

TEACHER EXCHANGE NIJEMARDUM – BORZESTOWO, OCTOBER 2005

In a village called Borzestowo, about 60 km from Gdansk (Poland) lies the Kashubian School with which our school 'The Stapstien' has been in touch for several years. Last year in April we welcomed two Kashubian teachers in Nijemardum (Friesland) and now it was our turn to travel again. Since my colleagues were unable to go at this time, I was asked to represent our school. Joined by delegates from five other Frisian schools, this was the second time that I travelled to Kashubia in Poland, an area with its own culture and language. This unique



The Stapstien, Nijemardum

culture and language actually form the basis of the contacts between Frisian and Kashubian schools. During the communist era there was no space whatsoever for the Kashubian culture. Teaching personnel was transferred to other areas in Poland and replaced by teachers who were unable to understand or speak the Kashubian language. It was even forbidden to use the language at school. Many people decided to start using the Polish language in their houses as well in order to prevent that their children would be misunderstood or punished at school. For a whole generation long, the Kashubian language and culture was forced to be forgotten.

Luckily everything changed 25 years ago. During our first visit, we already noticed that the own culture and language had returned in education, at this point there were even more positive developments. This time, we visited the Kashubian radio station, which had been founded in December 2004. Although the channel only has a small range, and can only be heard in a small part of Kashubia, it is a good start. And the people have enough enthusiasm to proceed with it. A regional television station does not yet exist, but who knows we will be visiting one next time. We were asked to sing a Frisian song, and when we translated the lyrics of "Simmermoarn", the DJ promised that he would use the song every day to open his program!

A real highlight of our trip was a visit to the exhibition "25 years solidaridad", on the old docks of Gdansk. Our guide was a retired dockworker, so we learned the story about the strike led by Lech Walesa from first hand. These brave people, who had no guarantee as to whether they would achieve anything with their actions this time, knowing that a similar strike ten years earlier had cost the life to some 200 workmen, truly deserve a great deal of respect.

That same day we were guided through the Gdansk that had been rebuilt in its original style after WW II. We climbed up the church tower stairs (400 steps!) to enjoy a wonderful view of the city and the docks. Later on that day, Asia, the English teacher with whom I stayed for two nights, took me to the beach where we saw fishermen were mending their nets. Gdansk is really a multi-faceted city. The closer we become, the more we learn about all the problems that took place in the past, and that often still have not been solved. Being able to buy the daily supplies requires a lot of hard work and especially children who study are very expensive. This is the reason why many Polish families have only one child. The result is that the number of pupils at schools is reducing quickly, especially in small villages, where schools even run the risk of being shut down. I have visited such a school, not very far from Borzestowo. The school thanks its existence to the zealous director, who applies for every possible funding. Moreover the school switched to the system of combination groups, which is quite unique in Poland. This also explains the interest that this school has in our education system. The school in Borzestowo itself has not reached this point yet. This school consists of 170 pupils, aged between 6 and 12. During the first three years, the classes have a fixed teacher, after this, the children get different teachers for different subjects, as happens in Friesland in secondary education (after the age of 12). Next to the regular subjects, Kashubian language is also part of the curriculum. Furthermore, the children get in touch with Kashubian culture during the creative subjects where they paint glass and do other sorts of handcrafts. English is a subject in all age groups and I was invited to attend an English

lesson with the youngest group. Everything was done with attributes and many movements while sitting in a circle on the floor. One thing I noticed was the computer classroom, that wasn't there during my last visit.

The school breathes a nice atmosphere, showing paintings of the children in the corridors and classrooms. Every school has its own little museum, containing objects that are specific for their own culture. Furthermore, the children who are interested have the opportunity to join the folklore group, where they learn Kashubian dancing and sing Kashubian songs. Whenever there are guests at the school, they receive a cheerful performance. Unfortunately I came at the wrong moment: the folklore group recently got a new teacher, and many of the children in the group were new themselves. Therefore no show for me, if the Kashubians do something, they like to do it right. This also became clear during the joint closing night that was held at 'our' school this time. The party was well arranged: delicious food, music and vodka. Although the language formed a barrier to get to know everybody, the atmosphere was still very warm and comfortable and the fun could not be spoiled. Then there was also this breathtaking scenery that we drove through, rolling landscapes, varied by autumn forests, green meadows and open fields and in between many small lakes in which the water reflected the sun like a mirror. Even the weather was beautiful!

Taking everything into account, this exchange was once again a pleasant experience and a reinforcement of the relationship between Kashubian and Frisian schools.