

The ninth Chapter of my German Adventures

Maibericht



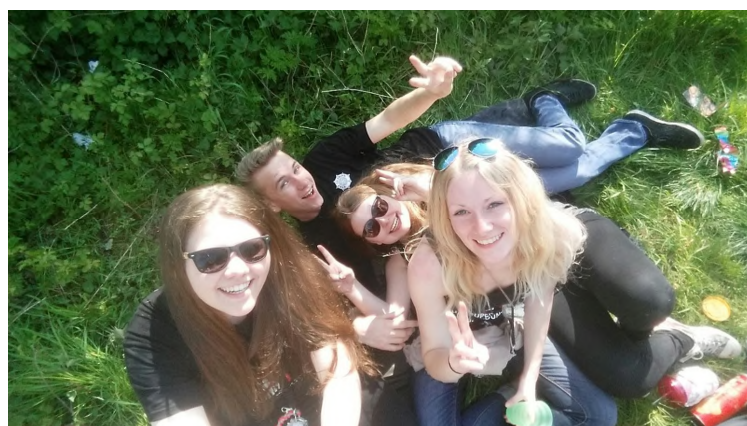
Many things differ between American and German schools. At Albert-Schweitzer-Schule, I have 13 subjects each week: English, Math, Chemistry, Physics, Biology, Rowing, Art, Theater, Sports/PE, Geography/Economics, Politics/Government, German, and Philosophy/Ethics. A regular German student would also have French and maybe Spanish, making that 14 classes. I find the courses are often very different than what I expected; it's surprising how much "Sport" the class actually accomplishes during PE. There are requirements here that don't exist in an American high school, such as International Politics, Economics, and at least two foreign languages, with the third being optional. (As an exchange student, I was allowed to switch out of the obligatory second foreign language and into a rowing class). Two out of three subjects related to the arts are also required from 5th through 10th grade. I have learned to really appreciate the politics and economics courses and feel strongly that a proper understanding of basic political and economic mechanics is of the utmost importance because it ensures educated voters for the future. The ethics course "Werte und Normen" (values and norms of society) is the alternative to the required Religion class. These courses teach students about morals and expose them to historical and current information about different religions. This year we have covered controversial topics like organ donation, assisted suicide, abortion, and death and grief. My experience in this course has been very positive, and the teacher leading it shares his knowledge, gets the class involved in intense discussion and is very good at not projecting his own opinions. I would have never thought of taking such a course, but now that I am in one I find it very intriguing.



This month, throughout the entire country, all 1st to 10th graders take part in the “Bundesjugendspiele” (federal youth games), a national day for the schools to support and encourage youth athleticism. This is different from school-wide US sports events in that every child is required to participate, but there is no direct competition between students. Events are usually focused on track and field such as a 100 meter sprint, a 1 kilometer run, long or high jump, and shot-put (ball pitching for the young ones). In the weeks leading up to these games anyone walking through the school hallways would hear a general undertone of muttering and moaning. The day of the games started with a nice cool morning. Since I was clueless about where to go and what to do, I took the safest course of action and just followed a herd of groggy school kids. When we arrived at the stadium, I met up with my class, the “Klasse 10e”. I learned they are infamous because of their track record - namely that they have never won the class relay race. At this point, I could imagine they would go for a “perfect record” and wouldn't win again. Certainly I wasn't going to be of any help as running is not my strong suit, but someone signed me up anyway. Since the relay race happens at the end after each student checks off the individual stations, I had time to prepare. I got a lot of [non]exercise standing in long lines both to complete the exercise and to get my score afterward. I also learned that because the games are only required through 10th grade, the 11th graders are in charge of working the stations, including writing down your time and score. As we all know, 11th graders are not always the most organized people. For the first two stations I followed a group who happened to be all girls. Not a good decision since the stations were split according to gender - the end result being me standing in the wrong line for 15 minutes before I could do my running. Then I went off looking for my guys from 10e and stuck around with them for the remaining stations. In the end the 100m sprint and the 1km run were my best scores (Note: I'm NOT one of the boys in the picture.) Following the events I visited the “Pommes Bude” (booth) for some fresh and salty fries. These were the best 5 minutes of “Schlange stehen” (standing in line) I had had all day. After that much exercise, I was full of adrenaline, which was just right because later on I went with a friend to a Lumineers concert in Hamburg. This was the perfect ending to a very long day.



