two different people. I thought that was so impossible, no one could possibly change that much in just a year. I was wrong, although sometimes I think I haven't changed at all, I know that I have. This year has taught me skills like patience, acceptance, openminded thinking, and understanding.

Unless you live under a rock you are aware of what has been going on in the world since around February, so let me take you back to when this all began here in Switzerland. In February the first case of coronavirus was confirmed here. The second hardest hit country after China was Italy, since Italy and Switzerland share a border, many Italians cross the border to work here in Switzerland. Shortly after there were no trains that serviced to the Italian part. The end of February the Swiss government announced that any events with over 1000 people had to be canceled. About two weeks after that it was finally announced that all schools and non-essential stores would have to close for three weeks and then we had a two week break for Easter holiday, 5 weeks altogether, that meant this break would be longer than they get for summer break.



The first week of the lockdown was very stressful, I was calling and talking with both people from Rotary Switzerland and Canada about whether I would have to return home. Rotary Switzerland had made it clear they thought students travelling home would have a greater risk of catching the virus and bringing it home to our families than staying here. Having a sister with an autoimmune disease, my family and I decided it would be better to stay and see how things turn out. Many of my friends had to leave within the first week of the lockdown. It was upsetting because we were not able to give proper goodbyes to the people who helped make our exchanges so memorable, and to people we may never see again.

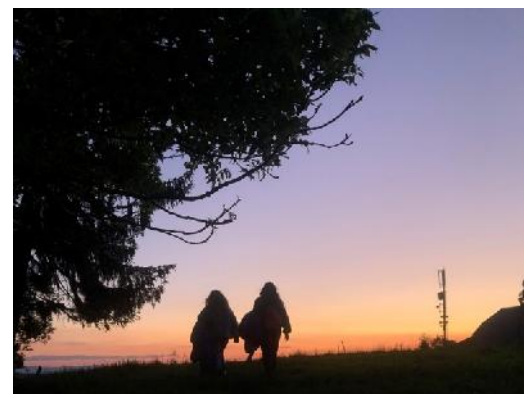
When Trudeau announced that all students studying abroad should return home immediately, I was sent an email saying that I had 24 hours to decide if I would return home and 48 hours to leave Switzerland. I took the twenty-four hours and thought about it and talked to my host family, family, Rotary Switzerland and Canada and they all thought it wasn't enough time for me to pack and say goodbye to my life here. Ultimately the decision was left to my parents back in Canada whether or not to bring me home. We knew that no matter what country I was in I would have to social distance for a while and since Canada was a month behind Europe we thought it would be best for me to stay. For that I am grateful.

Of course, in the weeks to come, the rules became very strict, you must stay 2m apart, no more than 5 people in a group, hand washing and masks were also advised. During the month and a half of the lockdown I was able to get to know my host family even better, I introduced them to some Canadian junk food, TV shows and of course macaroni and cheese. My host sister and I celebrated our 18<sup>th</sup> birthdays in April, and my host mom and my other host sister's birthdays in May. Although we couldn't do everything, we wanted for our birthdays it was still a day I will never forget.



In my last BeaverTale I told about how Switzerland has a week off school for skiing, my host family took me to Leukerbad where they spent the week teaching me to ski. They first wanted to test how well I could ski... by taking me down a black diamond slope. The view was amazing from the top of the slopes. My host family and I went skiing and hiking for the entire week. My host family all took turns teaching me different techniques and by the end of the week, I was falling just a little bit less.

After my week skiing with my class, I went to a Jonas Brothers concert in Zurich with my host sister from my first family, there I saw an exchange student from Switzerland who did her exchange year in our district the year I was a future outbound. Two days later I had a Rotary weekend in Kandersteg where we did a lot of walking and hiking and we went curling.



After that it was back to regular school for a while. My host family took me and another exchange student in my school to the Stockhorn, a very famous mountain in our city. We took the gondola up to the very top where we ate brunch and looked out from a view point, unfortunately we couldn't go to the highest point of the mountain because there was still too much snow; we went back down half way and then we did some walking and I attempted to go tobogganing. The snow in some parts went up past my thigh so it was a little hard to navigate through. I was there once already in the summer with my first host family, but it was almost unrecognisable with the snow but still just as magical looking.

