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A new attitude

Youth exchange means not only seeing new things but also confrontation between oneself and others. This process is called intercultural learning.

Going abroad, travelling, getting to know new people, seeing and experiencing different ways of life. Who has not felt a desire to get away from everyday life and break new ground? If someone has had the deter-

*Luisa Pagano**

mination and luck to do this, what experiences did he have? How has he changed?

One thing at a time! First of all we must consider the various facets of "being abroad". If you travel as a tourist or a businesswoman, your contact with the people of the country you are visiting is generally rather superficial. Such travellers receive mainly impressions which strike the eye immediately: landscapes, architecture, cuisine, fashion, etc. They are confronted hardly at all with the deeper or perhaps hidden aspects of the host culture. In very many cases this type of stay abroad has the effect of hardening prejudice and ethnocentricity (the idea that one's own culture is the most important).

But someone who stays in the host country for a longer time, lives in close contact with its people, goes to school there or works there and perhaps lives in a family there obtains a much more realistic view of the country and a deeper



Intercultural learning: making contact, getting to know each other, respecting each other. (Photo: zvg)

impression of its culture. This is how the long process of intercultural learning begins, and it is one of the main objectives of international youth exchange organisations.

Intercultural learning assumes that learning is an activity which aims at acquiring new knowledge and behaviour patterns – which automatically change and improve the mind. This implies that intercultural learning makes those taking part more tolerant and more open towards different values and ways of self-expression, more interested in other cultures and more objective about their own culture.

"Meet my country – meet the world"

"Meet my country – meet the world" was a joint project between Swiss Radio International (SRI) and Intermundo, the federation of Swiss youth exchange organisations. Young people between 16 and 25 all over the world were invited via SRI programmes to describe their country, their surroundings, their habits and their social and cultural origins and to make them easily understandable and real.

Of the almost 1,200 contributions sent in, the best received prizes, and their authors were then invited to Switzerland. In this way about 40 young people were able to take part in an intercultural camp held in Emmental, Canton Berne, last October. This camp and the project as a whole were extremely successful and were thoroughly enjoyed by all those taking part.

Someone who lives abroad immersed in a new culture cannot avoid this confrontation between the two cultures, their values and their typical behaviour patterns. Someone who becomes conscious of the differences and lives according to the rules and values of the culture of the host country starts to look at the world with new eyes. It is as if the meeting of the two cultures results in the birth of a third created by a fusion of the different values, behaviour patterns and moral principles.

So intercultural learning comes about through the meeting between different cultures. But this process is often painful, since the enormous number of overpowering new impressions can lead to culture shock and serious identity crisis. But the way out of such a crisis is through improving one's own state of mind in the way already described.

The international youth exchange organisations are aware of the strength of the emotive forces behind this learning process, with all its various stages. They are therefore determined to support those taking part in all phases of the exchange and in particular to be available to help in critical moments. The intention is that youth exchange should contribute to shaping a tolerant and open-minded generation interested in

Swiss Abroad youth exchange

The Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad, working with the AFS Intercultural Programme, organises an exchange scheme for young Swiss between 15 and 25 living in Switzerland and abroad. Swiss Abroad from 17 countries already take part in this. Details may be obtained from:

SSA Youth Service
Alpenstrasse 26
CH-3000 Berne 16

others, which will work in favour of peace between peoples and dismantling cultural barriers. Is this Utopia or can it be reality? ■

*The author works with the AFS Intercultural Programme, an international youth exchange organisation.