

Article # 16: Florence, Italy

Well... where do I begin? During the week break for Carneval in February, my host parents took me to Florence, Italy! I could write a novel about the four days we spent in the beautiful city, but unfortunately I only have one column, so I'll try to capture the radiance of the city the best I can!

So, I guess just start at the beginning! We left Stuttgart Tuesday evening on a train to Munich, and then the schlafwagen (sleeping train) from Munich to Florence. The space we had to sleep was very minimal! There are small cabins about 6-7 feet wide and only about six foot long with six bunk beds two bottom, two middle, two top). In between each bed it was only about three feet wide. You get a pillow, bed cover, and blanket. It was a little rough sleeping, but it worked out fine and saved time by traveling during the night.

We arrived in Florence around 6:30 am, exhausted, but also very excited! We walked around a bit and got some coffee until we could check into our hostel. Yes, hostel, not hotel. Let me explain the difference... a hotel is very expensive and you have a bedroom and bathroom, a hostel is more like a house/apartment turned into a small private hotel. In our hostel (Casa doke Casa), I had my own room and my host parents had a room. Then there was a kitchen we shared with the others, two bathrooms to also share, and a common area with a TV and computers. This hostel can hold up to about twelve people. It was really nice! In the four days we stayed there, we befriended a young American couple, an American mom and daughter, and four young Argentinean boys. Everyone was so nice!

So the city... You could stay there for weeks, or even months, and still find plenty to do!! Of course the city is very old and the architecture and buildings are breath-taking alone! I wish I could go into detail about it all, but I'll give you an overview. I'm not sure how much you know about Florence or what is found there, but maybe you'll recognize a few things.

We went to so many museums I can't count! But the big ones include the famous Uffizi Art Museum, The Academia, and a third museum displaying costumes, silver, art, etc. As far as art goes, you would never believe it! It's so intricate and beautiful! I saw lots of very famous pieces such as the Birth of Venus and Michelangelo's David. Typically these are only pictures in school textbooks, but being there and seeing it in person was breath-taking. It also made me realize how "new" America is!! I saw pieces of art or sculptures from 11th and 12th century. Was America even thought of then?!?! I walked through a building built 600 years ago! And we think 150 is old! They still have very vivid art and sculptures that were painted while Christ was roaming the earth. If that doesn't take you back, what does? Also in Florence is the famous bridge, Ponte Vecchio. Another extremely renowned sight is of course "The Dome." Not only is the inside incredible, but after climbing 463 steps, the view from the top is absolutely breath-takingly incredible!! I can't even begin to describe it!!

The weather while we were there was a nice break from the snow in Stuttgart. While it wasn't sunny 70s, it was still a refreshing upper 40s/50s.

Food was great! We didn't eat out a whole lot, but when we did, we treated ourselves to real Italian pasta and bread.

Some things that I noticed as differences: their cars are even tinier than most Europeans! And buses too! Most people drive mopeds. There are thousands of them everywhere! There was also a huge street market! Starting at about 7am vendors pull their carts to city center (around the Dome and Market Halle) and stay open until about 9pm. They sell everything from leather purses to carnival masks, and of course tourists' memorabilia. It's really a sight to see!

One day we took a bus to the top of a mountain nearby to the small village of Fiesole. In Fiesole, we then climbed up just a bit farther to the oldest church in the area. The church was neat, but the view looking down onto Florence and surrounding area was unforgettable! Wow!! Also in Fiesole are old Roman ruins. I'm not talking about bones and pots (yes, they were there too), but the Roman theater and small village with everything from a swimming pool to an altar. It is very similar to the Greek way of life. It was all so awesome because you see pictures of these semi-circle outdoor theaters and of ruins in history books, but I was there! It was a trip I'll never forget!

Article # 15: New Host Family

In my very first article I wrote about my first host family and profiled them. Now that I've switched I'd like to give you a glimpse of my new family!

As a part of the Rotary program, I am to have at least two host families. Why? So that I can see different ways of life and get a better perspective of a typical German lifestyle. I switched to my new host family on Saturday, January 16th. It took me like 3 days to pack everything up and move, but now I'm staying with this family until I leave (which speaking of it, will be the first week of August). And they are SO nice!

In the US, when you "send a kid" you don't have to host one, but here in Germany, with Rotary, if your child goes on exchange you are expected to host one during the same year. So right now my "would-be" host sister is now on exchange in Chile. I also have three other host siblings as well, but two of them are much older and have moved away from Stuttgart to study. The oldest sister is now living and studying in Berlin and the next oldest brother is living and studying in Karlsruhe. The third oldest brother is living at home, Bertrum, is 20 years old, and graduated last year. This year he is still living at home while he studies to be an architect and is currently doing an internship with a local company. He is very nice, but I hardly ever see him. Between his working schedule and going out with friends in the evenings and/or weekends and then my school and activities, we don't see much of each other!