About a week after that is when the lockdown here in Switzerland started. I remember I was sitting in English class when it was announced that the school would be closing for 5 weeks, I was so worried, would I be able to stay here with my student visa if there was no school. My classmates all looked worried for me too so that didn't help. Since then we have been doing school online, I have about three to six hours everyday of calls with my class. My host family has been doing a lot of social distancing, the Swiss way. We have gone hiking at a lot to amazing places in different cantons in Switzerland. I have also been running and playing a lot of volleyball with my host family. I was even able to go with my host sisters and some friends sleeping overnight in the woods with just a sleeping bag and waking up at five am to hike and watch the sun rise.

It was just announced May 27<sup>th</sup> that Switzerland will be heavily lifting its lockdown rules. Starting the beginning of June, all schools will be going back, still with restrictions. Spontaneous group gatherings like in a park or public area will be a maximum of 30 people. Sport events and gatherings can have up to 300 people. Places like zoos, theaters, cinemas, botanical gardens and swimming pools will open back up. Restaurants and bars have also relaxed their rules. About two weeks ago the Swiss government slightly lifted the lockdown to see how everything would be; luckily the number of cases were still dropping to where we have less than thirty new cases a day in the whole country.

I will never forget the day I signed up with Rotary; my guidance councillor and I had talked about wanting to do a year, but I wasn't sure how. One day at lunch I got called down to the office and there I met Bob, who immediately welcomed me with his warm smile and jokes, he told me a little about the program and within the first ten minutes of talking with him I knew this was something I needed to be a part of. By the time the lunch hour was over I had signed up to go. Going home that day my mom and dad asked me the same questions as they do everyday "how was your day?" and "what did you learn today?". Of course I knew I had to be subtle about this because I hadn't asked permission so I responded with the usual "it was good, I learned something in math but I forget what its called, today I signed up to do an exchange year next year, I have no homework tonight." I've never seen my parents so surprised before; at one point I thought my dads head was going to pop off. This should not have really been that much of a surprise since I had been talking about it since seventh grade. At first it was very difficult to convince my parents, and I almost wasn't able to do the year, but after some convincing and puppy dog eyes I was able to officially start with the program, and since that day, my life has truly not been the same.

Although this has not been the most “normal” exchange year for us, I wouldn’t change it for anything. I have met so many amazing people from all over the world and have made so many lifelong friends and memories I will never forget.

This paragraph has been the hardest to write. There are truly no words to express how thankful I am for every person that has helped me on my journey, but here is my attempt; thank you to both Rotary Club of Tillsonburg and Rotary Club of Thun for the continued support and help throughout this year and for giving me this amazing opportunity. I owe so

much to my family in Canada for their understanding, love and encouragement throughout this year. I can not imagine my exchange year being any better than it has been with out the love and support I have gotten from both of my host families here in Switzerland. This year has given me not only the opportunity to not just live in another culture and country but to be able to thrive in it. This wouldn’t have been possible alone, I also owe a lot to my friends both local and exchange for always making me laugh and always making plans with me whether it was going hiking or taking a two hour train ride to get burritos.. yes, they were worth it. Realizing my time here in Switzerland is going to end soon I have started to really appreciate everything more than before, watching the sun disappear behind the mountains every night, the trains, how clear the water is, the rich history every house here seems to have. The list could go on and on. This year has taught me to cherish every moment because time really does fly when you’re having fun.



To future exchange students, whoever you are and wherever or whenever you go, Your exchange year will be one of the most rewarding year of your life, it will be filled with love and pure happiness, it will also be one of the most challenging years, facing obstacles such as homesickness, culture shock, and language barriers are almost inevitable. This year is not just about learning about a new culture and language it is about learning about yourself and your strengths, after your year abroad you will have a new found confidence that you may not have had before, you will also have amazing memories that most people our age could only dream about. Although your home away from home will not always be easy, enjoy every moment of it because we certainly can not tell what the future holds in store. One quote that I heard that really made me open my mind to new adventures was “The lessons you learn on your journey towards a destination will always be more valuable than the destination itself.”

Danke für alles

viele Grüsse,

Rachel

