

COMENIUS-First meeting of the European partners from January 13 – 16, 2010

by Gerhard Beil

It is the famous educator/pedagogue Johann Amos Comenius who gave his name to the exchange programme of the European Union. The idea is to bring together regions, schools and individuals and live the community spirit. To promote this project nine teachers from seven European countries stayed in Rheinzabern from January 13 – 16, 2010, a small town from where the Romans exported the well-known Terra Sigillata throughout Europe already 2000 years ago.

The focus of the meeting was to find a theme, but also to work out substantial agreements that had to be adjusted by computer communication and all in English. There is nothing like starting young. The conditions for schools are really different. School is above all a cultural institution which has to respond to characteristics of the individual person. One of the participants was Katja Jutunen who came from Oulu/Finland, the most northern city of Europe, not far from the Arctic circle. She spoke German fluently and was very interested in special Palatinate expressions. Adelė Berezovskaja and Angelė Vasiliauskienė represented a school from Prienai near Kaunas in Lithuania. Agnieszka Batóg and Bożena Mikula came from Rzeszów in Galicia, a tourist place in south-east Poland. They enriched the meeting in fluent German and with their openness. "I'm Zsófi, I come from Budapest", this is how Zsófi Attiláné Kovács introduced herself in best Cambridge English. She came from the country which pulled down the barbed wire in 1989 and opened Europe towards the East. From Francavilla Fontana at the "heel of the Italian boot" came Mario Adrisano, a real Italian Signore. Juan Antonio Gonzales came from Betanzos near La Coruña in Galicia/Spain, a place where at "Europe's end" the Atlantic Ocean roars against the steep coast. Juan works at a huge school with pupils of all ages. Some girls were crazy about Scott Cosnett from Walsall near Birmingham who teaches dramaturgy at his school. Bettina Vierthaler, teacher at IGS Rheinzabern, had the overall responsibility, supported by many colleagues, some of them even acted as "foster colleague" for the guests.

Of course there was a special cultural programme like the visit of the Cathedral of Speyer (UNESCO world heritage) where Gerhard Beil presented a lesson in European history. One cannot imagine how much European history and tradition is found in Speyer and the region of Palatinat. The Polish participants were very proud to see that Jan Pawel, Pope John Paul II had already been there. The majestic Romanesque cathedral impressed everybody by its plainness and dignity. The participants were awestruck when standing in front of the tombs of eight emperors and kings mostly of European rank. Nowhere in Europe can you find anything similar. Who was here? Celts, Romans, Burgundians, emperors and monks, Bernard of Clairvaux appealed for the crusade, Reformation, Thirty Years' War, wars of succession, the French Revolution, Napoleon, the democratic movement of the Hambach Festival and the revolution 1848/49, two world wars. The great European Robert Schuman met Konrad Adenauer here. George Bush, Gorbatschow, Mitterand, Thatcher, Jelzin and many more statesmen visited this extraordinary cathedral with Helmut Kohl. A wine-testing event and a typical local Palatinate meal ended the first day.

On the second COMENIUS-day the participants visited different classes. Agnieszka and Bożena sang the most famous Polish congratulation song "Sto Lat" accompanied by teacher Ernst Braun on his guitar. Zsófi Kovács taught English to class 10a and everybody was delighted with her temperament. After a short visit to the water works and sewage works the delegation was invited by mayor Schwind. Mayor Gerhard Beil welcomed the guests: "You've come as colleagues and are leaving as friends" and handed over a typical gift from antique Tabernae: a Roman bowl and a Palatinate tumbler with the emblem of the anniversary celebration of 2004.

Of course the European friends contributed to the programme of the "Open Day" on Jan. 16, 2010. The event had an European touch because they sang songs together and introduced themselves in their home language to the audience. Finnish, Lithuanian and Hungarian can't be heard every day! In between there were reports to make and to coordinate everything via computer. In the end there was a little time left for a short stroll in Karlsruhe. The busy days ended with live-music and a "gemütlich" meal accompanied by head master Pete Allmann and his guitar. Early on Sunday morning it was time to say "good-bye" with lots of knowledge gained and even more emotions in the hearts.

We can conclude: people of different origin have come together, have felt the European spirit and have contributed to the house "Europe". More important than the topic "water" is the personal contact with people. To build Europe it is essential to emphasize what we have in common and not what separates us. Especially "small countries" can contribute a great deal. Now the idea must be promoted at the participants' schools. We are really curious – and optimistic.