

Welcome to the Land of Ideas: The Goethe-Institut 2006 Fellowship Tour of Germany

by Keith Samuelson

"Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime."

Mark Twain was inspired to write these words after a visit to Germany in the 1860s. Almost a century and a half later, I visited many of the same sites he described so eloquently in *The Innocents Abroad*. The Goethe-Institut 2006 Fellowship Tour gave me a much deeper appreciation of the significance of his words.

There are many valid reasons for participating in an educators' tour of Germany. It is a nation with a legacy of literary and political thought that has had a profound impact on the evolution of Western civilization. Germany has offered the world artistic and scientific genius and been the source of devastating war and unprecedented genocide. The historic opening of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the unification of Germany in 1990 underscore the importance of understanding the geopolitical role of modern Germany in the world community.

Today Germany is one of the world's leading export countries, a major contributor to the European Union and an internationally respected member of the United Nations. A model of post-war reconstruction and the use of renewable energy resources, Germany has shared many of the problems evident in Canadian and American societies. Many teachers across North America consider a study of contemporary Germany essential to developing global understanding from an international perspective.

The Goethe-Institut Transatlantic Outreach Program (TOP) supports these teachers by disseminating teaching materials about modern Germany to K-12 Canadian and American teachers, program coordinators and university "methods" professors; promoting in-service teacher training; and offering all-expense-paid study/travel tours to Germany for social studies educators. The participants of the study tours are expected to contribute lesson plans to the program and to offer in-service training to other educators about 'Teaching Modern Germany'. TOP is a public-private partnership between the Goethe-Institut, the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany, Deutsche Bank, and the Robert Bosch Foundation.

Highlights of past summer study/travel seminars include Question and Answer sessions with diplomats from the Federal Foreign Office, experts on German immigration, officials from the European Central Bank, German curriculum developers, authors, teachers and students. Participants are given a private guided tour of the Reichstag and visit modern German industries such as the "Glass" Volkswagen factory in Dresden and a brewery in Weimar. Last year one group met and exchanged gifts and photos with Chancellor Schroeder; this past summer another group met Chancellor Merkel and President Bush during his official state visit.

These all-expense-paid travel seminars are two weeks in length. Four groups of about 15-20 educators visit different regions of Germany during July and August, and all "Fellows" spend a few days in Berlin and Frankfurt. This past summer Harry Lewis from Victoria and I became the first Canadian participants. Our itinerary focused on Berlin, Schwerin, Hamburg and Frankfurt with many excursions to smaller towns and villages along the way.



Our tour group included thirteen teachers, professors and program coordinators from across North America and three Goethe-Institut staff members. We met at the Institut's head office in downtown Atlanta where Dr. Michael Nentwich, Executive Director of the Goethe-Institut, provided a fascinating orientation on German culture, politics and economics. Dr. Nentwich gave us a great deal of practical advice to ease the transition into German culture.

While Germans share many things with us culturally, their media is more oriented towards public television. Television networks are not motivated to provide entertainment at all costs but instead are expected to provide educational programming representative of the "Goethe-Schiller" ideal, a belief in the value of elite culture. Germany spends \$2 billion annually on the arts, more than any other country. Over half of the operas that are performed worldwide on any given night are performed in Germany, and even the smallest villages provide private and public-funded theatrical performances, art exhibitions and public concerts all year round.

There is a fundamental belief that it takes time to learn to appreciate art; that most people only develop this appreciation later in life and are not mature enough to develop it while they're still in school.

The public is encouraged to visit the wide variety of museums that are integral to the cultural life of every community.

Germans believe that the arts are as important as the sciences because they teach us about what is essentially human.

The German attitude towards the arts is rooted in a political ideal - the obligation of the state to look after its citizens. Germany is a parliamentary democratic republic in which the President's role is mainly ceremonial and the Chancellor is the head of government in a multi-party system. The present Chancellor, Angela Merkel, is the first female, the first former East German and the youngest post-war head of state. A recent article in Forbes magazine describes her as the most powerful woman in the world.

