

Comenius Trip to Ankara

As the John Scottus School wants most of their students and teachers to visit Milan and Athens later on in this project, it was only the coordinator who was travelling to Ankara. Of course he felt extra privileged when he sat in the Air Coach and passed the school and saw some students and teachers entering the building. For him there was no teaching this day and he did not mind too much to travel on his own. Once in Turkey he would meet the other teachers from Greece, Italy and Spain. He only was concerned that he as a Dutchman had to represent Ireland. Would a fifteen-year residential be enough to compensate his shortcomings? Probably not and therefore he decided to buy a typical Irish present for the host school.



Winning Logo

On previous occasions he had bought a bronze “Irish Dancer” to donate. This time he wanted to do the same, but the shop did not have them anymore. Other gifts did not seem to be that suitable. There were enough copies of Saints and High Crosses, but they are not really appropriate for a Moslem country and he did not like a Crystal vase from Waterford. So what to do? Then he remembered that there was another shop in Terminal 2. Being always on the safe side he had plenty of time to go there and try his luck. After a challenging walk through a labyrinth of escalators and roll-ways he arrived at the shop where they had these statues. Fortunately there were two prices on it, one with tax for inside the EU and another (lower) for outside. As he could prove with his boarding pass that he went to Turkey, he claimed the lower price and thought how lucky the Turks are, not to be part of the EU. When he paid the money the shopkeeper asked what he was going to do in Ankara. She started to give him her whole philosophy about education when she heard the reason why he went over. Delighted to know that there was at least one person in Ireland who supported him, he returned to the other terminal. There he bought a photo book about Ireland and now equipped with these attributes, he felt confident enough to be sent away as an ambassador for Ireland.



Host School in Ankara

When he entered the Airport in Istanbul, he was quite surprised that he hardly recognised any features. Airports seem to be the same all over the world. But when he came to the custom officers, he remembered that he had to buy a visa before trying to get through. Now he saw posters everywhere with information about the necessity to get a visa for travellers from certain countries. He could not remember that they were there the previous time. Maybe they had read his report about the Comenius trip to Istanbul and they had decided to warn him this time. So there was no delay and after a short walk to the domestic terminal, he was ready to go to Ankara. But first a cup of coffee and something to eat. Alas, there was no ATM and he had no Turkish pounds. He walked around but found no bank to change. Then he decided to try his luck and see if he could pay with Euros. No problem, the Turks are still eager to receive the European currency.

It was already dark when he arrived in Ankara. He first thought that the Airport was covered with sand, but then he realised that it was snow. Except for the runways, the whole Airport was totally under snow. That was not what he had expected. When you see pictures of Turkey, you mostly watch sunny beaches and colourful landscapes. He realised that he had chosen the wrong coat when he considered what to wear. Maybe it would not be too bad, he thought. But again he made a mistake. He expected someone from the hotel to collect him. As he saw no sign with his name, he decided to look outside. Again there was no one, but now it became clear that it was freezing cold. He wanted to go back inside, but the door was closed and the system did not allow passengers to go back from this side. So now he had a real problem. He could not take a taxi because his hotel had sent a chauffeur to bring him to their place and that man was now probably on his way. He could not contact the hotel from here and it was real cold. He walked to another entrance and saw that he could only get in through the security check. He walked back. No sign. Back again. He now began to feel lonely. At last he decided to go inside through the security and see if he could contact the hotel. The guard was quite helpful and sent him to the information. There he showed his confirmation of the hotel and after some Turkish telephone calls someone arrived with a sign with his name upside down. He felt cold and tired and was happy to go to the hotel in a nice warm car. Once he arrived there he saw Anastasia, the Greek coordinator, and was immediately relaxed. Now he knew that he was at the right place.

The next day a minibus would bring the group of teachers to the school. The people in Turkey seem to take things easy. The bus arrived at a quarter to eleven to bring the group to the school. It was no problem, for all the other teachers were in the same hotel and there was a nice exchange of information. There were the Italians with Anita as coordinator and the headmistress Clara with her husband and Julia with six students. From Palma were Eva, the coordinator, and Carmen and Jolanda. Anastasia had brought another colleague from Greece. The whole company was here on behalf of the EU to study the educational system in Turkey. Not that we were going to decide whether Turkey was going to be admitted to the EU or not, but we still felt quite special. It is a wonderful opportunity to meet teachers and students from different countries in their own work environment.



Coordinator presenting "Irish Dancer"

The Turkish work environment is really interesting for teachers of Europe. There was an enormous show of enthusiasm among the students and teachers when the delegation arrived. Everyone got a decoration with the Comenius logo on it and all the students made pictures and tried to shake hands with the different teachers. The Irish coordinator felt treated as the president of the United States. He only missed the body-guards, but then a teacher from the school goaded him and the other teachers into the office of the headmistress. There he immediately pitied the headmaster of the John Scottus school; such a nice and spacious room she had. She welcomed all of us heartily with tea and native sweets. Once we were all settled, gifts were exchanged and the Irish coordinator presented his "Irish Dancer". After some conversations with different teachers partly in English and partly translated into Turkish and Italian, we started our programme.

