

Germany, Poland, SLUBFURT

Since 1999, Michael Kurzwelly's project "Slubfurt" has analyzed factors which both divide and unite the two cultures on either side of the Oder/Odra. On an academic level, the *Sprachenzentrum* at the European University Viadrina strives both to study and to celebrate different cultures and languages. In the 2006-07 Winter Semester, 25 students attended Dr. David James Prickett's English course "Germany, Poland, SLUBFURT." The seminar is an attempt to bridge academic and artistic/community interest in "Slubfurt" by researching (reading skills), discussing (oral skills), and presenting (written and oral skills) cultural analyses in English. We also investigated ideas on how to best promote SLUBFURT to the English-speaking world. Six essays from the course follow.

"The Debate about a Center against Expulsions"

Anita Gotovac

After a long period of unrest, Erika Steinbach, a German politician, proposed building a center against expulsions in Berlin. It "[...] is to be devoted to victims of forced deportations" (449). At first, it seems to be a good idea. The goal is to help the effected persons to deal with the past. People have a chance to get to know what really happened in their native countries without being influenced by political propaganda. The center might even help to reunite separated families. Historical studies say that every fourth German is affected by the border shift and the expulsions that followed. Thus, it is understandable to locate this center in Berlin. Nevertheless, there are a lot of reasons not to locate it in Germany.

If the center were built in Berlin, "wounds might be reopened" (458): the traditional victims of World war II want to avoid German attempts to reconstitute themselves as a "community of victims" of World War II, which was perpetrated by the Nazi regime. Poland's President Kaczynski and other opponents were opposed to the Berlin location, fearing that the roles of victims and culprits could be reversed and that it would neglect the victimization of people in Poland.

Still there is too much distrust towards Germany. Would it help to remind the concerned people of cruelties done to them by the Nazis? Besides, 61% of interviewed Poles expect Germany to demand former German territory in Silesia back. On account of the new German-Russian friendship (pipeline), the Poles might have a historical *deja-vu* and might be reminded of Stalin. He tricked Poland with Germany and vice versa. Probably Kaczynski's election campaign and the debate about a center against expulsion in Berlin were linked to a rise in the anti-German sentiment.

Another possibility is to build such a center in memory of the expulsions in whole Europe in Sarajevo or Strasbourg. To my mind, that would be the best solution to the debate. Less people would be offended and a lot more victims or relatives could share their experience. So why not reunite them all? A debate about such center in Berlin can start when all the prejudices and the distrust are gone.

“German-Polish Relations: A Tragedy without a Happy End?”

Mathias Löhnert

Repression, destruction, six millions victims of death, fear, hopelessness and a new threat from the east: this is the result in Poland after the Second World War, which was caused by the Germans. It started with the German attack on Poland on 1 September 1939 when the Nazis carried out horrible atrocities on Polish soil. After the war, the Poles expelled and killed the Germans in the east. Considering all that happened, it seems to be impossible that Germans and Poles can reconcile their differences. In this essay, I want to show arguments that enable and also hinder German-Polish reconciliation.

If we have a look back in history, we can see that Poles and Germans slowly approached each other after the Second World War. It started with the correspondence “We forgive and ask for forgiveness” between Polish and German bishops in October and November 1965. The Warsaw Treaty and the Moscow Treaty (in 1970) are also good examples for the slow rapprochement of both countries.

The relationship was and has been poisoned for generations. Older people still have the image of the old enemy in their minds. Wrong stereotypes like “all Germans are racists” or “Poles are thieves” hinder reconciliation. Therefore, healing of the old wounds seems to be impossible.

Nevertheless, there are people in Poland and Germany who are trying to achieve this. For example, the Polish-German Youth Office enables 130,000 young people a year to take part in a German-Polish exchange program. Polish pupils can visit German schools, and vice versa. The Goethe Institute, Inter Nations, and the German Historical Institute want to get the Polish people interested in German history and culture. A further paradigm is the Viadrina European University in Frankfurt (Oder) where German and Polish students learn and celebrate together.

In conclusion, it can be said that many steps were made in the past. I think the process of reconciliation is not finished yet. A key for a good relationship between Germany and Poland is overcoming stereotypes and mutual ignorance. In my opinion, especially the young people should fight for this by being open and interested in their neighbours.