So most of the time it's just me and my host parents, but that's okay because I really like them! My host dad is older (60s) and loves history, physics, math, and geography. He is now retired, but keeps himself busy. My host mom works at the university, but not as a professor or anything. I'm not sure of her official title, but she is like a scientist working with different plastics. She loves music, art, and theater, just like me. So we go see ballets and events together. They love explaining things to me and helping with my German. Almost every night after supper, my host mom and I will sit down and read children's books, work on vocabulary or grammar. It's really nice! They are also teaching me how to cook! In my last house we had a maid to cook, but here it's much more relaxed and homey. For example, on Wednesdays I normally get home around noon, but my host mom not until around 2:30, so I'll cook and have lunch ready for the two of us when she comes home. It's so great! They're very welcoming for me to go hang out with friends and always try and find things that I can do or go to!

Unlike the majority of the world, my host family doesn't own a car! Right now all of you, I'm sure, are gasping, but don't! That was my first reaction too, but we live in the east part of Stuttgart, which is not too far from the center of the city. I can walk 35 minutes to get downtown or take two different trams or two different buses! Many possibilities! I'm finding it much more ideal. Since the trams and buses normally come every 10 minutes, it is absolutely no problem. And we've also had very spring-like weather recently making walking places very enjoyable!

We also eat a lot of vegetables and less meat. I probably already told you, but the eating pattern is way different. Here you eat bread and jam/jelly or musli (raisins, rolled oats, nuts, honey) for breakfast. Lunch is normally the biggest meal and always warm and very filling with dessert. Supper, most of the time, is bread with cheese or cold meat. This way is much healthier! Ad my host family loves veggies!

The rule is: you must try 3 bites of everything! So... I did! And now I love food that I never would have even looked at before! It's great!

Also, we don't have a TV. As shocking as this may sound, it's not too bad or dreadfully uncommon... I have 3 other friends also with no TV and several with only one (contrary to America's 2-3 per average household). Yes, it would be nice to maybe watch some things in German or the Olympics! But I don't have a lot of time anyways... I've learned to fill my time with reading, writing, walking, spending time with friends, and a lot of other activities!

Article # 14 - Fasching

I had previously written an article about different festivals in Germany. I briefly talked about the Fasching/Carneval, but since the main celebrations were held here recently, I want to re-explain it with more details. Carneval, also known as Faschings in the southern part of the country, technically begins on November 11 and is a season of celebration that lasts until the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday.

On November 11, there are big parties and parades in Cologne (not as prevalent here in Stuttgart) and then more activities occur the week before Ash Wednesday. The Monday before Ash Wednesday is called *Rosen Montag* and the Tuesday is *Fasching Deinstag*. In smaller towns, celebrations are held on weekends before, but in bigger cities, like Stuttgart, their festivals are held on Monday and Tuesday. We also had the whole week of February 15-19 off of school. But not all of Germany is the same. In northern Germany, they hold smaller celebrations and still go to school.

So what are we celebrating? Well that's not really clear to me. I'm sorry that I can't explain that more, but no one was really able to give me a clear answer! However, during the week of Fasching, Monday and Tuesday are spent eating a lot because on Wednesday starts the fasting period. But that's about all I could understand about Fasching.

Like I said before, they don't celebrate Halloween in a big way, but Carneval is celebrated just as much or more than American Halloween. During these celebrations, it's crazy! I went with my American friend, Nicole, to her small town's Fasching Parade and had SO much fun! It was a parade through the main downtown with many different groups of people and music groups, such as our marching bands. Except their bands are not associated with school and involved adults too. Each group had people dressed in identical costumes. Most costumes were NOT pleasant looking and included a lot of witches, goblins, and other mysterious creatures!

The costumed paraders found it quite amusing to scare you or come over and mess up your hair or throw confetti all over you! In addition, they thought it was more fun to "kidnap" people and kids!!! They would just come up to people and pick them up, throw them over their shoulder, and keep walking! They would also have strings and wrap people up! Or take strollers with kids in them down the street! Nicole and I were freaking out, but everyone else seemed to be enjoying themselves, so we loosened up a little too!

Another festival I went to wasn't a parade, but rather just a huge party in the center of the city. It began around noon and lasted until late into the night. At this fest there was a big stage where groups would play very loud, up beat music and everyone would stand around and eat, drink, and be merry! Lots of fun to be had by all! The only comparison to Carneval in the USA is like our celebrations and parades for Halloween and Mardi Gras in New Orleans.

Christmas in Germany- Part 3: January the 6th & A White Christmas

The Christmas Tree is up until Jan. 6th, which is also a holiday called Dreikonigfest, or the Three Kings Festival. This Catholic holiday celebrates the three kings that came to visit the Baby Jesus. On this day various small groups of children representing three kings and an angel visit people door to door. Along with an adult advisor, these small groups do around dressed in costumes reciting a few lines and singing a couple traditional songs. If you would like the “kings” to come visit you, you must write a couple symbols at the top of your door. A small tip is expected when they perform for you, but is it definitely worth the cute scene they prepare!

For Christmas, my host parents gave me a ticket to see “Wicked,” which was playing at the theatre in Stuttgart for most of the year. So on January 6th, my host sister and I got dressed and up and went to the show. I was so shocked to find out that our tickets were in the second row! Since I had seen the show before and loved the music, I knew the story line and every word to every song, so understanding the German version of the musical was easy. But trying to translate some of the dialogue and lyrics was a challenge, and I really enjoyed it!

