

Dresden Scholarship Summary

I spent three weeks over the summer in the city of Dresden on a 'Dresden Scholarship'. In providing these scholarships, the 'Dresden Trust' intends to promote reconciliation between Dresden, which suffered so heavily under RAF bombing campaigns during WW2, and the UK. 'Dresden Scholars' attend a local secondary school whilst in the city and are accommodated with the family of one of its students. During my time in Dresden, I was at the 'St. Benno-Gymnasium'¹, a lovely school located not too far from the 'Aldstadt' (Old Town).

Much like QE, the St. Benno-Gymnasium has an extensive history. In 1697, Augustus II the Strong – Elector of Saxony – converted to Catholicism to secure the Polish crown. This became a point of contention at the royal court in Dresden, where both Protestants and Catholics demanded that royal church services be held in accordance with the traditions of their denomination. Ultimately, a compromise was reached; both Catholic and Protestant services would be held. This did, however, lead to difficulties with the court choir, which had to be divided in two. The St. Benno-Gymnasium was established in 1709 for the purpose of educating the boy choristers ('Kapellknaben') of the Catholic choir, who required instruction in music and Latin. The story of the school beginning with its roots in 17th century has been tumultuous. It has relocated several times since 1709 and was even closed by the Nazi government in 1939. It is through the efforts of Konrad Wagner, a former musical director of the choir, former students, and interested locals that the school was re-established in 1991. It now educates over 700 students from years 5 through 12 and maintains an excellent choir.

I thoroughly enjoyed attending the St. Benno-Gymnasium. Far from the stereotype that Germans are cold, all the students and teachers I met were incredibly lovely. Each school year begins with a church service in the 'Kreuzkirche' ('Church of the Holy Cross') at which new students receive a model fish representing the school logo (the ichthys) to symbolise their acceptance into the school community. This year, the Year 6s were kind enough to make extra 'Benno fish' to be presented to the school's exchange students. I certainly felt incredibly welcome being presented my fish at the end of a service that had otherwise been full of lovely German choral music. The Kreuzkirche itself is just one example of Dresden's recovery following the War. Almost entirely destroyed by allied bombing, the church has been rebuilt on its 18th century foundations.

As German students maintain a broad subject profile in the 'Oberstufe' (sixth form), I attended all sorts of lessons that I would not normally have the chance to in England. I found reading Manfred Jendryschik's parable-cum-critique of the DDR, *Wechsel (Change)*, in German lessons incredibly thought-provoking, and relearning some of my AS maths content (binomial probability distributions) in another language was certainly an experience. Particularly fascinating, however, were English lessons, in which I really enjoyed learning about the German perspective on British politics and culture. I was glad to find that griping about Brexit is very much not the sole preserve of the English! I also took great pleasure in noticing smaller differences between QE and school in Germany. The lack of uniform was perhaps the most immediately noticeable, but equally surprising was the discovery that chalk boards remain a common feature of classrooms across the country.

¹ 'Gymnasien' ('Gymnasium' sg.) are the most academic schools within Germany's broadly three-tiered system of secondary education. Whilst historically restricted to the most academic students, just over 40% of German secondary students now attend them.

Outside of school hours, I was largely free to explore the city. I particularly enjoyed visiting the Old Town on the South Bank of the River Elbe, with the distinctly Central European facades of the 'Neumarkt' ('New Market') and Dresden's gorgeous baroque church – the 'Frauenkirche' ('Church of Our Lady'). The latter was rebuilt following its destruction in WW2 with the support of benefactors including the Dresden Trust, which organised a highly informative guided tour in the second week of my stay. A beautiful artistic rendering of the Old City is to be found in a painting by the Venetian artist Bernardo Bellotto often called the 'Canaletto-Blick'. I was lucky enough to see the painting up close when visiting the city's 'Alte Meister' (Old Masters) gallery. Just across from the gallery is the 'Semperoper', a famous German Opera house I had the pleasure of visiting in my final week in the city. Despite all the attractions however, I most enjoyed simply taking a stroll or cycling through the streets in the summery evenings and soaking in the architecture.

I could not have asked for a better host family during my time in Dresden. Whilst I greatly enjoyed their company on tours through the city, I most appreciated their incredible warmth and openness to conversation. It was because of this that I could have such fascinating discussions about the legacy of the GDR, life in modern Germany, and – much to my delight – German politics in the weeks leading up to Saxony's state elections. I am also incredibly grateful to my host family for taking me on a camping trip to the 'Sächsische Schweiz' (Saxon Switzerland) on the final weekend of my stay. The national park is noted for its unique rock formations, which inspired the great German artist, Caspar David Friedrich, to paint his iconic, *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (*Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*) – a work often regarded as a masterpiece of Romanticism.

My time in Dresden was simply unforgettable. I have learned so much about German culture, the German language, and have met such incredible people. Most of all, however, my experience with the 'Dresden Scholarship' is a testament to the profound benefits of language learning. Without my German lessons at QE, I simply would not have been able to engage with another culture and build relationships in the way that I have. The lesson? Keep at it with the adjective endings!