

In order to prepare a new Comenius Project for our school the coordinator went to Milan in the Midterm to meet colleagues from Palma de Mallorca, Athens, Ankara and Milan, with the purpose of organising an exchange programme about our Western Civilisation based on the contributions of the different Nations in the past. The “Time Machine” will bring us back to the glorious periods in history, when our countries were actively involved in the development of European culture. Turkey is going to present a programme related to the origins of their people. Greece will give us insight in the start of Philosophy, Democracy and Freedom in Ancient Time. Ireland will go back to its Golden Age when the scholars and saints cultivated the Classical knowledge and brought it back into Western Europe. Italy will revive the Renaissance in the person of Leonardo da Vinci and Spain will look into the Future and consider how we should prepare ourselves for this challenge.

Most of these ideas had already been discussed in the preparatory meeting last February in Palma and we were all delighted that the European Commission approved our concept and that our National Agencies donated the money to make this programme possible. Still we had a lot of issues to resolve. The main coordinator of Spain, who had set up this project, got a job in another school and a fellow teacher had to take over. None of the Turkish teachers had been present at the first meeting and therefore they came over to speak with us about their ideas. Thus it was useful to come together to finalise the whole project for the next two years.

We were all received cordially by the Coordinator and the Headmistress in their fabulous school where students can study Design and Fashion. An Art exhibition was being prepared at that time and we immediately got a nice taste of what is going on there. Nine hundred students are walking around here daily, but the building is so spacious, that you hardly notice them. After coffee with delicious Italian sweets and cakes, we started our conversations. Needless to say that it did take some time to tune in, but there was an intension to work together and we really came to quite a few agreements. Fixing the dates for the visits was the most difficult one. Holidays are different in every country and even with good will it did not seem possible.

After consultation with headmasters, we reached a compromise on the first three visits. The rest will come later. Our host had already done a lot of work with her class. Her students had designed a logo for this project and had composed a travel guide about Milan. They gave a presentation of their work and then they showed us their school. I was really impressed by the quality of the Fashion and their practical skills of drawing, photography and computerised designing. I felt totally lost. I realised that this is a world which I do not know at all. One of the English teachers grabbed the opportunity to enliven her class by asking me to speak about Ireland. She said she wanted to make a proposal to me. I tried to escape by saying that I was already married, but she did not give up so easily. And so I was teaching again in my holidays. The class was listening well, but the teacher asked me to speak more slowly. It is always the same problem with learning a language. If people who speak their mother tongue could reduce to half of the speed, acquiring a language would be much easier. I experienced the same with Spanish and Italian. I picked up quite a few words, but at the time that I tried to make sense of it, the speaker had already moved on. But this lady was a good teacher and she stopped me a few times and asked the class if they had followed my story. They showed great interest, but they did not find it easy to ask questions. The European Union encourages us to participate also in social

events. All the teachers like this part of the programme best. A nice meal was organised in one of the many Pizzerias in Milan. The Italians have really exported their culinary fashion all over the world and if I had to give one example of the benefits of cultural exchange, this would be a most convincing one. Where in Europe do you find a country without pizzas? The meal was fresh and well prepared with some Italian liquids. Of course the costs had to be shared and when the waiter gave the total bill to the headmistress, I knew that we were in trouble. She wanted at least five different receipts. The head waiter was explaining the impossibility of this request. I was not able to follow the conversation in Italian, (again too quick) but I immediately sensed that this man was lost. The headmistress explained in a nice and gently way that it could be done. I noticed that the waiter was gradually losing terrain. He took the bill back and returned ten minutes later with a separate receipt for all of us. These are the qualities that you need as a Head of a school! I think, she should become the new president of Italy after her retirement and bring the country back to order.

Of course there was the usual sightseeing and shopping. Not too much to report on. As we expect to visit Milan with a group of students and teachers in May 2012 you will hear more about the city and its population. I at least had a great Midterm there and hope that we can work together the next two years to make this Comenius programme successful. All students, teachers and parents who want to participate in this project are most welcome. Please, be open and alert to join certain activities, for this is a golden opportunity to experience Europe in a positive way. I know that the EU is at threat at the moment, but like the saint and scholars of Ireland's Golden Age, we should cultivate our common heritage. It is too precious to surrender it to the financial world.