And did I have a “White Christmas?” Well yes and no.... the whole week before Christmas, it snowed off and on, but nothing accumulated over an inch or so. Unfortunately, it warmed up the day before Christmas and there were very few white patches left here and there. But by my birthday on January 2nd, we had at least two inches of snow! So I guess I had a “White Birthday” instead of a “White Christmas.”

But what we didn't get as snow in December, we are making up for in January! It seems like it never stops snowing! We probably have close to seven inches on the ground now in mid- January. Normally, I would love the snow! But that is before I had to walk to school 15 minutes one way twice a

day. Now I just want sun and warmth! Everyone here is a little shocked by the amount of snow they have now because Stuttgart is a “bowl city” (much like New Orleans). The center of the city is at a lower altitude than the surrounding area, thus protecting the city from getting much snow. Only the outer lying areas and suburbs get some snow, but usually only a few inches. My host family jokes with me that I brought it with me from the midwest because the last time they had this much snow was nearly ten years ago!

Christmas in Germany- Part Two: The Celebrations

In Germany, Christmas lasts for three days: December 24, 25, & 26! Although the 24th is by far the biggest day, a three days are *Freiertage* (free days) and EVERYTHING is closed. December 24th is the big day! I'm not sure exactly how it is in every family, but I'll tell you my Christmas story. The morning of the 24th, we woke up and ate a big breakfast.

After breakfast it is time to decorate the tree. Since they don't have artificial trees here, they wait until the 24th to put it up. They were astonished when I told them about our "fake" trees! Once we managed to get it up and "fluffed out," we began decorating. They don't drench their trees in ornaments like Americans tend to do, instead only a few glass bulbs here and there, plus handmade straw stars. The final touch to the tree is not the angel on the top, but rather real candles that are clipped on to the branches! Open flames appear on the tree instead of strings of electric lights. Under the tree is placed a Nativity Scene, rather than the gifts. In Germany, there is a very strong tradition for every family to have a nativity scene under their tree.

At lunchtime, the grandparents arrived to dine with the family and the afternoon was full of conversations and storytelling. Church service was held at 5:00 and was similar to our Christmas Eve services in America. We sang some of the same songs (only in German) and it highlighted by the candle lighting.

Once we returned home, the candles on the tree were lit and we continued to sing more Christmas Songs while my host sister played the cello to the traditional *Stille Nacht* (Silent Night). I was very leery about putting real fire on a real tree... but everything seemed to be okay! Then it was time to open gifts. Each person took a turn to open their gifts while we were singing. Presents were not really as big as in American; just one or two presents per person instead of piles. From my host grandparents, I received a very nice calendar with pictures of Baden-Wurttemberg, which is the German State I live in

here. My host siblings gave me a packet of blank CD's to save all my pictures. Finally, from my host parents, I was given a ticket to my favorite musical, "Wicked!" The production had been playing in Stuttgart since last spring, but was leaving at the end of January. I really wanted to see but had not gotten any tickets. What a wonderful surprise!

My host grandparents stayed over night and returned to their home on the 25th. Our family spent time on the 25th and 26th visiting other family members. By the 28th, most adults returned to a semi-normal work week and stores were open again.

As for celebrations in school, it was very similar. Our last day of School before Christmas break was Tuesday, Dec. 22, but both Monday and Tuesday were full of fun! Monday was a semi-normal day with all classes, just very laid back. Tuesday was the day of parties and special events!

Tuesday morning we all attended a program at the church just down the street from the school. The three religion teachers held a small simple service for the students. We sang three songs and some of the students from the 12th and 13th class (Junior and seniors) gave small presentations. It lasted about 45 minutes and then we all returned to the school for our party.

There were drinks (like coffee, tea, hot punch, hot chocolate) and goodies (like cakes, cookies, waffles) available to buy from the student council. While sipping on warm drinks and sitting around chatting, there was Christmas music playing, which put everyone in the Christmas mood.

Then we went to our third period class only to eat more cookies that teachers and students had brought to school. The teacher read to us a couple short Christmas stories and we had our gift exchange. It was the same concept as Secret Santa. We pulled a name out of the hat, purchased a present for that person for about 5 Euro, wrote their name on it, and placed it on the table. It was a lot of fun watching people open their gifts not knowing who they were from. Around 11:30am everyone was going home to begin their holiday break. Our break from school lasted through Jan. 10.

Christmas in Germany- Part One: Traditions

Christmas is a time of joy and cheer, love and giving, happiness and charity. These same qualities hold true here in Germany, too! Although Germany is missing out on decking the house with lights, millions of Christmas Cards, Frosty the Snowman, plastic trees, candy canes, Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer, leaving cookies out for Santa, and caroling... they still have many great traditions.

For starters, you may be thinking:” No Rudolph? How does Santa deliver his presents?” There are three different “Santas” and the tradition is slightly changed in Germany. People still know and sing the song, but Santa starts visiting much earlier. On December 6th, everyone puts their shoes by the door, hoping Nikolaus fills them with goodies! This would be similar to our tradition of hanging our stockings on Christmas Eve. Therefore, December 6th is known as “Nikolaus Day.” The other two “Santas” who visit on the 24th are called Weihnachts Mann (Christmas Man) and Knecht Ruprecht (a Bishop).

Advent calendars and wreaths are a main tradition here. We have advent calendars and advent wreaths in America, but here they play a major role in the Christmas season. Every family has an advent wreath with four real candles and they light one candle each week of the advent season, as we do.

