**Where I left my heart**

It’s difficult to sum up in few  sentences an experience that completely changed my life, but I will try.

I would start by saying something that you may already have supposed: I’ve been to Poland and, back to my hometown in Italy, everything seemed different to me.

My story started in quite a common way: exactly six months ago I had a difficult period in my life, full of stress, difficult decisions to make, great expectations on me and just a great confusion in my mind. Well, exactly on the 29th November I was surfing on the website of AIESEC, an international organization I work for, that lets university students leave for six-week-volunteering projects all over the world. You know, it just happened all of a sudden. In my mind I just started imaging something like: “Hey, you always engage and assist people who do the greatest experience of their lives. Maybe one day you will also take part to this kind of projects. Actually, in 3-4 months you can gain the money you need and go”. Well, after 5 days I applied, without thinking too much about it. My family just thought I was crazy, as it was something...unexpected: I am used to making plans in great advance and on the 13th December I just told my mother that I found some projects that would start by the end of January, that I had already been accepted and that I just had to choose my destination among 4/5 European countries. Actually, I don’t exactly know why I chose Poland. Maybe because I didn’t know anything about that country, apart from some historical concerns of the 2nd World War, so I had no expectations. Maybe also because the project was particular: I would have the chance to share Italian culture to students mainly aged 15-19 years old, in English of course, hosted by Polish families and, what was different from the other opportunities, every week I should change city or village of the Kuyavian -Pomeranian Voivodeship.

So on the 27th January I was getting prepared for the unknown: me teaching in a foreign language to young people? In a country where I don’t know the language? Changing every week my accommodation, making sure I could be able to arrange on my own public transports? For six weeks?

It definitely was the most challenging and rewarding experience of my life. Really, I think I could write an entire book about it, I still remember what I was feeling in every moment of those unforgettable 6 weeks. Just to sum up my travel plan: I first stayed in Torun for 3-4 days before starting the project; then began with the first school in the small village of Tłuchowo, near Lipno, to move then to Włokławek, Torun (again), Nowe, Kowal (near Włokławek) and in the end Żnin. After this brief explanation, what I want to highlight is that every week was different and special, once for the schools and the students I worked for, once for the family, another time for the places I visited. It’s difficult not to say everything that comes in my mind, I would fill in an entire Bible. So I will tell you the most interesting experiences that I had.

1.       Food

I am Italian, I have to start from this aspect! Just kidding, but really, there are a lot of differences. First I would say that I fell in love with some dishes...starting from “gałąbki”! Then “pierniki”, “ogórkowa”, “sernik”, “pierogi”, “oscypek”, “devolai” and, of course, “borscht”.

Second thing: oh my God, I didn’t think it was possible, but I found out that Polish people really eat much more than Italians! We don’t have supper in Italy and between meals there is really a lot of time to wait. After six weeks eating a meal more per day I was like exploding, I don’t know how my clothes could still suit me!

Third thing: Italian dishes. I was astonished mainly because of three facts: some of our typical dishes are cooked in a very strange way, starting from “Bolognese”,  to “carbonara” and “Tiramisù”; coffee is just made mixing the powder in hot water, while we boil it in a special machine called “moka”; finally, people put really strange ingredients on pizza, like pineapple, and this fact created really great debates during my classes!

Last thing...when I came back I just changed some habits. My family really laughs at me as I started eating so much for breakfast and, above all, salty things (Italian breakfast is only made of few sweet things) and I began drinking hot tea during meals. Here it’s so strange, tea is for early morning or afternoon breaks, water or cold drinks are for lunch and dinner!

2.       Families

I can just say that I felt at home, experiencing unexpected situations. I found out that my first new mother was pregnant and she revealed the fact while I was there with the rest of the family, as if I was a member like the others, I was like crying; then I’ve been baking pizzas, tiramisu and carbonara with everyone... once I also caught one of my “sisters” eating an entire bowl of mascarpone cream that I left in the fridge to prepare tiramisu, as she never tried it in the Italian way!

I went back to visit the first family for two following weekends in Tłuchowo and then...something about the family of Torun. I’ve been there during the third week and for three days before going back to Italy by mid March. Could you believe me if I tell you that this summer they should have gone to Portugal for vacations, but decided to change destination to come and visit me for some days in Verona in August? Such great bounds in a week and a half. This is beautifully shocking.

3.       Schools and work

I really enjoyed preparing the material for my presentations: videos, power points, games, big flipcharts where I drew on my own some images related to stereotypes about Italian culture...But then the approach was so hard. I had to understand how to adapt my presentations to each class, switching from a teaching style to another one, trying to make 45 minutes per time as interactive as possible.

Some schools really treated me and the other international volunteers as famous stars: we were on newspapers, on the TV, the on the radio and on YouTube! It also happened during the fifth week in Kowal: I was in a cooking and catering school, so for an entire week I alternated lessons concerning Italian food culture and “practice” in the kitchen. A journalist made a reportage about how we prepared original Italian pizza. It was so funny! I also learnt how to prepare tiramisu (but nobody knew I had never tried to prepare it by myself when I was in Italy!). Great!

I also still write to a lot of students, who then turned into friends. You know... once I stepped into a classroom and some girls started crying because they couldn’t believe that I was there to dedicate my time to them, but actually I was just myself. They were thanking me for being myself.

4.       Places

If the food was great, the people I met so nice and warm...The beauty of Poland was unique. Different architectural styles and atmosphere, combined to a don’t-know-what, made every place great. I had the chance to visit, apart from the cities and villages where I was working, Gniezno, Warszawa and Gdansk. I still have to visit Krakow, but I’m going there this summer. I found out that this year World Youth Day will be held there, so I applied as volunteer for two weeks. Right before and after that I will go back to visit my friends and families in the North, so... my adventure in Poland has just begun!

Last thing: I love languages. I studied French, German and some Spanish, but when I came into Polish I was shocked. Neither German was so strange, difficult and full of exceptions. So now I can say... Uczę się polskiego, ale to jest bardzo, bardzo trudny! I can just read and introduce myself really simply. It’s so stimulating and challenging, it’s something I really want to learn. Even because I know that in the future I will have to come back and give something more to the country that gave me everything. Starting from schools, that asked me to elaborate specific projects for them, and maybe for university, considering that my final thesis will be about Polish constitution of 1791 (that here, believe me, nobody knows!) and I may have the chance to do further research in Poland next year.

In the end I would say... there is a place where I was born and I have your home, then Poland, where I have been adopted and I left my heart.