

## Mr Oates' Lithuanian Blog

### Day 1 - Sunday 8th October

My alarm went off at the eye-watering time of 3.30am. A quick shower and some very last minute packing took place before Miss Mossie picked me up at 4am.

A phone call on route to Glasgow Airport confirmed that all pupils were already at the airport searching for the check in desk. Miss Mossie and myself were not too far behind.

Our destination for the week was a small town named Siauliai in Lithuania. The nearest airport to the town of Siauliai is Riga which is the capital of Latvia. We would be participating in a European funded 'Erasmus Plus' project.

All staff and pupils made it through security without a hitch and headed for a hot breakfast roll at the 'James Martin Cafe'. At this point I should recommend the roll and link sausage as one of the best I have ever tasted (even at £4.50!!).

Just as I took a final bite from my superb roll and sausage the information screens displayed that we were now boarding. An unsuccessful search for 'The Daily Record' newspaper led to a hurried walk to the departure gate to take full advantage of Miss Walker's gift of priority boarding.

Our flight to Riga left ten minutes behind schedule and lasted the duration of two and a half hours. The flight was a comfortable one and many of our party caught up on some much needed sleep.

On our arrival in Latvia we made our way towards the bus station to catch the bus across the border into Lithuania. As soon as we left the airport we noticed that it was bitterly cold and the bleak grey skies made us instantly feel at home.

The bus journey (2 hours) flew by as we admired the very rural Latvian and Lithuanian scenery. A quick check of our passports at the border by a burly immigration officer ensured all Kilmarnock Academy staff and pupils were granted access.

Our bus pulled into Siauliai Bus Station where we spotted our host for the week, Zulfija Guziene. Zulfija greeted us warmly and led us to a waiting minibus to transport us to our hotel. A five minute journey later and we pulled up outside the Soviet built Hotel Siauliai.

On first viewing the hotel looked rather dated however the rooms were more than acceptable for a week's stay. Pupils had double rooms which included living rooms and fridges which delighted all. When the pupils found the gym, pool tables and table tennis tables all initial concerns were quashed.

Bags unpacked and it was time to meet the Italian staff and pupils (who arrived at the same time) to head for dinner. A short five minute walk to a restaurant called Morgan's allowed us to stretch our tired legs.

In Morgan's we had plenty of choice on the menu with chicken skewers and cheese burgers being the preferred option. A relaxed meal took us to 9pm when it was time to depart to the hotel.

We agreed with Zulfija to meet all other European partners (Italian, Turkish, and Portuguese) in reception at 9am the next morning. First agenda item in the morning was a visit to the host school, Siauliai Sporto Gimnazija.

Day 1 - Done



### **Day 2 - Monday 9th October**

The alarm sounded at 8.30am, enough time for a shower and to experience our first Lithuanian breakfast. Our group enjoyed cereal, yogurt and pancakes.

After breakfast we met all partner countries in the reception and made our way on a public bus to the host school. The Lithuanian public were friendly and helped accommodate our large group (32) on and off the bus.

On our arrival at Siauliai Sporto Gimnazija a warm welcome was well received. Some pupils were dressed in traditional Lithuanian clothing and the school mascot guided us inside.

Zulfija introduced us to the staff and pupils at the school and invited us to try a Lithuanian tradition of brown bread dipped in salt. Some enjoyed the tradition, others not so much.

We made our way to the school assembly hall to watch a special concert in our honour. To begin the concert, a large flag of each nation was brought into the hall and presented at the front. We stood for all five national anthems, joining in our own and respecting the others. Legs were starting to get numb after the third anthem, however we all held strong until the fifth had finished. Who knew the Italian anthem was eight minutes long?!

The concert included speeches, dance, judo, wrestling and singing. At the conclusion of the concert each country played a video we created entitled 'What makes us proud?' We watched Demi, Ciara, Lewis and Kyle interview family members about what makes them proud. A rousing round of applause was given for our video!

After all partner videos were viewed we went to lunch in the school canteen. As Sporto Gimnazija is a specialist sport school the diet is strictly controlled. We sampled vegetable soup for starter and beef with rice for main. The food was washed down with a glass of water with a slice of pear placed in it for extra taste. Lunch was a pleasant surprise and was all far too much for us to manage.

Our next stop was a visit to the Siauliai Council Headquarters. We were met by a young looking Mayor who gave us information and historical facts about our new home town. The Mayor seemed delighted with the bottle of whisky in a tartan bag we presented him as a gift.