Advent Calendars originated in Germany by a man that managed an orphanage. It was his way to show the kids how many days until Christmas. In America, our Advent Calendars consist of opening a little door on a poster or putting an ornament on a tree. But here you get a small present each day. Many traditional German Advent calendars are full of chocolate, one chocolate treat each day. My family had one that is slightly different. Every morning, we went to the advent calendar, which were little Christmas Tree pouches, and found a small item like hand lotion, pens, small container of body spray, or lip gloss. It was a nice way to start each day.

Another German tradition is the Weihnachts Markets (Christmas Markets). These markets are in almost every town and run for about the entire month of December. The markets are set up in downtown areas and include everything from handmade ornaments and candles to knee socks and jewelry to art work, collectibles, and of course many home cooked goodies like medein, flannkuchen, lebkuchen, and Schoko-obst. The only thing in our area somewhat like The Christmas Markets would be Arts In the Park, or a local craft show. But in comparison, even these don't do justice to the awesome German Christmas Markets.

Many of the traditions we have in America are German in origin, but it was interesting to experience their version of the familiar ones and discover their unique foods and events for the holidays.

Article #10 – The German Language

I reported to you in my first article that my classes in school would be in English while I learned German. Well, it turned out to be quite different. Instead, almost all of my classes are taught in German. However, I happen to attend one of the only bilingual schools in Stuttgart meaning not only is English class taught in English, but so is Biology.

What am I doing to learn German? I am taking an intensive course at the language school here in Stuttgart. I started my course the last week of September and it ended December 3rd. The course was held each Monday - Thursday from 1:30-5:30. Yes, that's right...4 hours, 4 days a week of pure German! It was long and hard...but I'm progressing quickly!

In my course, there were 21 people from all over the world! We had people from north, south, east, and west! With countries including: China, Nigeria, Bulgaria, Turkey, Canada, and, of course, the USA! I was by far the youngest, with others ranging in age from their early 20s to early 50s. We are all here for different reasons. A couple people are here because their spouse lives here, some followed jobs, and then there is me - just here for the amazing experience! We have become somewhat like a family because we are all at the same level, regardless of age or wisdom, when it comes to learning German. We're all very supportive and are trying to tackle this language!

We have a workbook that we follow along with the teacher's lessons and, of course, Hausaufgaben (homework). Because I am still unable to understand the majority of what is going on in the classroom, I take my German homework to school for my friends correct, if needed, and help me out! I've also started, on my own, a small project with my friends. At night, I write about my day (in German of course) and take it to them the next day to correct! Naturally, I have plenty of grammatical errors, but they tell me that they can understand it! It's great practice for me!

As far as my progress...I'm nowhere near fluent, but I've most definitely improved! If you speak fairly clearly and somewhat slowly, I can understand 90% of typical small talk or easy daily topics. But when people speak really fast and use big words and topics I didn't even know existed, I'm lost in a heartbeat! But my friends are really impressed with how quickly I've progressed and how much I can understand. For any of you who haven't ever attempted to learn a foreign language...it's easier said than done! When you are at my level and know a decent amount of vocabulary and basic sentence structure, then understanding it is not too hard. But when I have to reply in German, words just swirl around in my head and I put together really grammatically incorrect sentences and even spout out "denglisch" (Deutsch plus English)! But my friends just giggle along with me and correct me! It's great! My host family and friends are now speaking about 80% German with me unless I don't understand or they KNOW I won't understand!

Many people have asked me if German is a hard language. Everything is only as hard as you make it out to be. But.....it's not easy! German is actually the closest language to English. And it is certainly easier than attempting to learn Japanese! The alphabet is nearly the same, with just a few differences in pronunciation. For instance, the V sounds like an F, the W sounds like a V, and the I sounds like an E. Once you have those memorized, things flow easier. The German language also has the accent, called an umlaut, which you may know about. German is a very "throaty" language. Even the most feminine of girls can't make German seem "cute". I love the language, but it's going to take lots of practice to get the "R" to roll in the back of my throat and the perfect hard, hissing "ch" sound, but I'm optimistic that I will have it in no time!

So besides the pronunciation, the only other thing about German that is difficult to grasp, is which article to use with each noun. English has one article: the. German has three: der, die, das (masculine, feminine, neutral). Not only is memorizing all the nouns PLUS the article difficult enough, but you need to know the gender of the word in order to use the correct form of "no", "the", and "a". At times I feel like I am in over my head, but I know I'll get there eventually!

My German gets better everyday and I get lots of practice, ALL the time! When I can say something in German (even just a word or two), I do! And I'm always trying to read the newspaper and whatnot! Although I'm not quite thinking or dreaming in German yet (that'll come soon though!), I'm starting to understand things without translating them into English first! It's a great feeling! In another month or two, I hope to be nearly fluent. So my hausaufgaben (homework) to you: brush up on your German! I'll be ready and eager to speak in German with you when I return!

Article #9: Holidays and Fall

Falling leaves, pumpkin pie, hot chocolate, chilly weather, bonfires, and s'mores. All of these things and more are what typically come to mind when you think of fall. Along with these characteristics, you also have the much anticipated Homecoming, beloved Halloween, and, of course, Thanksgiving! This is all a very typical American fall. The fall season in Germany also includes falling leaves, chilly weather and special holidays but it has a different feel.