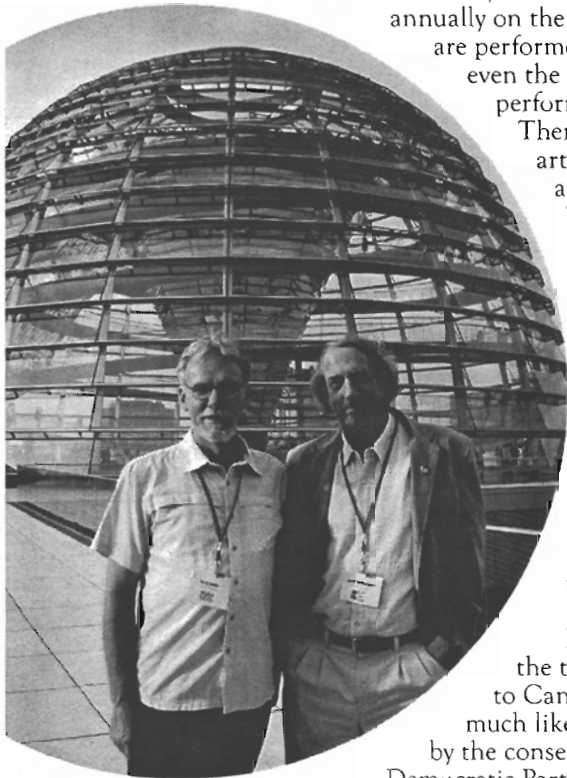
Federal legislative power is vested in both the government and the two chambers of parliament - the Bundestag, which is similar to Canada's House of Commons, and the Bundesrat, which functions much like our Senate. Since 1949 the party system has been dominated by the conservative Christian Democratic Union and the more liberal Social Democratic Party.

Today Chancellor Merkel leads a coalition from both parties and is the most popular Chancellor ever. Smaller parties that play an important role include the Free Democratic Party, which has been in the Bundestag since 1949, and the Green Party, which has had seats since 1983. The Judiciary is independent of the Executive and the Legislative branches.

This political framework was laid out in the Basic Law of 1949, which remained in effect with minor amendments after reunification. Basic Law has four principles:

1. Social Welfarism - the state is obligated to protect and support disadvantaged citizens and to strive for social justice and human dignity;
2. Federalism - the government's power and sovereignty are shared between a central government and regional (state) governments;
3. Democracy - all authority emanates from the people;
4. Rule of Law - the actions of the state are subject to law and justice.

These principles have served the country well. Germany has a higher rate of voting than either Canada or the United States. Over 70% of the population participates in any given election. A mechanism is in place which enables each citizen to vote for a candidate and a party separately, thus ensuring that parliament reflects the views of the majority of voters who support an individual candidate and the percentage of voters who support a particular party's platform. This culture of discourse has been nurtured by an educational system that has given Germany a competitive edge in the global economy.



After four years of elementary school, most students attend a "Hauptschule", which is designed to prepare them for life and focuses on practical matters. About one third of them attend a "Gymnasium", which concentrates on more academic topics to prepare students for university. As a result, classes in the Hauptschule concentrate on the basics in Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Geography, History, the World of Work (Arbeitslehre), Religion (or a substitute subject), Music, Art, Politics, Physical Education and Language. From the first year of Hauptschule, all children learn English (sometimes French) and German. Once students have graduated at the age of 15 or 16, they can go into practical vocational training, start work in the public service at the basic or secretarial level, or attend a Berufsfachschule (full-time vocational school). The jobs for which they apply consequently require practical skills rather than academic knowledge. They also can qualify for further education in a Gymnasium depending on their academic performance. Gymnasium students attend for nine years from the 5th through 13th grades and study the same main subjects offered at Hauptschule but in greater depth. They are also required to study at least two foreign languages (the combination of English/Latin or English/French being the most popular) and, in the 12th and 13th grades, prepare for the "Abitur", a challenging external examination required for entrance to university.

The summer of 2006 was a particularly exciting time to visit Germany. In the year of the World Cup, the German government and business leaders are presenting the country's modern face to the world with an initiative entitled "Germany - The Land of Ideas". The project is a showcase of the inventiveness, creativity and open-mindedness of the German people. A sculpture boulevard is being developed in the centre of Berlin, each sculpture dedicated to an outstanding idea which originated in Germany. At the German Historical Museum visitors approach the various exhibits along the "Walk of Ideas". A competition entitled "365 Places in the Land of Ideas" aims to find different places where ideas were born - one place for every day of the year. These "places" include private and public institutions, cultural and religious establishments, social projects, private companies and scientific research centres - any location where good ideas have been or are being conceived.

Based on the idea that the best lessons in life come from experience, the Transatlantic Outreach Program has since 2001 sought to find the best and most qualified K-12 social studies educators and give them the opportunity to experience modern Germany in the most dramatic way possible - in person. From Munich to Nürnberg, from Lake Constance to the Black Forest, from Dresden to Weimar, and from Frankfurt to Berlin, each corner of Germany is sampled through sight, sound, touch, and taste!

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Applications for the 2007 Transatlantic Outreach Program are now available online at www.goethe.de/top. Interested teachers may contact Wood Powell, top@washington.goethe.org, or Keith Samuelson, keithsamuelson@esdnl.ca

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