On the advice of the Mayor we took a walking tour round Siauliai visiting famous statues such as The Golden Boy and The Crying Girl. The tour was cut short due to the ever present heavy rain.

For our evening meal we once again took the public bus. This time we opted for the shopping centre on the outskirts of the city. We went to a restaurant called Kapidele which had a full glass wall looking into an ice rink which had an ice hockey match underway. Great viewing whilst we enjoyed stone baked pizza plus the traditional Lithuanian meals of potato and chicken pancakes.

At the end of the meal pupils were delighted to go to the ten pin bowling alley above the restaurant and staff were given the opportunity to sample the shops. The Scottish contingent shaped up well in the bowling contest with Demi Muir deemed 'Champion Bowler'.

We returned back to the hotel in the heavy rain ready for a rest before the next day's activities.



### **Day 3 - Tuesday 10th October**

Day 3 got off to an excellent start with the introduction of both bacon and sausages at breakfast. A guaranteed hit with the Scots on the Erasmus Plus project.

After a hearty breakfast we all boarded a hired bus headed for an Additional Support Needs school on the outskirts of Siauliai. On our arrival at the facility we appreciated the warm, friendly and modern building. The pupils in the school seemed very happy to see so many visitors to their school. Pupils performed a dance called 'Sunshine' and older pupils played musical instruments. After the performance Erasmus Plus partners assisted pupils from the school in making friendship bracelets. This experience was rewarding for old and young alike.

Next on our busy agenda was to visit the very famous site, 'The Hill of Crosses'. Lithuanians have been placing crosses on this hill since the 1800s until the present day. The precise origin of this practice is unknown! At the moment there are over 100,000 crosses on the hill. The Soviet uprising in Lithuania led to this site being destroyed three times between 1961-1975.

Next stop was a rural village museum. A small Lithuanian village set up as the nation would have lived in the early 1900's. When walking through one of the model houses Lewis Kennedy decided to try on a coat which was on display. This led to an angry Lithuanian woman leaving Lewis in no doubt that this wasn't acceptable behaviour but no harm done. The woman continued to follow Lewis around the museum like a hawk until we left for lunch at Seduva Mill.

In the mill we were given vegetable soup for starter and fish for main course. By all accounts the fish was delicious, unfortunately fish is something I cannot stomach. The cabbage and rice which accompanied the fish was enough to keep me going through the afternoon activities.

We completed our afternoon by visiting Chaimas Franklin Vilas museum. Here we watched a film about migrants in Lithuania. The events of today had caught up with all of the party and eyes were getting tired. Zulfija called quits on the movie after some negotiations between all parties.

After a quick twenty minute nap back at the hotel we walked to a nearby restaurant/nightclub for dinner. We had beetroot soup to start and chicken in a mushroom sauce for main. The meal was excellent with little left on any Scottish plates.

As pupils finished their main course a DJ dimmed the lights and raised the music. A five nation disco competition took place with the Italians leading the way. Miss Mossie and Mr Oates supervised from afar.

The clock hit 9.45pm and it was time to go back to the hotel before the over 21 nightclub kicked into action at 10pm. It was a short walk back to the hotel before hitting the hay for a big day tomorrow!



#### Day 4 - Wednesday 11th October

Breakfast was served an hour earlier this morning as we were making a three hour journey to the capital city, Vilnius. Breakfast was hurried down before boarding a bus with all partners. Around 15 Lithuanian students from the host school joined our group as we set off for Vilnius. As we left at 8.05am the Lithuanian pupils produced a music speaker and the tunes were pumping out before my cereal and yogurt had even settled.

We arrived at our first stop of Trakai Castle at 12pm. Our journey slightly delayed after a stop in at the service station to use the toilet and buy refreshments.

Trakai Castle is built on a very small island and required us to walk on a small bridge to reach the entrance. We were allowed to wander freely round the castle placing Miss Mossie amongst others in the stalks.

We were back on the bus for 1pm armed with all the Trakai Castle trinkets you could ever want or need. There will be some delighted/disappointed families when these €3 trinkets are produced as gifts back home.

Back on the bus we made for the city centre of Vilnius. We were led on a walking tour by Zulfija taking in various chapels as well as the Tower of Vilnius where the views were spectacular above the city.

After a late lunch of ham and pineapple pizza the bus collected us at 5.30pm and made our long trip back towards Siauliai.

On our arrival back the Italian party led the way to dinner. The staff returned to the restaurant of the first night with pupils opting to try next door at Chilli Pizza.