It started getting chilly in early October and by the end of October/beginning of November, gloves, scarves, hats, and winter jackets were in full use! From what I hear from family and friends back home, the weather is very similar. We also changed our clocks here, and fell back a hour in mid-October, so the days seem very short now. I see the sunrise on my walk to the train every morning (around 7:30) and the sunsets around 5:00. So breakfast and supper are both pretty dark. All of the trees changed color into warm shades of oranges, reds, and yellows, the trees have lost their leaves, and there is certainly a significant amount of leaves to kick around!

Because I am in a large city, bonfires are nearly non-existent. A lot of my friends have heard about such things, but never been to one. I'm not sure whether it's just because I'm in a large city, or if they really don't have them here. But I'm really craving a s'more! And speaking of s'mores...forget it! NO ONE knows what a s'more is!! I've tried very hard to describe them, but they just don't understand the concept of roasting a marshmallow over a fire and eating it between graham crackers with chocolate. Marshmallows are very hard to come by here, but those who have eaten one, say that it's too sweet for them.

So you mean they don't put marshmallows in their hot chocolate?? Well, they don't really drink HOT chocolate. They drink something very similar called "Kaokao." Kaokao is basically a chocolate powder mixed with cold milk. I actually really like it, but I am missing my HOT chocolate with marshmallows! They will occasionally warm up the milk in the microwave, but most of the time it's just cold. When I told my friends that we use hot water with the chocolate mix, they all kind of cringed at the thought of it! I will say, it is much richer with milk!

So for those of you who haven't put two and two together yet, Thanksgiving is strictly an American holiday! Therefore, on Thursday, November 26, I went to school like any other day! No turkey, sweet potatoes, or Grandma's delicious pecan pie! And most importantly, no pumpkin pie!! When I asked if they had pumpkin pie here, they all looked at me with a disgusted look on their face. "No...why would you put pumpkin in a pie!?!?" I tried explaining that it was delicious and that it's more like a cheese cake. I guess they will just have to come to American for Thanksgiving one year and give it a try.

The only thing they have like our American Thanksgiving is a season of offering in the churches. If you belong to a church, this is the time of year when you give thanks for what God has provided by

taking some sort of offering to your church. I'm not 100% sure of the details, but my host family tried explaining that the church altar would be full of foods and goods that people brought as an offering. This sounded similar to our gathering of canned goods for the local food pantry.

Another holiday Americans look forward to and love is Halloween! Unlike Thanksgiving, Germany does celebrate Halloween...just not nearly to the extent that Americans do! Trick-or-Treating is huge in America, but here, many don't even know what it is, let alone actually go! There were bars and pubs that had Halloween themed night where people dressed up and went out for drinks, but if you weren't going out to one of those, it felt like a normal night.

However, Germany has its own celebrations. Such as in Köln (cologne)! On November 11 (11/11) at 11:11 a.m. begins their famous Karnieval! On 11.11 it is like a holiday in Köln. Everyone is off of work and the partying begins! There is a TV channel on that day broadcasting all the Köln the celebrations and various concerts. I was at a friend's house that night and so we watched the TV, sang along and danced to the music, and had so much fun! My friend tried her best to translate the songs, but most of the time it was just silly lyrics. They take familiar tunes in Germany (most of them not familiar to me) and put new words to them. I was able to sing along to parts of the songs because it was just the same thing repeated.

So Germany may not celebrate Thanksgiving or have a big Halloween, but they certainly have plenty of other festivals...I don't think they are missing out! I have enjoyed experiencing their holidays and traditions, but my heart will always belong to Antwerp where s'mores, trick-or-treating, and pumpkin pie rule!

Stuttgart Nacht

Article #7

Recently I went with my host family to *Stuttgart Nacht*. This is a huge culture night with performances and events happening all over the city. Music, dance, theatre, art, films.... everything! It occurs only once a year, always in the fall, and it starts at 7 pm and continues until 2 am.

We started out listening to a group of five guys, who are an accapella group that makes all of the instrument sounds with their voices. It was so cool. I couldn't understand most of the lyrics because it was all in German, but the music was still incredible! They change popular tunes by adding or changing words in it to make it funny. They danced and moved with the music, it was hilarious and entertaining.

Next, we walked from the Staatsgalerie to the Parliament Building to watch a short film about German history. In this five-story building, on each floor, there were different small bands or groups playing all kinds of music. All over the city there was music and arts EVERYWHERE! It was really cool!

Then we walked to a small club where there was an accordian player playing traditional tunes. Some famous people of the area talked about what happiness was for them. It was inspiring. Following that, we went to a magic show and it was really fun!

At the town hall building, we grabbed a bite to eat and rode in Europe's only *open elevator!!!* It is very hard to describe but I'll do my best! First of all, the elevator never stops moving, you just have to step in and out quickly. There are individual cabins which only fit two people per cabin. It goes up to the top, shifts around, and heads down. So you could go in circles all day if you really wanted! It doesn't move terribly fast, but you do need to step in and out quickly. It was a unique experience to ride in Europe's, and maybe even the world's, only running open elevator.