Çağıl, our Turkish coordinator, had spent months of work with quite a lot of students to prepare our welcome. Her pupils had made presentations about the Turkish culture, set up an exhibition of traditional music instruments, clothes and places of interest. For her the Comenius activities were really a means of encouraging the children to learn English. The reception of the foreign visitors was a crown on all these efforts. She even had mobilized mothers and other teachers to prepare a copious lunch. The Irish coordinator got worried about two things: a. how to avoid putting on too much weight during this trip and b. how to organise a welcome in Dublin that could match this one. He knew that he probably would lose both challenges, but he still felt happy for he realised how important this event was for all the people who had been involved in this process.



Italian Headmistress painting

Some Italian students really got inspired and were happy to continue the activity while the teachers were going to discuss the next meeting.

In the afternoon we all started with a wall-painting. The art teacher gave some instructions and handed out plastic gloves, brushes and oil paint. Some people were concerned about their suits and preferred to make pictures of the activity. Of course that was not accepted and they also had to participate. Cautiously the Irish teacher did a bit of painting, but he was afraid to explain to his wife why there was green paint on his jacket and after five minutes he gave up. Glad that no damage was done to his clothes.

Meetings are always difficult. But meetings with teachers from different countries and different languages are extremely arduous. Not that there was no good will. On the contrary there was a strong motivation to get things settled quickly, but a lot had to be translated into Italian and Turkish, this caused comments and these had to be translated, and of course these caused comments which had to be translated and so on. At a certain stage the English language was not used at all and the Irish teacher felt completely excluded. The Italians and the Spanish and the Greek teachers did seem to understand each other in a common language that he did not know. Nevertheless in the end we came to some agreements. Then we had to stop the meeting for the students were going to show us a play and some dances. Again it was obvious that they had spent a lot of time to perfect their performances. It was all of high quality.

At the end of the day the whole school assembled in front of the flag. It did take a while before everyone was lined up, but then a teacher started to sing the National Anthem and all the pupils and teachers joined in. The flag was raised and there was a moment of united attention. For teachers from Ireland and other countries this might seem to be very nationalistic. Also the pictures of Kemal Ataturk in all the schools and government buildings are for them of this nature. Those teachers are not used to these rituals and do not value them that much. The Turks however are proud of their nationality and it does bind the country. In Western Europe we have lost much of this feeling and it has weakened our societies in some ways, but it also has opened up new means of coexistence. It is a challenge to get the balance right between the benefit of the Nation and the service of the World. Comenius exchange programs can help us to become more aware of this problem.



Exhibition of Traditional Dresses

In the evening we first went to a Citadel with an interesting exhibition about Turkestan. There were a lot of traditional scenes of a rural society. Although people did not travel that much hundred years ago, it seems that life was more or less the same all over Europe. People were working on the field, baking bread, sewing, marrying, feasting and suffering. Local variations are evident, but the underlying common pattern was quite similar. Yet, for a display the differences are more important, for they show the reality of life. This also occurs with food. People are eating food all over the world, but it makes a huge difference what and how food is taken in. In Turkey an evening meal is a cultural happening. We went to a restaurant where live music was accompanying the meal. Some people immediately started to dance and sing when they entered the place. As the Irish coordinator normally eats his super in front of the television, he preferred to do the same here. Just sit, watch and eat! But if you are in a big company with forceful people, you find yourself doing things that you would not have thought of on your own. They got him on the dance-floor and he had to join them if he liked it or not. He overcame his resistance quite rapidly and enjoyed the evening as a cultural event.

The next day the program did not start too early so the Irish coordinator decided to walk around in the centre of Ankara. He wanted to buy a nail cutter for one of his nails was broken. Normally you find in Turkey a lot of bazaars where they sell these articles in abundance. This time he walked in the neighbourhood of the hotel and saw only DIY-shops. Everywhere on the street lay washbasins, gas pipes, timber etc. Turkey is economically booming. They make a lot of money with building activities at home and abroad. The coordinator was wondering if these builders never broke a nail. At last he found a shop where he could buy what he wanted. He had to point at his broken nail to show what he wanted. Sign language is fortunately universal.



