Agnieszka Lipinska

Report from Puy L’Évêque

This summer I took part in a volunteer project in Southern France organised by Concordia International. I was one of the 12 young people who came from all around the world (among us were those who live permanently in South Korea, Belarus, Mexico or Russia) to undertake a 3-week long work in Puy L’Évêque. This a very small, medieval, picturesque village, situated in Southern France with only 2300 (as I soon realized) extremely amiable inhabitants.

Our task was quite different from the vast majority of volunteer projects offered by other organisations which focus mainly on teaching, care work or restoration. Apart from the fact that we were supposed to paint the local sports hall in the primary school, our main job was to help members of a local association and municipal employees to organise the second edition of a festival of unusual things (Festival de l’Insolite). We meant to assist in the implementation of this event which was composed of street arts, concerts, mask parades and "unusual" animations. Its main aim was to enhance the living environment of this small village, provide an entertainment for its inhabitants as well as attract even more tourists who come here every year in large numbers, seduced by a ravishing beauty of this village and the admirable hospitality of its dwellers.

However my journey to Puy L’Évêque in itself, emerged to be quite of a challenge. After having landed in Toulouse, I noticed my suitcase being abducted by an elderly Frenchman who was one of the passengers of my flight. Had I not chased him and gave him a long explanation of my property rights to this object, this gentleman would not have given it back. After this first troubling conversation in French, I managed to take a bus to Toulouse train station from which I supposed to take a train to Cahors (still located 30 km from my final destination). My journey on the bus through the centre of Toulouse gave me an invaluable opportunity to admire the great architecture of this city, from which unfortunately I did not benefit since the scorching weather-with the temperature of up to 35 degrees at 9 in the morning was truly unbearable.

Furthermore, at the train station it turned out that I had to wait 3 hours for the next train, surrounded by exhausted passengers who were completely fed up with the heat and happily took all the available places to sit, leaving me squatted on the floor with my huge baggage. Luckily after having got off the train in Cahors I was noticed by the first five volunteers, who were also waiting for the bus to Puy L’Évêque and recognized me thanks to the pictures, I had sent them on a widely popular Facebook which I had always considerably underestimated myself. Afterwards my French (although highly imperfect) turned out to be already very useful because I managed to negotiate a considerable discount on a bus ticket for our group to Puy L’Évêque. All the hardships of our previous journeys were more than outweighed by stunning scenery that we admired from the bus, on our way to this small village. We could see stone houses built among green hills and surrounded by vineyards- an inseparable part of a culture of this region, together with steep valleys formed by deep rivers.

When we finally arrived at our destination we were met by our camp leader. The problem was that although all my fellow volunteers spoke English well, they knew only a bit of French. Our leader who was from a different part of France spoke English but strongly preferred to use French claiming that it would considerably enhance our cultural immersion and quickly improve our understanding of a local community. Therefore, willy-nilly for the whole three weeks I had to become a major interpreter for a whole group of volunteers, who would explain in English all the instructions given to us by city employees and our leaders. I must admit that, at first this task seem to be a bit daunting for me since I was convinced that my French vocabulary, mainly connected with very technical stuff, would not come up to their expectations. Fortunately, after few hours it turned out that my fear was completely unfounded. During the rest of our first day, we had a pleasure to meet the members of a village council who gave us the outlines of our volunteer work in Puy L’Évêque and expressed their gratitude for our willingness to assist them in the preparation of their festival. Furthermore they were kind enough to offer us a quick tour of their village- we walked between tall medieval buildings made from stone to protect their
inhabitants against the inclement sun and had an impression that we were in a mountain village since it is built on a steep hill, and almost every street is arranged upon a higher level, which at the very top gives a breathtaking view of a whole Puy L’Évêque.

For the next few days, our main task was to promote Le Festival d'Insolite among the dwellers of nearby villages by the distribution of leaflets with further information with regards to this event. In order to attract the attention of others, we were disguised as bottles of wine-each of us was given a long, black robe and a huge red hat with only a small rectangle for the eyes, which meant to be a cork. Besides, on our back they attached an advert for a wine of Cahors, produced in a local vineyard, so while we walked around everyone could see it. That was a main way for its producer to promote this wine among wider group of customers and therefore boost his sales. Every day we were dropped off by a very kind and helpful inhabitants of Puy L'Évêque who were responsible for this event, to the market in nearby villages since we expected to meet there the largest amount of people.