Source: Reiche, S. “German-Polish Reconciliation.” *Informationen zur politischen Bildung*, “Polen”, 2001.

“The 'Apartment Exchange': A Way to Eliminate German-Polish Stereotypes?”

Ola Marchewka

The 'Apartment Exchange' project took place during summer term 2004 and was organised by M. Kurzwelly—the creator of the Slubfurt initiative. Both German and Polish students who took part in the project were obliged to move to the dormitory on the other side of Oder. It was a great possibility to experience an interesting adventure and get to know new people. However, did it really help eliminate German-Polish stereotypes? In this essay, I will try to find the answer to this question.

Stereotypes unfortunately have a big influence on relations between nations, especially those with such a complicated history as Germany and Poland. Furthermore, they often have nothing in common with reality. One of the possible

solutions to this problem is getting to know each other better in order to avoid superficial opinions. This project provides this possibility.

On one hand, living in somebody else's apartment gives you the ability to get to know everyday life on the other side of the river. For one week, the participants of this project were surrounded by foreign language and culture. It was a great occasion to learn by experience the differences and similarities between German and Polish students. In addition, they could collect more information about the other country.

On the other hand, if one is prejudiced, it is hard to change the stereotypical way of thinking about the other country. What is more, such a person will find evidence proving his or her opinion. Slubice is smaller than Frankfurt, and in dormitories, you have to share your room with another student. There are many parties organised in the dorms – because of that, the stereotype about Polish alcoholism could be maintained.

However, in my opinion, this project has far more advantages than weak points. Based on the information presented above, such projects can improve the relations between Germany and Poland. Living in somebody else's apartment is very intimate – you can meet the other culture from 'inside'. Based on the very positive feedback from participants of this project, I think this project does a lot in order to eliminate stereotypes. Even if they might be supported, it is better to experience it for oneself, than to give standardized opinions without knowing about the topic at all.

“The Apartment Exchange Project: Is it a Good Possibility to Improve Polish-German Relations?”

Agata Moczarna

In this essay, I will try to prove that The Apartment Exchange Project is an good idea and has many positive consequences. After the first project, which took place in June 2004, both the participants and the leaders were very satisfied with the results. That was surely the reason for the second project. It is being prepared by AStA (General Student Committee) and starts this semester.

To begin with, I would like to explain how the leaders came to the idea of preparing such a project. The main reason concerns the situation at the Europa-Viadrina University, which the public sees as having a German-Polish character. However, in reality, this looks completely different. Polish students often spend their free-time together and Germans are often in their own company. The language is thereby surely the substantial factor that influences the relationship between them. The most often used language is German and there are only few German students who speak Polish. Another reason is that the majority of Germans live in Frankfurt (or in Berlin) and Poles live in Slubice. This distance does not help maintain close contact.

The leader created the project in order to eliminate the communication gap between these two nations. During a week, the participants had possibility to see what everyday life on the other side of Oder looks like. They were surrounded by a foreign language and culture. Obviously, it was a great opportunity to make new friends with neighbors, and thanks to that, the integration between the two nations could be improved.

In addition, during the temporary residence in their partner's apartment, the Poles had opportunity to practice their German skills and Germans may have been

encouraged to start learning Polish. The other positive aspect of the project was the possibility to eliminate Polish-German stereotypes. The best way to get to know people better is simply living with them for some time.

In sum, The Apartment Exchange Project is, in my opinion, an excellent idea to bring Poles and Germans closer. Even though the experiences of each side could be different, they would not have learned as many details about their neighbor's way of living without taking part in this project. I hope that second project will also be as successful as the first.

"German-Polish Relations at Viadrina: How "Effective" Is "Slubfurt"?"

Nadine Peißker

In 1991, the Alma Mater Viadrina University was re-established as Viadrina European University. The Viadrina cultivates close cooperation with the Adam-Mickiewicz-University in Poznan, Poland. The two universities organize the Collegium Polonicum, located opposite the Viadrina on the Polish side of the Oder River in Slubice. This partnership sets a great value on Polish-German cooperation in science. In aspect to the German-Polish relation, the city of Slubice is important because of its history and close geographical location. "Slubfurt" is a nickname for Slubice and Frankfurt. "Slubfurt's" bridge symbolizes a mental and intellectual cooperation between different European traditions of culture and science. "Slubfurt" is effective with reference to German-Polish relations at Viadrina University.