Traditional Turkish Lunch with music

The following day we started our tour with a visit to Hamamönü. This area is a replica of an Ottoman quarter. There are a lot of studios for artists and musicians. We visited places where painters, calligraphers and potters were demonstrating their crafts. Especially the painting of patterns of coloured paper in a liquid was quite interesting. Also some

musicians were playing traditional music in one of the buildings. The whole place is set up as a tourist attraction, but it gives you a nice impression of life in ancient Turkey. There is a house where the author of the National Anthem composed his work. An old mosque and a traditional tavern complete the concept. After a Lunch with more folk music some people wanted to go to a shopping mall. The Irish coordinator was absolutely not interested in this activity and once he got an opportunity to escape the bazaar he went to a Haman. His previous visit was not a success and so he decided to try it again. This time he enjoyed the massage and he understood why these hamans are so popular in Turkey. The masseur rubbed off all the old cells of his epidermis and after the washing with bubble soap, he felt reborn like a snake which had crept out of his old skin. On his way to the hotel he saw all kind of stalls with nail cutters in all sizes and colours. He just walked along realising that he had taken the wrong direction when he was looking for them.



Comenius group in front of Mausoleum of Kemal Atatürk

The first visit on the next day was to the tomb of Kemal Atatürk. Some of the teachers were walking around with mixed thoughts. You want to respect the feelings of your host country and especially the adoration of the Turkish people for the “Father of the Turks” is impressive. It is obvious that this man has created current Turkey and that he really has done a great job to restore the self-confidence of the Turks after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. He was the Michael Collins in the Turkish War of Independence. Turkey was attacked by different countries who were dividing the land in different spheres of influence.

Atatürk started a war against the different occupiers and ultimately at the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 the Turkish Republic was acknowledged as a sovereign state. He changed the country into a modern secular country. Everywhere you see his statues and his political slogans. His tomb is like a Pyramid for a pharaoh. Every day thousands of visitors pay a visit to this place and they make this location a symbol of the Turkish state. The change of the guard of honours is a spectacular ritual. For foreigners it all seems a bit over the top, but a most Turks are very proud of this monument.

Lunch was on a barge in a lake near Ankara. The place was an astonishing spot. The lake was completely frozen and covered with ice and snow. The reed tufts and the little canals made it a Dutch winter scene. Inside the barge was an old stove and the setting of tables and chairs showed that this was a restaurant. The only food was fish with bread. The vegetarian was too hungry to stick to his principle. He also had a sandwich with cooked fish. The environment reminded him of his youth and he felt quite relaxed.

During a short visit to a mosque, where the women were separated from the men, we had to take off our shoes. We got an impression of the practices of religious life. Some men were reading the Koran at a small table in a corner. Others were sitting on their knees and were praying. There was a pulpit but there was no imam preaching at that time. So the whole atmosphere was quite peaceful. Afterwards there was more time for shopping. It was quite cold and most people preferred to go back to the hotel. This time we had supper in the hotel without music and most teachers were quite happy not to leave the hotel in the evening. They had seen enough and wanted to sleep early.

On the last day we went back to the school. The children and teachers welcomed us as good friends. While the students were doing some activities, the teachers started to discuss the organisation of the trip to Milan. Needless to say that the meeting followed the same pattern as the first one. Ultimately we came to some decisions and the rest will be dealt with by email. Long live modern communication means. A Greek teacher and an Irish teacher had expected to visit a famous Archeological Museum. There had been no time the previous days as all museums close at four o'clock. They were really disappointed and wanted to sneak out for a short visit. They did not want to embarrass the hosts, but they felt that they would miss a golden opportunity. This museum of the



Archeological Museum with statues of Hittites

Hittites is unique in the world and was well worth to see. They got permission to go and they took a taxi. The driver did not speak a word of English and he had no idea where to bring us. After studying the written address and some mobile calls he brought us near the place where we had been the previous day. Close to the hotel. Afterwards he consulted some other taxi drivers and then he dropped us in front of the museum. Once inside, we knew that we had done the right thing. The stone carvings and the bronze objects were really authentic. As a matter of fact both teachers appreciated this museum as the best tourist attraction.



Turkish Dancers surrounded by teachers

Another taxi brought them back to school. The address was written on a sheet of paper and again the driver was able to find the school after some consultation with other taxi drivers. The group had been working with felt and was now watching a show of dancers. First two lads, dressed up as a small man and woman, with a head drawn on their bellies and their heads covered with a scarf, performed a funny dance. Their legs were only up to the knees and fake arms and shoulders reached to the height of their belt. It took a while to find out what the secret

of the strange effect was. Then they showed a Dervish dance. These dances are meant to bring the person in a state of higher consciousness. They seem to be simple turning movements, but there is a lot of philosophic knowledge behind it and those dances do exist for centuries. It is a real part of the Turkish culture.

After the performance there was a party with a huge cake to celebrate the successful end of the exchange programme. Children were dancing, teachers were eating and talking. Everyone was quite happy to share the harmony in which the exchange had taken place. Once you meet other people in a common activity, you feel directly connected and you forget the differences. You feel at home. The Turkish school presented every coordinator a photo frame with a felt design of flags from the five countries. More photos were taken. Speeches delivered. Hugs and kisses given. No one found it easy to say good bye. But we know that we will see each other shortly in Milan and we hope that this trip will be equally successful. Thank you Turkey. We will gratefully remember you.

The Comenius group.

