

## **OBW Report by Alisa Tazhitdinova**

University of Western Ontario - Universität Ulm, 2007-2008.

Last year I went on exchange to Universität Ulm in Ulm, Germany. It was a very rich, busy year. Overall, I can say I became more independent, more self-confident and more open-minded.

Germany was a very hospitable country. International office did an amazing job ensuring that students have a very comfortable experience upon arrival. My housing was arranged prior to coming to Germany; a German tutor met me when I arrived in Ulm and helped me move in. During the next few days we successfully went through all bureaucratic necessities and I was free to enjoy my stay in Europe. Given that my language skills upon arrival were very low, it would have been a very challenging experience otherwise!

The biggest challenge of this year was school. I finished my first undergraduate year at Moscow State University and my second at University of Western Ontario. Knowing the differences between these two systems I expected to be very comfortable at German University. Well, it wasn't all that easy. I definitely like and prefer the freedom that German Universities provide their students with: almost no necessity for registration for courses, no attendance check, no required homeworks to hand in: your grade is 100% dependent on your final exam. So all I had to do (in most of my courses) is to achieve 50% of all homework marks in order to be admitted to the final exam – easy as I thought! Being, in my faithful opinion =), a very diligent student I feel very comfortable in such environment and have no problems with self-control. But how surprised I was, when I tried to do my very first homework! I did one third of it as usual – fast and easy. But that was the end of the easy part. For the remaining two thirds I had to work really-really hard. Main reason for that was, that while Canadian courses have student-friendly and thorough textbooks available, as well as lecture material is somewhat connected with assigned homeworks, in Mathematics courses in Ulm it was nothing like that. Lectures were always extremely theoretical and homeworks usually very practical. There were no “helpful” textbooks available in the library: the ones on the shelves were simply the more precise copy of my lecture notes, and book store was hardly any better. And it seemed as fellow German students just do not need them. I got a little bit worried the very first week. But as time went by and as I met more German students and talked to them, I realized that we were all in the same boat. They experienced same difficulties but were simply used to this different way of studying! I adjusted rather fast and succeeded in all of my courses with very decent grades. This particular experience taught me to be more self-confident. It was difficult in the beginning, but now I have the confidence that with hard work any problem can be solved, especially school-related!

I have also realized that knowing German upon arrival isn't that necessary (though it makes life WAY easier!) Most students and professors speak very decent English which makes it easier to communicate in the beginning. It is definitely preferable to know the basics of the language before going on exchange; however, with some motivation and commitment to learning German over the year, I wouldn't discourage students from going simply due to their language skills. In Ulm there are several programs that include courses conducted in English, for example, some mathematics, management, engineering, advanced materials and some other courses. They are usually master-level but can be accessible to undergraduates as well. I think an intensive summer German course prior to departure should be sufficient for a successful year in Germany provided a student will work on language skills over the year. It is all about motivation and area of study. My judgement is, perhaps, somewhat biased since I was taking Mathematics courses: formulas definitely help understand the idea. On the other hand, there is always a tendency for extensive professional jargon in lectures, so the required

vocabulary might not be that big after all. I just think it is a pity that so few science students go on exchange to Germany: Germany has great opportunities for undergraduate and graduate studies in sciences and for internships! Yet very few science students study foreign languages or, in their opinion, their language proficiency is too low and thus they never consider going on exchange to non-English-speaking countries.

In the beginning of the year I was somewhat worried to “be stuck” in a smaller town and smaller university. Right now, however, I can reassure most students that smaller towns and universities aren’t bad when you are going on exchange. After all, most of us hang out with a same group of people and go to same places most of the times. Nice part of exchange in Ulm was that there were just a few Americans or Canadians, thus I had an opportunity to meet more Germans and ERASMUS students. Due to the size of Ulm, it was very easy to find my way around the town, I never felt “lost”. Ulm has a very nice “strategic” position: very convenient for travelling. There are two major airports nearby – Stuttgart and München. And DB trains are available at all times! So I did a lot of travelling during last year and that was, perhaps, the highlight of my exchange!

Over the year and, most likely, due to my extensive travelling, I realized that Germany was the best exchange destination for me. I found life in Germany extremely comfortable and a lot similar to Canada. I haven’t run into a lot of misunderstandings or across major stereotypes. I was surprised in the beginning that very few Germans have a somewhat clear idea of where Ontario or Toronto is. Having thought of that more carefully, I had to admit to myself, that I never heard of Baden-Württemberg before either =). Most people were very, very and VERY friendly whenever I would mention that I come from Canada. From the funny questions I can remember being asked once if all police officers in Canada ride horses. I said, “Yes, especially when they are catching you for speeding =)”. Besides that, the general idea of Canada is “country where it is very cold”, just like Russia though =). Most students were surprised to hear that temperatures in Toronto area are similar to ones in Germany.

All in all, I would recommend to anybody to go on exchange to Germany, and/or more specifically to Ulm.

The reasons are:

- Germany is a very hospitable country;
- International offices at host universities usually arrange accommodation prior to arrival (which saves A LOT of nerves);
- level of university courses is very high;
- method of studying is very different (which is very good experience, can be very challenging);
- studying in Germany gives an opportunity to learn a language;
- central location in Europe, thus, easy travelling opportunities.

Ulm is great because:

- International office is very helpful;
- depending on area of study, Ulm offers a nice selection of courses, both German and English courses are available;
- numerous language courses are available: both German and other languages (for free!!!);
- not “overpopulated” with exchange students from North America;
- nice, not very expensive town with highest church in the world =)