Firstly, a main focus of the educational program is to attract students from everywhere in Europe in order to create an international student body. Polish-German relations at Viadrina are important as approximately 29% of all Viadrina's students are from Poland. This increasing internationality causes a kind and open atmosphere among the students.

Secondly, students have a certain interest and pay attention to the different cultures of their fellow students. The European connection between the faculties of Economics, Law and Cultural Studies is becoming more important than it had ever been before. Tolerance, trust, understanding and curiosity about different lifestyles are valued by students because of the cross-border campus.

A long time after World War II, Poles and Germans have been confronted with their common history. The past caused a difficult relationship between the older generations for half a century and consequently, the relations between Poland and Germany were tense. However, the relations have improved incredibly, especially since the end of the Warsaw Pact. For instance, Poland placed a trust in German understanding for their concerns as a new EU member. Relations between the countries can be improved by Viadrina helping to correct existing stereotypes on both sides. The cross-border Polish-German campus stimulates discussion and supports the correction of those stereotypes, which is just a standardized image and superficial perception. Viadrina's students are directly confronted with each other and have to deal with the past and present discrepancies.

I come to the conclusion that there are difficulties that have crept into German-Polish relations on the political level, but Germans and Poles are really way ahead of the politicians. This is what we can especially see in "Slubfurt". Frankfurt and Slubice are two cities in two different countries with different cultures, traditions and languages, yet both share one disastrous history. Nevertheless, "Slubfurt" has grown

together and it seems like one city which is a perfect place to get over existing prejudices and stereotypes and make international friends.

"German–Polish Stereotypes: What Are They and How True Are They?"

Maria Reckliess

“The collective memory in its simplified form portrays Germans in the eyes of Poles as expansionist economical exploiters, ruthless murderers, and arrogant self-righteous fascists or crypto-fascists. The Poles in German eyes have been seen as inefficient, morally corrupt, lazy and disorganized and inferior in every field of State – building, culture economy and social / political organization.”

In this essay, I would like to point out some wide-spread German-Polish stereotypes and concentrate on the question if they are currently veracious or not. First of all, a stereotype is an oversimplified and fixed image of all members of a culture or group (based on race, religion, ethnicity, age, gender, national origins).ⁱⁱ Usually, we develop stereotypes when we are unwilling to obtain all the information we would need to make fair and objective judgments about a country and its people.

German-Polish stereotypes have originated in history, especially in the Second World War and its incidents. The Nazi-regime was characterized by a superior feeling, meaning that Germans were very possessive and did not accept the loss of territory to any other “inferior” neighboring countries (e.g., Poland). Therefore, Poles were banished, discriminated, humiliated, and murdered. Besides, Poland always had an unfavorable political location between two great powers: Germany (in the west) and Russia (in the east). That caused a military struggle, the loss of Polish independence and political instability (after the third partition in 150 years [1795–1918]).

In consideration of the extreme negative situations and the terrible memories and associations, German-Polish relations are still difficult, especially for the older generation. Nowadays, from the perspective of Germans, Poles are regarded as thieves, unemployed, poor and quarrelsome people. Dirt, alcoholism, chaos, smuggling and black markets are wide-spread associations, too. From the perspective of Poles, Germans are beer-drinking, cold, unfriendly, intolerant, insensitive and bureaucratic people. Besides, they enjoy having orders and rules in every area of life.

Are these prejudices really true? With the help of two examples, I will briefly try to give an answer on that. Obviously, the favorite drink of the Germans is beer. According to DHS-statistics, one German drinks 116 liters a year, but a Czech consumes 160 liters in the same period (!)ⁱⁱⁱ Based on the confiscations of the (worldwide) custom inspections in the year 2005, China smuggles the most (35, 80%). Poland is far away from that (0, 59%).^{iv}

In my point of view, the preceding passage is sufficient to prove that German-Polish stereotypes are generalized and superficial images. To guard us against such narrow-minded thinking, we should always be critical of information we get from others about a specific culture. Moreover, we all have to confess and correct mistakes if certain assumptions were not true.

“The deepest sin against the human mind is to believe things without evidence.”
Huxley, Thomas Henry (1825–1895)^v

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ⁱ Fure.

ⁱⁱ www.english_dept.tripod.com (26.11.06 – 22:52)

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