Time for bed.



## Day 5 - Thursday 12th October

Thursday didn't get off to a great start. A text from Lewis Kennedy informed the teachers that he had been sick during the night. A further text from Demi said that she too was feeling unwell. Thankfully Ciara and Kyle were right as rain. As all teachers met at breakfast it appeared two or three pupils from each nationality were struggling with a sickness bug.

Lewis slept on for an extra hour after breakfast. The plan was that Lewis and myself would miss the first activity of the day and meet all partners for the second activity at the school.

At 10.30am we called a taxi and made our way to school. The boys participated in a basketball training session and the girls would take part in a taekwondo lesson. Lewis sat this activity out as he was still feeling under the weather.

At this point all teachers met to evaluate and review the project so far and also to discuss future projects in Portugal and Scotland.

Basketball, taekwondo and teacher meetings took us to lunchtime. Today's school lunch was vegetable soup followed by chicken and rice in a white wine sauce. The meal again was excellent.

After lunch we boarded the school bus destined for a bread making museum. When we arrived we were shown the historical utensils used to create the bread before making our own small loaf.

We were asked to create a unique design on top of our own loaf to ensure we collected the correct one from the oven. My 'O' for Oates quickly turned my well-shaped loaf into a poor man's mushroom!

Following my display of average bread making skills we took the school bus back to the hotel to prepare for a meal at the intriguingly named 'Smaku Smakas' restaurant.

In Lithuanian 'Smaku Smakas' is translated in to English as 'the taste of all tastes'. A bold statement as it aimed to please around 45 pupils, staff and guests in a private function room.

My marinated pork was excellent and the chocolate cake to finish wasn't too bad either! As pupils enjoyed their meal they mixed with all nationalities as staff shared stories and experiences from their own schools.

As the dinner drew to a conclusion the Scottish party presented the Siauliai Sporto Gimnazija Head Teacher with bottle of whisky as a gift. We also gave to her a Kilmarnock Academy plaque which will be displayed in the Lithuanian school.

As another day was coming to a close Lewis informed us that he was feeling much better and enjoyed most of his dinner.

Time for some sleep.



### Day 6 - Friday 13th October

Friday the 13th is traditionally an unlucky day...not for us. We had some exciting plans around Siauliai. Most exciting of all was a trip to the 'Ruta' chocolate museum!

This would be our last day in Siauliai therefore we braced ourselves for an emotional farewell party later in the evening.

We tucked into cereal, eggs and toast at breakfast before taking the public bus to Siauliai Sporto Gimnazija. At school, pupils participated in creating an iMovie of their Lithuanian experience so far and teachers had one final project meeting.

At 10.30am we headed for the Ruta chocolate museum. Here we were shown how the chocolate ingredients are sourced and the impressive history the Ruta Company has to offer.

After watching videos of chocolate making it was time to make some of our own. We were given a blue apron as well as a fairly unattractive blue hairnet. We were led to a chocolate laboratory which had ingredients that we could use in our own creations.

Our masterpieces included white, milk and dark chocolate as well as fillings of marzipan, strawberry flakes, cornflakes and rice crispies. Some of us amongst the Scottish group had a hidden talent; others should certainly stick to the day job!

Despite feeling a bit queasy from sampling the chocolate we walked to lunch. We had our meal in the shopping mall at a restaurant called Charlie Pizza. We enjoyed all the pizza, calzone, chicken wings and salads that Charlie could throw at us.

After lunch we picked up a few remaining gifts to bring home as souvenirs and made our way back to the hotel.

Zulfija informed us to meet at 4.30pm in the hotel reception and to dress 'warmly' for the night ahead. The farewell party was to be held in a specially designed outdoor Lithuania historic village!

On arrival at 'Zemaitiska Troba' we were welcomed by some of the school pupils wearing traditional Lithuanian dress as well as the owner of the property.

The lady owner showed us round by ringing a bell indicating that we were to follow her to a new hut or hidden building. These places included log fires, saunas, hot tubs as well as a disco room which would be used for some serious partying later in the night.

Before any dancing took place dinner was served. Cooked on a rustic barbecue were chicken sausages and baked potatoes as well as cabbage soup. The meal was not a massive hit with our pupils but provided enough fuel for the singing and dancing which followed.

As all nationalities filed out of the dinner hall pupils were lined up to participate in Lithuanian style dancing. These dances were very similar to Scottish ceilidh dancing which we enjoy at Christmas.

