



Mackenzie

from Milton

to

Germany

“Wenn nicht in diesem Leben, wann dann?”

“If not in this life, then when?”

It's honestly a surreal experience for me to be writing this right now. Less than a year ago, I remember sitting up in bed at night, scrolling through my phone and reading about all the Beaver Tales I could. I would imagine what it would be like to live the lives of all the past exchange students, and all the amazing opportunities they were given. Now that I am in a similar position, it almost feels like déjà vu.



My adventure began on August 13th, a day filled with excitement rather than nerves, much like Christmas morning but without all the gifts. I hurried to finish packing and make it to the airport. Once there, my nerves kicked in as things started to move quickly. Although I faced some airline issues, I remained excited. The goodbyes were tough, especially for my family, but I held it together. I boarded the plane, realizing I was leaving my old life behind. A few tears were shed during the flight, but I felt better upon landing in Frankfurt.

I also had an incredible experience when I was given the chance to sit in the captain's seat of the aircraft (the perks of having a flight attendant as an aunt).

As I awaited my host family, my initial nerves faded away during the friendly and warm introductions with my host dad, mom, and brother. It was about a four-hour drive back to my new home in Velbert.



Three days later, I found myself traveling again, this time to Poland! My host mom is originally from Poland, and when I arrived, there was a Ceramics Art Festival, which she attends every year. What better way to get to know each other than to embark on an exciting 8-hour drive to Poland? The beginning was a bit challenging at first since my host mom didn't speak any English, and I only knew very little German. Thankfully, my host sister and host dad were there to help with translations.



Poland turned out to be an incredible experience. Being immersed in a new culture that I hadn't expected was simply amazing. The ceramics were stunning; we took a guided tour of the factory where all the art is created and saw how each piece is handcrafted and hand painted. I even bought a beautiful piece for myself and another for my grandma!

After returning home, it was only a couple of days before I began my first day of school. In Germany, public transport is commonly used by people of all ages, from young children to the elderly. On my first day of school, I took a thirty-minute bus ride, which I still do every day.

Arriving at my school was an overwhelming experience. The exterior and interior of the building were packed with students from grades 5 to 13, all rushing around, reuniting with old friends, or starting their first year of Gymnasium. The educational system in Germany differs significantly from Canada's. After elementary school, students are placed in one of three types of schools based on their giftedness: Hauptschule, Realschule, or Gymnasium.

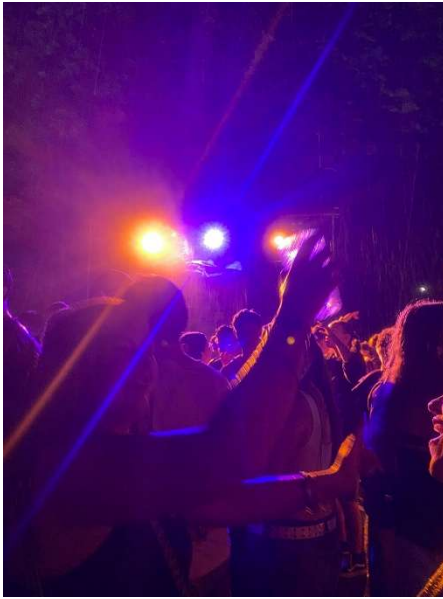
I attend Marien-Gymnasium in Essen-Werden, a school for relatively more gifted students (similar to our highschools in Canada). As I walked into my classroom, I was immediately greeted by many smiling faces. A lot of my classmates wanted to talk to me and get to know the exchange student from Canada. This was, at first, very surprising for me because before coming to Germany, I had researched what the people here would be like. Many sources said that Germans were typically cold and standoffish, but my experience was the exact opposite! Germans are the warmest and most welcoming people I have ever encountered! Generally, everyone in Germany understands English well, considering that it is taught in school. After many introductions, the school year officially started for me. However, after only three days of school, we already had to say goodbye to each other, as we all had to participate in something called Praktikum, which translates to "internships."



For the next two weeks, I interned at a kindergarten. At first, it was a bit awkward because the kids didn't understand who I was or why I was there. However, that changed quickly when they realized they had someone to play with who wouldn't tell them no. I spent the two weeks running around and playing with the children. It was also a great opportunity to practice my German since the kids only knew basic words. They didn't mind when I made mistakes; they would just laugh and then grab my hand to drag me around. By the end of my internship, I was truly sad to leave them. The staff created a beautiful album for me filled with pictures of me with the kids and captions alongside each photo. It's something I will treasure forever.