With my host family and friends



With friends from school

This last month it has not rained much. From my past visits to Germany with my grandmother, usually in June, my memories include a lot of rainy days and I really enjoy them -- perhaps because I grew up in New Mexico and appreciate any water the sky gives forth to help the earth become green. Even though I love the rain, the recent sunshine-filled days were very inviting for outdoor excursions and especially for “Vatertag” (Father’s Day) which falls on a long weekend thanks to “Himmelfahrt” (Ascension Day). This holiday is celebrated differently than in the US. The adults, parents or not, either go on daylong hikes or “Fahrradtouren” (bike rides) through nature and enjoy the spring. Meanwhile the youth don't tag along but instead get together with their friends and organize their own outing called a “Bollerwagentour” where everyone puts favorite foods, snacks and beverages into a wagon (ours was filled to the brim with some things falling out). They start a walk and are joined along the way by other groups of youth. At the town’s official “Treffpunkt” (meeting point), all the “Bollerwagen” stop, friends greet one another, loud music is

played, food and drink are shared, and then they slowly make their way home. -- In Germany beer is legal to drink at 16 years of age although hard liquor is not legal until 18; so there is some drinking during the day, but everyone is walking and looking out for those who have had too much – something I would have never experienced in the US. -- It seems that fathers are not the focus of “Vatertag” except maybe that they get some peace and quiet for a day when everyone else is out and about.



On the third long weekend in May, over “Pfingsten” (Pentecost), I visited my great-uncle Ernst-Otto and great-aunt Erdmute in Timmerlah, a village near Braunschweig, which is called “Brunswick” in English. Braunschweig is a very beautiful city where you can still see many of the traditional German “Fachwerkhäuser” (wooden beam construction). When I first arrived by train, Ernst-Otto picked me up and led me by bike through the city. I got a great history lesson: In the 12th century, Heinrich der Löwe (Henry the Lion) made Braunschweig his representative city and residence. It became a powerful center of trade and commerce in medieval Germany. Today, with over 252,000 inhabitants, it is the second largest city in Niedersachsen (Lower Saxony) and a major center of scientific research and development. I also heard how much of the old architecture was destroyed in WWII. This resulted in islands of old traditional houses interspersed between the more modern but less attractive buildings of the 1960’s and 70’s. We then biked back home because it was raining and were rewarded by a delicious meal of “norddeutscher weißer Spargel” (northern German white asparagus).





The next day we visited the "Pfingstmarktspektakel" (a medieval market) on the "Burgplatz" (castle square) between Henry the Lion's Dankwarderode castle and the St. Blasii Cathedral that he had built after his Palestine "travels" towards the end of the 12th century. Craftspeople, artists, knights, jesters, musicians, actors, jugglers, dancers – all in medieval costumes – entertain the crowd, and vendors offer delicious food and beverages. I bought some arrowheads from a real traditional blacksmith. This event is perhaps somewhat comparable to the Renaissance Faire in Las Cruces, but it has a totally different atmosphere. I had been to the same festival with my grandmother in 2011, so I have many great memories of the reenactment fights and the wonderful actor troupes performing in front of the impressive castle.



During my two-day stay in Braunschweig, we often biked past a few “Jugendschutzgebiete”, which are sheltered youth parks that are set aside for graffiti artists and skaters. There are also “Sportfelder”, generally areas for youth to come and play together. These areas are a point of great pride for the city. I also learned a lot about the family history on my grandmother’s side from photos Ernst-Otto had collected. Maybe this would have bored other kids, but I found it quite cool. I had so much fun and also enjoyed some really great conversations, including politics -- my favorite.



Schacht Konrad (the old Konrad mine)



Atommüll-Kunst (atomic waste art)

The people in Braunschweig and surrounding areas are very concerned about nuclear energy and the resulting waste because some of the old mines in the region are targeted for nuclear waste end storage. Germany has been going away from nuclear power since the Fukushima Daiichi disaster in 2011 but still has a lot of nuclear waste. We went to see the approved areas, empty mines, which are supposed to store nuclear waste, and Ernst-Otto presented me with the big arguments against them. Having never thought of nuclear waste as a large concern on an environmental and political scale, I was surprised as to how complicated thoughtful consideration of this one problem is.

Now that I have written this May report, I realize how much I have experienced in such a short time. The next two months will certainly also be full of interesting activities in combination with the end of school and some vacation time before I head back to the US end of July. Many wonderful adventures are waiting, I'm sure. “Bis dann” (until then)!