After the exciting elevator ride we went to a small organ concert at a historic church downtown. There was so much more to do, but it was cold and rainy outside, so we decided to go back home at midnight.

There are hundreds of things to attend all over the city including New Orleans style blues music at a famous cemetery, a big presentation at the historic Stuttgart TV tower, or about anything artsy you could ever imagine! Stuttgart Nacht happens yearly on one night, and all over the city! It's not free, you have to pay for each event, or purchase an all inclusive wrist band (like the fair). So once we had our red wrist bands we could get in anywhere. There were a wide variety of events for kids and adults alike. It was a really great night full of culture and fun!!

Article #6- Ulm, Germany

After climbing up all 768 steps, I can now say that I've been to the top of the world's tallest church steeple tower!! Though my legs suffered the consequences, the view of Ulm was incredible! Ulm is a city about a half hour by car East of Stuttgart built around the Danube River situated on the border between Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria (Two German states), and was the home of Albert Einstein.

My host family and I traveled there on a Sunday morning getting there just in time to catch the weekly organ concert at The Ulm Münster Church. This church is unbelievably big!! It is an old gothic church built in the early centuries. During the war, much of the church, and more specifically the stained glass windows, were destroyed. But because of the church's historical value and size, they restored the church and added on additional space. If you want to see pictures of how massive and beautiful the church and tower are -- Google it!

After we made the climb all the way up into the steeple and back down, we stopped for a light lunch and then continued to explore the big hometown. 90% of the roads are all cobblestone and most of the buildings have been restored to their original structure. We walked down by the river and crossed over into Bavaria (just so I could say I was there).

Picture for me, if you will, walking next to a peacefully flowing river with green lawns and sweetly scented flowering trees lining the cobblestone trail. A slight breeze is blowing and it's a comfortable 70 degrees with little to no humidity. There are people riding bikes, walking their dogs, picnicking with their families, and having a Sunday afternoon stroll with their lover. Both young and old lovers were enjoying the warm fall weather. As I'm sure you can imagine by now, it was a picture perfect day!!

To wrap up our day in Ulm, we went to an art museum there. As I love almost every kind of art, I was sure I would enjoy it...and I did! We saw many different styles including a whole exhibit from an artist from NYC you might have heard of: Keith Herring.

The weekend was full of firsts! First climb to the top of the "Münster", first time in Bavaria, first art museum, and first ride on the Autobahn!! The drivers here, in southern Germany at least, are crazy enough on regular city streets but you need to know there is no speed limit!! Because many parts of the Autobahn don't have a speed limit, driving can get very fast and furious and road rage is at a maximum! It was awesome to be going SO fast but the whole time I was clenching my pants, tightening my seatbelt, and gritting my teeth!! We got going up over 160kmph = over 100mph! WOW!! Going from 160 to only 100kmph felt like a crawl although it was really over 60mph! What an experience!

I'm really enjoying it over here! So many new experiences to share with you...so keep reading and I'll keep writing!!

Article #5 - My Host Family's House

My host family's house is quite big! I am living in one of the best parts of Stuttgart called Botnang. They are very classy, up-scale, modern houses. Since Stuttgart is located in a bowl shaped valley, Botnang, being on an outside edge of the city, makes the whole section on the side of a hill. The houses are built into the hill sides.

As you're driving along my street, the house looks like a very small, simple, one-story house, but it is far from that! Our "driveway" consists of three tightly parked spots barely off the street. This area sits above the house. From there you must walk down two flights of stairs to reach the front door on the second level. On this level you can go up a flight of stairs to bedrooms or down a flight to the kitchen, living room, and dining room.

Also on the second level you can access my host parents' bedroom, their bathroom, the music room (used for practicing instruments), my host mom's study, a storage closet, and another regular bathroom. The second floor, except for the rooms, is completely open enabling you to look down into the dining room on the first.

Now, as you walk down the stairs, you are on the first, and bottom, floor. The dining room is the majority of the first floor. Just off of the dining room is the kitchen, living room, laundry room, and a pantry. The kitchen appears kind of small at first but has lots of hidden storage. The living room is very spacious! It appears even more spacious because of the huge wall of windows!

Every wall in entire house is white. The only color they have on the walls is brought via art and paintings. There are hardwood floors in every room. So not only is it a huge house to begin with, but the white walls and abundance of windows make it seem endless! Speaking of windows, every window in the house has its own electric blind system. Just flip a switch!

But now back at the second (main) level, if you climb up a winding flight of stairs you'll reach the third, and top, level. There is a huge landing for storage of games and whatnot. From the landing you can go into each of the bedrooms (Lennart's, Cora's, Vera's, mine) or the bathroom. The bathroom has 2 standing showers and 2 sinks...very convenient. The bedrooms do not have closets; instead, we hang our clothes in a "wardrobe," which is a large piece of furniture.

It's a beautiful and very huge house! I love the house! I'm enjoying my stay here in Stuttgart. But it will still be wonderful to be back in my own home, where my heart belongs- in Antwerp!

Article #4- Lifestyles

This week I will fill you in on some of the life styles I am experiencing here in Stuttgart, like the fashions, hairstyles, and food. Some of these are similar, while others are quite different.

