

Erasmus+ project „The Children of Sheherazade“

Germany – Year 1 (2021–22) – Storyteller’s Report

School: GGS Düppelstraße, Aachen, Germany

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Entering the class room on the second of November 2021 twenty four pair of eyes turned to the door and looked at me curiously. We all were wearing masks and so all I could see were big eyes and hair long or short. We were about to start the storytelling project „The children of Sheherazade“. I walked into the room and joined the class room teacher Mrs. Kathleen von Scheven in front of the black board. She introduced me as „Mrs. Sommer“ and then left to sit down next to one pupil. Now it was up to me to explain who I am: an artist living in Germany and the USA for the last 40 years, then explaining the art – my art – of storytelling, and why I am here now: an introduction of our project followed ending with the words that I would be coming from now on nearly every Tuesday for the next 3 years.

24 pairs of eyes continued to look at me either curiously or astounded or frowning. Total silence followed my words, no whispering, no questions were asked nothing at all. I felt at a loss but then I had an idea. I wanted to give them a choice as well as get their consent. I opened all the windows, asked the two first rows of kids to move their desks backwards. I then removed my mask (distancing for more then 4 meters and air flow allowed me to take these actions) and began to tell an old fairy tale. „The crystal ball“ one of the collected ones of the Brothers Grimm. After I finished and had put back on my mask and said: „That is part of our project. If you liked listening to this story let me know by rising your thumbs up into the air if not turn your thumps to the floor and then maybe we should not do this project!“ 24 thumbs went up. I felt relieved. Now we truly could begin.

I explained that in the first year we – the other storytellers in our partner classes – would pick up wonder tales from all the nationalities which are represented in a class. So each of them have to tell me their name, which languages they know or speak at home and and a bit about themselves. That took a long time as most to them had a hard time to express themselves. 5 had less then rudimentary speaking skills in German, 4 understood hardly anything although they had listened vividly. With the help of class mates, their teacher and translation they understood then what to do and were able to say their name and name their country.

Sixteen nationalities are represented in this class: Turkey, Syria, Czech Republic, Kamerun, Serbia, Rumania, Bulgaria, Russia, Hungary, Vietnam, Spain, Poland, Croatia, Algeria, South Sudan, Kurdistan (2 children explained that this is their country although it doesn’t exist anymore because of war)

Now our „normal“ sequence continued. They were allowed to go outside and run around the court yard – allowed with their masks on. Something that would happen after each telling. On return I told them that it was now up to them to express themselves, by drawing a picture and pick something of the tale they heard. But what it was they decided for themselves. All of their pictures would be collected and turned into a fairy tale picture book at the end of the school year. Each child would create his/her very own book.

I had laid out paper, crayons and colored pencils on their desks while they were outside. But a few told me that they have nice colored pencils themselves and don't need mine. They showed them to me ever so proud. And then they started. Well not all of them though. One little boy Benjamin from Hungary said he did not have an idea. So I told the class, that sometimes if one did not have an idea one would get one when seeing something. So they could walk around the class room looking at the pictures of the others to get inspired. As our hours differ from the normal sessions we would be doing things differently as well. Here copying is seen as a good thing. One idea starts another. It is like telling an old tale. It doesn't belong to me but when I tell it it takes on my way of being. We discussed then that all of their pictures are inspired by their own minds. If we go to the land of the fairies everything is possible and no picture will get the attribution good or bad. Imagination rules here. And fantasy can't be judged.

Some observations about some children.

Well Benjamin didn't get an inspiration. He sat in front of his blank paper and sulked. Well you do not have to draw! I told him it just would be nice. The girl sitting next to him took his paper and drew some grass on it. He then added a few more blades. Fine with me, if you are fine with that! He nodded. That went on for good 2 month. Since then he draws after having heard a tale. „I have ideas“ he told me. Was his fantasy awakened?