After around 30 minutes of high intensity dancing a presentation of gifts from the Lithuanian school to each nationality took place. All staff and pupils received a mug which had our own names printed on it as well as a Scotland and Lithuanian flag. A treasured gift for sure. As well as the mug our goody bag had a box of chocolates which could feed a family of eight for a week!

After gifts were exchanged we were told one more surprise waited outside. A huge bonfire was set alight by the head boy and head girl from the school. Music played and all European partners held hands, swaying and singing round the fire.

As the clock struck 7.30pm it was time for us to say our final farewells and head for Siauliai bus station. Our coach to Riga was at 8.15pm and we arrived at the bus station with 15 minutes to spare. Just enough time for those who did not enjoy the chicken sausages to grab a quick Burger King.

A two hour bus journey back across the border into Latvia was a comfortable one as we exchanged our personal highlights from the week. On arrival at Riga bus station we found one taxi which Miss Mossie and the two girls took destined for the Rixwell Gertrude Hotel. Mr Oates and the boys wandered into Riga city centre to flag down one taxi of our own. A short five minute taxi ride took us to our plush four star hotel for the night.

The Rixwell Gertrude Hotel was modern and clean. We headed for our rooms agreeing to meet at breakfast at 10.30am the following morning. At breakfast we would plan our one day stay in Riga.





## Day 7 - Saturday 14th October

Breakfast in the Rixwell Gertrude Hotel was excellent. For the first time in a week the buffet included baked beans! As we ate breakfast we created a plan for the day. It was agreed that we would take a canal tour round Riga. The rain was lashing against the breakfast room window as we went back to our rooms to get our jackets looked out for the day ahead.

A wet walk into Riga lasted around 20 minutes before we found the start point of the canal tour. The small river boat was very comfortable and we were given our own blanket to keep warm. The enjoyable tour lasted 50 minutes with the only downside being that there was no commentary from the captain about the surroundings.

At the end of the canal tour we strolled around Riga city centre taking in all that was on offer in this beautiful city. The stunning buildings and the elegant cobbled streets made the heavy rain less of an issue.

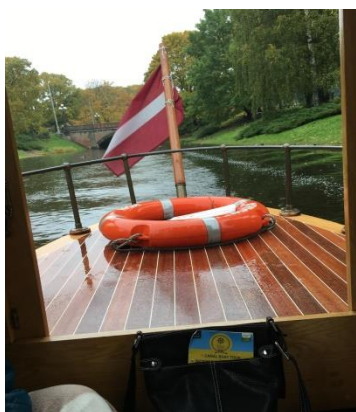
We had a quick lunch stop at Costa Coffee before we navigated our way to the Riga indoor food market. This food market has been crowned as the largest indoor market in Europe! As we walked round we saw various fish, chicken, spices and bread as well as fruit and cheeses! The market was full of tourists and locals looking for some fresh bargains.

We walked in the rain back to our hotel to grab a quick shower and freshen up for our final dinner on the project.

The Italian group was staying in a hotel two minutes from our own so we agreed to meet for dinner. Six Scots and ten Italians made for the Steik Haoos in Riga city centre. The steaks at the restaurant were phenomenal and not a scrap was left by anybody at the table!

Both groups ambled back to our respective hotels before one final embrace between both groups. The Italians would fly home two hours after us tomorrow.

Back in the hotel we packed away all of our belongings and made for bed.



## Day 8 - Sunday 15th October

Our taxi was due to take all six of us to the airport at 9am. Some final packing and breakfast took place before we made our way down to the hotel reception.

The taxi journey to Riga airport took all of 15 minutes as we took in the last of our Eastern European surroundings.

We checked our luggage in at the Ryanair check in desk before passing through security. Riga Airport has many shops to spend any remaining Euros in and we all agreed to meet at the boarding gate at 11am.

Mr Oates and Miss Mossie were the first to arrive at the gate with no sign of any pupils. Miss Mossie sent a warning text to all pupils informing them that it was time to board. Demi and Ciara duly arrived and boarded as the teachers waited for Kyle and Lewis. As time marched on there was still no sign of either boy at the gate.

With only a handful of passengers still to board the plane Kyle and Lewis came running to the gate. They had made it by the skin of their teeth! Both boys apologised for under estimating the size of the airport and were far too comfortable in a coffee shop close to security.

We boarded the plane as the pilot informed all passengers that we would be flying into 80-90mph head winds and there would be an additional half hour on to our flight back home to Glasgow .

Safe and sound we landed back on Scottish soil at 12.45pm more than ready for the October holidays!