Typical fashion in German is not drastically different than American fashion but they have their own uniqueness. Skinny jeans with Converse shoes are definitely the hot fashion. If not Converse shoes, then leather boots. Girls typically wear a tank top, or something similar, with a cardigan or light sweater over it. Another popular choice is to wear black or navy hose with a cotton knit top, short dress, or skirt.

Scarves are HUGE!! Almost everyday 90% of the girls have a scarf on to accessorize their outfit. Color tends to be pretty bland though; Nothing sparkly, flashy, or bright. Big earrings are a good accessory to an outfit, but only wearing neutrals or light colors. And patterns are also non-existent. If there are any patterns its only stripes or something very subtle.

So what about the guys? They typically wear jeans - not necessarily skinny jeans - with a t-shirt, button-up, or polo and a zip-up jacket over. I also haven't run across any groups of people dressed gothic. Most high school students dress either preppy or nerdy. There aren't many in between.

Because it is not very sunny or warm here in this time of year, a cardigan, sweater, or jacket are most definitely needed. Especially because the classrooms do not have central air, so a window or two is almost always open in classrooms.

As for hairstyles, with the boys there is no real distinct hair style. Many are long and swept across their forehead. Some are just short or even buzzed. But for the girls, they typically leave it long and curly. A lot of girls here have a nice natural curl or wave to their hair. But for those who don't, they just leave it go. They normally part their hair to the side and let it sweep across their forehead. And I have yet to meet someone with highlighted or dyed hair - they just stay with their natural hair color.

Food over here is pretty good! I've only run across a couple of foods that I don't care for, but that's to be expected. The food isn't drastically different than American food. Some essentials they are miss though include: peanut butter, ranch dressing, 1000 island dressing, sliced bread, and macaroni and cheese.

They asked me what my favorite food was, and when I replied Macaroni and Cheese they all just starred at me blankly. I tried explaining it but they didn't understand the concept! They eat a lot of

different kinds of bread and they do not buy them in the loaves like we have ours. And....they do not have white bread; it is mainly wheat bread and has wheat grains and seeds in it.

Breakfast is normally a piece of toast with marmalade. Lunch is normally what we would have for dinner, like spaghetti or some big hot dish. Dinner is something light and cold: cereal, toast, or sometimes leftovers. We eat breakfast together before school, lunch may be with others or on your own, depending on everyone's schedule and usually not eaten until 1 or 2 pm. Then dinner is around 8 or 9:00 pm and most everyone is home by then to eat together.

It has been interesting to compare and contrast the living styles here with those at home. I am getting used to their lifestyles here, but my heart will always belong to Antwerp!

Article #3 9-22-09

More News from Germany!

Our first day of school, Monday, September 14, brought about lots of excitement! The school system is very different here. You are assigned to a class section, for instance mine is "11b," and the people in that section are the people in all of your classes...much like elementary. But the scheduling is much like college. For example, Monday I have classes until 5:30 but on Wednesday I only go until 11:30.

The classes I am taking include: Physics, Chemistry, Math, Biology, English, German, Religion, Politics, Sports, Art, and Geography. We get a half hour break after second period and then an hour lunch break. The atmosphere is much like college, not only because of the time schedule, but because it is very open. As long as you're at your next class on time, you're free to do whatever. Open lunch and, if you have a free period in the middle, open break. We are allowed to moderately eat and drink in class.

There are about 30 kids in "11b" so I'm already getting to know everyone pretty well. I am introduced and known as "The New American Girl." I love it! They love asking me lots of questions about America. They are very fascinated with the prom, school sports, and most of all....school busses. A group of about nine girls gathered around me today and eagerly listened as I showed them pictures and talked about our school bus system. They all want to ride one! It's very different for them because they all get around via a metro system.

They don't call it the metro, however, they call it public transportation, but it's much like our metro or subway, although the majority of it runs above ground as opposed to underground. Kids get to school either by walking or the metro. No one drives to school or gets dropped off by parents.

Speaking of driving there are five main types of cars. Stuttgart is home to the Porsche and the Mercedes Benz, therefore, making them a popular choice. There are also many BMWs, Nissans, and Lamborghinis. As you may already know, all of the cars, vans, and SUVs are much smaller here. Most likely because there two way streets I would consider the same width as a typical alley. In other words, very narrow! And because of the narrowness, many parking spaces are either half on the street half on the sidewalk, or completely on the sidewalk. Also, their side rear view mirrors all fold in due to the narrow streets and small parking spaces.

Several people have asked me about homesickness. For the first couple of days, I will say, it was rough. But the busier and more rested I get...the easier it becomes. Because of the six hour time

difference, it is difficult to catch my friends online so we can chat, but I have talked to them a couple times and I am able to talk to my mom almost everyday which is nice. It's very odd though, because I will be getting home from school around 2:00 and my friends are just going to school! Facebook is GREAT!! It is an excellent way to stay in touch with my family and friends. So keep watching Facebook for my postings and keep reading my articles in The West Bend Newspaper. Germany is great, but as always, my hearts belongs to Antwerp!

Article #2: 9-18-09

Hello Ohio! I hope you read my first column talking about my trip to Germany this year! If not, make sure you read the Sept. 9th issue so you can stay up to date!! I've been here about a week but it feels much longer because so much has taken place!