Continuing to walk around the class room Mrs. van Scheeven and I looked at what the pupils were doing, praising them, or listening to their stories, about what they were drawing. I then noticed one little boy in the first row who just sat motionless in front of his paper. Badr from Syria said that he did not like to draw. He insisted in not liking it with 3 words. He understood German quite well but could hardly express himself. He came to Germany a year ago. I looked at him and saw him grinning a bit. Well this little guy is making that up I thought to myself. „Would you like to make a cartoon or a sketch!“ I asked. He shrugged his shoulders. „Did you like the tale?“ He nodded his head. „Well let's make a deal. I will tell a story and you listen. But then you have to draw something even just one single object from the tale. OK?“ Another nod. It turned out that he is a fine painter and draws great pictures. His favorite objects are houses. This little interface took place all year long. I don't like drawing! I know you do! And a wonderful picture will unfold with more and more details while the year was progressing and his German got better and better.

Alexander from Poland has very good language skills, listens avidly and partakes often during the telling, which is fine with me. His pictures are another story. They are dripping with blood. He explains that often one of the super heroes – he puts them into his drawings – are needed to help the person in the tale. Their weapons are important to kill all enemies because there are monsters everywhere even if I did not talk about them. A lot of them are invisible. One of his pictures differs. The one before Christmas: a wonder tale from the Elsass where a poor family with the help of two trees find the Christmas fairy who gives them presents for the children and decoration for the tree. His tree trimmings were red globes and a warm fire in the fire place to keep them all warm. After the break he returned to his „normal pictures: weapons and blood and sometimes a super hero“.

Sara Maria loves to draw. Great colourful pictures emerge full of details off the specific tale. When she introduced herself she said she is „arabic“. It was in March when she told me that she wants a tale from her country and that she is from Algeria. Nobody had this information about the family so far.

Asli a little Roma girl who grew up in Bulgaria and Turkey. She speaks three languages so far: Romani, Turkish and Bulgarian but unfortunately little German. She communicated with me often per hand signals. From the beginning she loved the story telling classes, greeting me from the 2nd time on with the heart signal and saying good bye likewise. She drew from the beginning one scene: a couple getting married in a meadow. The first 10 pictures were all the same but then she started to add something from the tale: a color which was mentioned, a flower. After observing this I tried to put into each story something that she could add. Maybe the color of a ribbon in the girls hair, a colour of a dress, the long hair of the young man. She picked it up but stayed herself: a meadow with a couple getting married.

The tales of the first year

„The crystal ball“ Brother Grimms, Germany

„The Miracle tree“ + „The princess in the flaming mountain“ Bulgaria

„The little pot“ „The clever farm girl“ Turkey

„The magic drum“ + „Oni and Anago“ Kamerun

„Cat, sparrow and dwarf“ + „The Zarewitsch“ Russia

„Maruschka and the four seasons“ Czech Republic

„The Christmas fairy“ The Elsass

„The two ponds“ Syria

„The emperor who wanted to marry his daughter“ Serbia

„Blanco Flor the devil's daughter“ Spain

„The golden balloon“ Poland

„Brothers and friends“ Vietnam

„The love of the dove“ Rumania

„Willa – the boy with the thousand spots“ + „He payed the debts of the dead man!“ Croatia

„The strong Jura“ Hungary

„The wooden sword“ Algeria

„The eagle prince“ Kurdistan

The tale from South Sudan was not told as the boy did not participate in the project after 3 times as he had special German lessons at the same time.

The booklets and the titles they chose

Glücksgeschichten
Landesgeschichten
Unsre Hexenwelten
Geschichtenbilder
MärchenWeltgeschichten
Unsere Welt
Königsgeschichten
Unser Märchenbuch
Geschichten aus unseren Ländern
Unsere Zauberwelt
Weltgeschichten
Alte Geschichten von unseren Ländern



The favorite story of year one

Choosing the favourite tale of the year how to go about it! By telling a short important phrase of a tale, or making a gesture or showing a mimic, or producing a specific sound. Of the 23 told tales only the very first tale was not really recognized. Just two children could remember it. From the second tale on 90% of them recognized the tale when hearing or seeing a phrase, a mimic, a gesture or a sound. They started to tell each other the tale in detail and were having fun remembering. An interesting factor was to observe which child learns how. One girl wanted to know the title of each tale. She remembered them through this. Several children recognized a phrase or the beginning. Some of them needed the sound or the melody to remember, some recognized a specific gesture or a mimic. The decoding was widely spread and really impressive. To pick a favourite tale was done quite fast. One tale received 22 votes followed by three others which got 21 votes each. The tale is the „Eagle prince!“