

Riveting 800-year-old Sigulda

A group from St Aloysius' College made up of two teachers, Dr Alan Deidun and MaryRose Sciberras, and two sixth form students, Edward Caruana and Steve Cardona, could not have visited Latvia at a more propitious time.

The participants at the Latvia Comenius conference were housed in Sigulda, the cradle of Latvian national identity, which this year celebrates its eighth centenary.

The town was founded by the Finno-Ugric tribe of the Livs, who settled in the Gauja valley in the 11th century. Since its inception, the town was fortified with a number of castles, the most famous being Turaida Castle, the oldest building in Sigulda, built by Bishop Albert in 1214.

Turaida is derived from the Liv language Tora, meaning God, and aida, meaning garden, therefore, God's garden. Papal ambassador Wilhelm established the Christian congregation in 1266, while the oldest church in Latvia - the Krimulda Church - dates back to 1205.

Throughout its turbulent history, the town was repeatedly ransacked by German Crusaders, by the marauding Russian armies of Ivan the Terrible during the Livonian War (1558-1583), and during the Polish-Swedish War (1600-1629).

Sigulda is a town in the Vidzeme region and is situated in the most picturesque part of the primeval Gauja valley. Reddish Devon sandstone forms steep rocks and caves on both banks of the river. Because of this, Sigulda has been called the 'Switzerland of Vidzeme'.

The jewel in the crown of the myriad of caves around Sigulda is Gutmana Cave, the largest cave in the Baltic states (18,8 metres deep, 12 metres wide and 10 metres high), which comes with its own legends. The most famous one relates to the Rose of Turaida, a Latvian maid who killed herself rather than concede herself to a local baron. Another legend has it that a Liv warrior ordered that his beautiful but cheating wife be entombed in one of the cave walls.

In Sigulda, the Latvian flag is proudly hoisted; in fact, the town is considered the heart of Latvian nationalism.

Written records of the red-white-red Latvian flag have existed since the second half of the 13th century. Bearing a red flag with a white stripe, ancient Latvian tribes went to war against Estonian tribes. This would place the Latvian flag among the oldest in the world. The flag's distinctive dark red colour is often referred to as 'Latvian red'.

The participants were given the privilege by their very obliging hosts to visit the Gauja National Park, just a few kilometres outside Sigulda, which extends to parts of the Estonian border.

The park, which is visited by around 1.5 million tourists every year, is inhabited by wolves, foxes, deer, brown bears, mongoose, owls, etc. Sigulda is also renowned for its bobsled track (opened in 1986).

Two of the mornings spent in Latvia were dedicated to the aim of the exchange - the mastery of the political debate, and a sharing of the various projects tackled by some of the participating countries in line with the Comenius venture of delving into various topical issues in the respective countries.

The morning kicked off with a warm welcome at the meeting hall, with the school choir singing a medley of songs. This was followed by a speech of welcome by one of the English-speaking teachers of our host school, and a practical introduction as to what a political debate consisted of.

Four members of a team, which has won numerous debate competitions in Latvia, showed us how to go about the challenge. Split into two teams of two, they simulated a discussion about selling junk food in schools, with the two teams arguing opposing views.

We were then given detailed technical insight by another Latvian debating veteran on four different debating techniques. The same speaker ran through the political debate method in further detail, consolidating the procedural breakdown given with practical examples, based on three other topics from various fields of interest.

We were then allotted time, following a coffee break, to discuss the topic we had chosen to debate the following day - "Teaching without marks and without homework is good".

The next morning saw the delivery of two presentations, the first from the German delegation, which dealt with a study carried out in the participating school regarding the students' opinions

on whether homework was a necessary element in the learning process.

Then, we put up a short presentation concerning our own Comenius project regarding waste management, which included basic insight to the extent and nature of the local problem, together with details of the study carried out and the conclusions reached, as appeared in The Sunday Times on September 10.

This was followed by the debate. Each team debated the topic repeatedly, competing against each of the other seven teams. The judges, all successful debate competitors, allocated points on an individual basis, based on proficiency in debating technique and quality of the arguments adopted. Both St Aloysius College delegates obtained close to the maximum possible points, deservingly placing first and second in the final standings.

Overall, one must comment on the success, even on an academic level, of the exchange, commending participation in such experiences, both on a local and international level.

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