Many of you have already emailed me and asked how my flight was...and my response: well...it's a loooong 7 1/2 hour flight! There were six other Rotary Exchange Students from all over the US that were on the same flight and will be staying in the Stuttgart area. On the plane we had individual TV screens so we could do a number of things including: watch new and old movies, play games, listen to music, and track our flight. It helped the time past a little faster. Our flight pattern was a huge arch upwards. We went up over Newfoundland, Canada, across "the pond", and then down over Ireland and England to land in Amsterdam.

On the flight they provided supper, which consisted of a small salad, a piece of cheese, two crackers, rice, and teriyaki chicken. It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be....but it was definitely pre-prepared, re-warmed food! Somewhat like a TV dinner. They also provided a breakfast consisting of an egg in a biscuit, orange juice, and a banana. I tried to sleep during the flight, but I was too excited and uncomfortable to get any shut eye.

When we arrived at the Amsterdam airport, we had to go through security and then find our next gate. Neither of those tasks proved to be too difficult. Therefore, we had plenty of time to rest before our small commuter flight to Stuttgart. This plane was a very small plane that we boarded by walking on the tarmac. My flight to Stuttgart was a little over an hour long and we were all glad to arrive at our final destination: Germany!

Now it was finally time for us to find our luggage and our host families. All seven of us anxiously waited for our baggage to come around the wheel. Some found both of their bags right away and some found only one right away. Two of us stood at the carousel for nearly a half an hour waiting for our luggage to come around. Thankfully, both of my suitcases appeared undamaged as did the other six students. I found my host family right away. Also there to greet me at the airport was my Rotary counselor and my second host mom and sister. [I will switch families in December or January.]

Once I got home, the challenge was to stay awake until an acceptable time to fall asleep, according to their time zone! Germany is six hours ahead of Ohio, so I lost a fourth of a day during my traveling time. But that night I got a full, hard eleven hours of peaceful sleep! I woke up and started unpacking!

Thursday we took the public transport to go register me with the local authorities, set up my banking account in Germany, and do some sightseeing around the city. It's a rather large city, much bigger than Fort Wayne, but it doesn't feel that big. It feels like one big hometown. It's beautiful though! We went up into the TV tower (a land mark of the area) and we could see the whole city and surrounding area! WOW! Stuttgart is in a bowl; every side of the city is surrounded by large hills and forest. Did I say?.....SO beautiful!!

On Saturday we took a small trip into the Black Forest (Schwalm Wald). We went to an old monastery in a small little town on a hill side and looked around as my host parents explained the history and many facts about the area. We then drove a little ways more to an outdoor museum of traditional houses from the Black Forest from different time periods. I would say it's very comparable to Sauder's Village. There were some ladies sitting around in traditional clothing weaving hats, purses, shoes with straw. And they were also making real stuffed scarecrows.

When you think of the Black Forest, a couple things typically come to mind: coo-coo clocks, deep, dark valleys, and, of course, hills. All of these are very true. However, no one in all of Germany, and possibly Europe, owns a coo-coo clock! Yes, they are made in the Black Forest, but it's too stereotypical for anyone to have one around here. They are all exported. The Black Forest is very beautiful and I am hoping to go back and take more pictures when all the trees have changed colors.

Germany is becoming home bit by bit every day, but, of course, it will still take some more adjustment. And as I said previously - my heart will always be in Antwerp!

Article #1: 9-14-09

Hello! For all of you who don't know me, my name is Hayley Feichter and I will be a sophomore in high school this year. Instead of attending Antwerp High School, I am taking a once in a lifetime trip to Germany as an Outbound Rotary International Youth Exchange Student. In simpler terms, I will be living and attending school in Stuttgart, Germany for the next eleven months.

Stuttgart is a rather large city of about 550,000 located in southwest Germany near the Black Forest. The weather in Stuttgart is very similar to Ohio. I departed on September 8th and will be back in the US at the beginning of August, 2010. Over the course of the next eleven months, I will be staying with three different host families. If you do the math, I will be with each family about 3 ½ months. My first host family has 4 kids: 3 girls and 1 boy ranging from the ages 13 -19. The oldest is attending college and the 15-year old is an exchange student to the United States, now living in Beverly Hills, California, this school year. My older brother and younger sister will be helping me get used to my new school and routines.

In Stuttgart, I will be attending Koenigin Olga Gymnasium where they have a program set up just for exchange students. Because I don't know much German, for the first 2-3 months I will be taking all my classes in English while after school, I will be taking a special German class to help me learn the German language. After I have some German under my belt, I will integrate back into the regular classes.

Right about now is when people normally ask the question "are you packed?" The answer is no. I never will be fully packed! The airlines only allow you to check two suitcases (each under 50 lbs.), one carry-on, and one personal bag. Coming from a girl's perspective....that's not enough! But yes, I will be able to go shopping over there and buy whatever is necessary. It is getting everything home that might be a real trick!

The past two weeks my emotions are like being on a roller coaster. I am so excited to be going to Germany, yet so sad to say goodbye to my friends here. Email and Facebook will be my life line home, but don't expect news on a daily basis. I'll be very busy trying to learn the language, customs, and routines in my new home, as well as making new friends and travelling about to see the sites. I am planning on sending updates to the West Bend News on a regular basis. Look for my news articles and know that my heart will always belong in Antwerp.