I had my first inbound weekend, where I had the opportunity to meet fellow exchange students from all around the world. There were around 40 of us, which is quite different from what I was used to in Canada! It was an amazing experience, getting to hear about and learn from so many different countries and cultures, as well as discovering how uniquely different Germany was for them compared to their home countries.





We had a great time getting to know each other, and I made lots of new friends whom I can see myself visiting in the future after my exchange year. I had another opportunity to meet with all the other exchange students in my district during a day trip to Oberhausen. We visited a museum and then went tree top climbing, which is a very popular activity among teens in that area. It was yet another amazing day spent with fellow exchange students.

It was then back to school for me. The weeks that followed were such an amazing time, as they allowed me to get to know my classmates. Many of them were initially a little awkward because they weren't exactly sure what to say to me, but after we talked more and hung out after school, we quickly began to become closer to each other. They invited me out to do things many times, such as one night when we all went to the Kirmes, which translates to "Fair." It was an incredible experience! They aren't kidding when they say that Germans like to party. I've only been to a couple so far, but when everyone gets together, it's always a great time. I've also been invited to friends' birthday parties, where they specifically bought a German tradition for me to try. We've gone out to eat multiple times and explored the city together, as they love showing me around Germany. I especially enjoy these moments because they bring me closer to everyone. Even in class, I interact with everyone, and my classmates are always willing to help me whenever I need it. One important lesson I've learned while being on exchange is to always ask for help. This is crucial during an exchange, as not asking for assistance can limit your experience. It might feel embarrassing at times, especially given that my classmates are around the same age as I am, but people are always willing to lend a helping hand. Classmates are also great for learning the language, as I pick up more slang, and they encourage me to speak German. At the same time, they enjoy practicing their own English, so we both benefit each other—I'm learning German, and they're improving their English. I am forever grateful for my class, and I can't wait to continue my journey with them as I further improve my language skills and strengthen my bonds with everyone.





Since being here, I've only officially had one meeting with my host Rotary Club. During this meeting, I made friends with another exchange student from Peru who lives only about a 15-minute drive from me. We take hour-and-a-half German courses every Friday after school, which has been a great help for both of us. This was a wonderful opportunity for us to socialize and network with the Rotarians. Sometimes, they aren't quite sure whether they should speak German or English with me, so I try to do a mix of both.

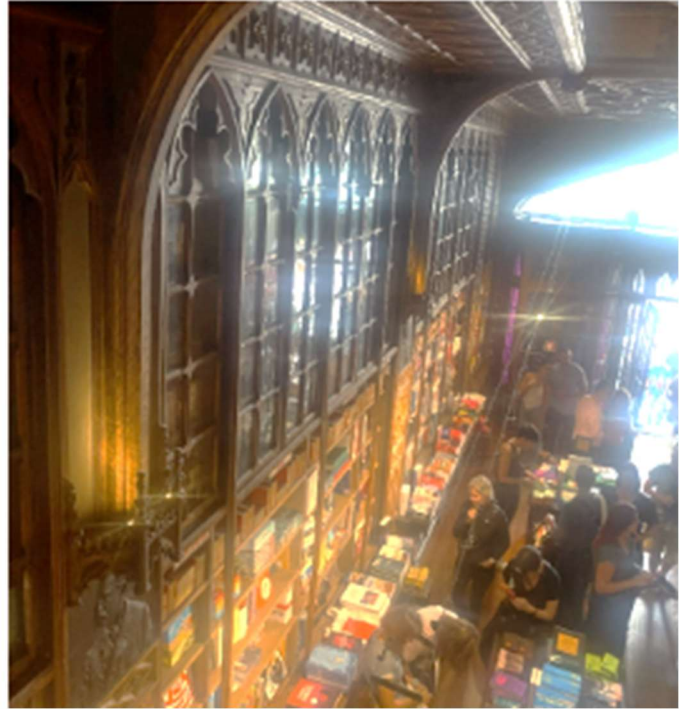
I had to give a presentation about myself, and I chose to challenge myself by doing the entire presentation in German. This was a great decision, as many of them were impressed and congratulated me on my German speaking skills, which was a nice confidence boost.

In early October, I was presented with the opportunity to go on a shopping trip to the Netherlands for a day, which I, of course, eagerly accepted. The Netherlands is only about a one-hour drive from where I live, which I find remarkable. In Canada, if you drive for an hour from my city, you're still in Canada.

I took a friend from school with me for the shopping adventure. Although she had been there before, we both enjoyed walking around the designer outlet mall and window shopping, even though everything was a bit too expensive for us. Overall, it was a fantastic day out.