When they noticed us, their reaction was extremely varied- in some villages, people were quite reserved and not very willing to accept our leaflets. Surprisingly, even some of them accused us of promoting the consumption of alcohol which in their view was deplorable. This opinion was very unjust, since they did not only misunderstand our intention but also did not appreciate the fact that we walked around, fully covered with black robes in that scorching weather. Fortunately, in the vast majority of other villages, people were much more hospitable- they seemed to be very enthusiastic and curious when they saw us-they asked questions about the festival, were very happy to accept the leaflets and stopped us almost every minute to take a picture of at least one of us, disguised as a bottle of wine.

However that was not the end of our task. As the festival was rapidly approaching, we had to help the municipal employees to decorate the whole village in a very unusual way. We were divided into small groups and as I expected my job was mainly to translate all the instructions with regards to the way and means of attaching the decorations and the explanation of our next tasks. For few hours, almost every day we were placing various bizarre objects in different places of Puy L'Evêque. Some of us were hanging pairs of old shoes and umbrellas on the ropes between the stone buildings, placing wooden sculptures next to the building of city council, arranging huge branches painted in white colour on the stairs leading to the main market in a form of a valley or making strange sculptures from the plastic bottles. Although almost every single day the weather was merciless and the heat very difficult to endure- we managed quite quickly to decorate this village in a very bizarre way which attracted attention of passers-by and coming in increasing numbers tourists.

Fortunately, the fact that we were so preoccupied with the festival, did not allow us to forget about our job which was to renovate the local sports hall. For the next few days, before the beginning of a festival, we started to clean it and did some painting work. However it was obvious that we would not manage to redecorate the whole hall in a given time. Therefore, the message saying that this task was supposed to be the main focus for the next group of volunteers coming to Puy L'Evêque in August, was a great relief.

Furthermore it would be extremely unfair to say that our volunteer project was nothing but only work. Since the idea behind this is that, as foreigners in France we shall immerse ourselves in their culture and customs, which would enhance further cooperation between the nations, we undertook many cultural visits.

First of all, we went to nearby Cahors- a medieval enchanting city with a very rich history. After a little sip of a great wine of Cahors (which we advertised ourselves disguised as bottles) we were ready for a little sight-seeing. First, we went to see a breathtaking Pont de Valentre –the medieval bridge considered to be the city's hallmark and arguably the most photographed place in France, outside Paris. And we were not mistaken, since we encountered there a huge amount of tourists constantly taking photos of this architectural achievement. The rest of our time was spent on a visit to the market, held in front of the cathedral. It was an extremely colourful and busy place with stalls almost completely covered with a huge amount of fruits, vegetables, flowers and above all, every kind of cheese made in France.
Moreover, taking a full advantage of our free time we did not miss an opportunity to go to Toulouse- the largest city of a region and also a famous place of a European aerospace industry. Its sights had definitely come up to our expectations- since within merely two days we managed to see the vast majority of them. One of them was a Japanese garden located in the centre of Toulouse, offering its visitors a huge variety of admirable plants which grow in Far East or the neoclassical Capitole de Toulouse -the seat of a municipal administration. However the most striking thing was a huge discrepancy in a way of living between small, charming Puy L’Évêque with is hospitable inhabitants who know each other and a large, busy Toulouse which fully epitomizes the atmosphere of a big city.

However, our tiring but extremely interesting and culturally enriching trips did not make us forget about the main purpose of our volunteer project. Therefore the last weekend of our staying in this village was to assist in the festival. Regardless of the temperature which was even higher that we expected, we did our best to help the coordinators of this event.

For two days, with other village inhabitants we took part in masked parades. We formed a large group of people that walked and danced on the streets of Puy L’Évêque and every single person had his own unique mask made with great care and precision by municipal employees. That was surely the most exciting part of a programme which attracted the greatest attention.

Furthermore, in the evening, we worked as waiting staff during a great feast which took place in the centre of a city. It was accompanied by a concert led by a group of clowns walking on stilts. I regarded this as very enjoyable but I also a very important catering experience.

Unfortunately, three days afterwards my volunteer project came to an end. It was very difficult to leave people with whom I worked and spend free time for almost three weeks. However I think that within this short period of time I learned quite a lot. I am convinced that my work with a group of people who come from around the world considerably improved my communication and time management skills. This was an invaluable experience which taught me perseverance and showed me the value of hard work regardless of circumstances.

Therefore, I am very grateful to the Expeditions Committee who decided to give me a financial assistance which made my journey to France possible. I am sure that the most noticeable benefit of this journey, is the fact that I managed to develop my linguistic skills with a huge amount of oral practise of French which immensely improved my confidence in using this language. I hope that this will also contribute to my academic and in the future, professional success.

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