In October, we had a fall break, which lasted two weeks in Germany. This was a nice change for me, as I usually have to wait until winter for a break. During the first week of my fall break, my host family and I drove to Belgium before taking a three-hour flight to Portugal. Portugal was absolutely beautiful and one of my favorite countries I've ever visited. We arrived in the city of Porto, where we stayed for two days. During our time there, we visited many amazing sites and cathedrals, and we even went to one of the most beautiful bookstores in the world, "Livraria Lello."



From Porto, we took a day trip to the city of Fátima, which is home to the Sanctuary of Fátima, a significant Catholic pilgrimage site. The Capelinha das Aparições marks the spot where the Virgin Mary allegedly appeared in 1917, and witnessing it was quite meaningful due to its history. Continuing our

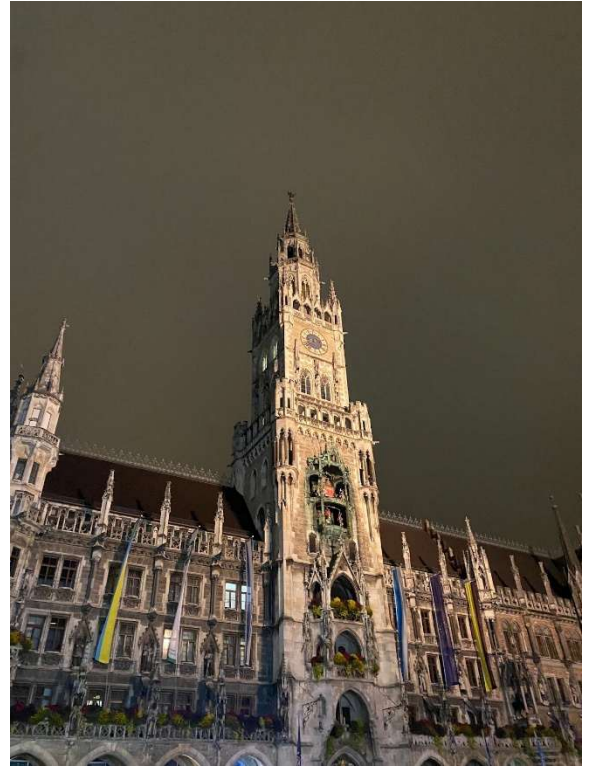
day trip, we finally arrived in the city of Nazaré, known for having some of the biggest and most powerful waves in the world. We stayed at a hotel in Nazaré, and the following day, we took a day trip to Lisbon, the capital of Portugal. It was amazing to see, with so much to explore and stunning views. On our last day, we spent more time in Nazaré to admire the incredible waves.



After that, we sadly had to drive back to Porto to catch our flight back to Belgium and eventually return home to Germany. It was an incredible experience, and I am so thankful to my host family for bringing me along.



During the second week of my fall break, we embarked on the Deutschland Reise (Germany Trip). Our group, consisting of nearly 70 exchange students, set off on an exciting nine-day journey. We began in Stuttgart, where we visited the Mercedes Benz Museum. From there, we traveled to our main destination, Munich, where we stayed for about three full days. However, we weren't in Munich the entire time.



One day, we took a trip to Füssen to see Schloss Neuschwanstein, a famous castle known for inspiring the Disney logo and being recognized worldwide. Another day, we visited the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial. This was a challenging day for many of us; it was heartbreaking to witness, but it was also an incredibly important experience for raising awareness. Next, we traveled to Dresden, which was my favorite city due to its stunning architecture and relatively low crowds compared to other places we visited. Following Dresden, we headed to Berlin, the capital of Germany. During

our time there, we went on a sightseeing tour and learned a great deal about the city's history. One day, we took a trip to Potsdam and visited Schloss Sans Souci, a beautiful castle built by Prussian King Frederick the Great as his summer palace. Our final destination was Hamburg, where we stayed for two nights before reluctantly concluding our trip.

Overall, the journey was amazing. I had the opportunity to meet so many people and form close bonds with fellow exchange students. There truly is no bond quite like the one shared among exchange students.



In the coming weeks, I have a lot planned and many amazing opportunities ahead of me. However, I will save those details for my next Beaver Tale. Until then, I want to express my gratitude to everyone back home who has supported me on this journey and made all these experiences possible. There are no words to fully describe how thankful I am for this opportunity. If anyone is considering an exchange program, I hope my experiences can inspire you, as this journey truly has the potential to change your life forever. It offers so much growth, and really, if not in this life, then when?

Bis zum nächsten Mal, tschüssie!