

# Erasmus+ project „The Children of Sheherazade“

## Germany – Year 1 (2021–22) – Storyteller’s Report

**School: GGS Düppelstraße, Aachen, Germany**

**Facilitator (Storyteller): Regina Sommer**

Entering the class room on the second of November 2021 twenty four pair of eyes turned to the door and looked at me curiously. We all were wearing masks and so all I could see were big eyes and hair long or short. We were about to start the storytelling project „The children of Sheherazade“. I walked into the room and joined the class room teacher Mrs. Kathleen von Scheven in front of the black board. She introduced me as „Mrs. Sommer“ and then left to sit down next to one pupil. Now it was up to me to explain who I am: an artist living in Germany and the USA for the last 40 years, then explaining the art – my art – of storytelling, and why I am here now: an introduction of our project followed ending with the words that I would be coming from now on nearly every Tuesday for the next 3 years.

24 pairs of eyes continued to look at me either curiously or astounded or frowning. Total silence followed my words, no whispering, no questions were asked nothing at all. I felt at a loss but then I had an idea. I wanted to give them a choice as well as get their consent. I opened all the windows, asked the two first rows of kids to move their desks backwards. I then removed my mask (distancing for more then 4 meters and air flow allowed me to take these actions) and began to tell an old fairy tale. „The crystal ball“ one of the collected ones of the Brothers Grimm. After I finished and had put back on my mask and said: „That is part of our project. If you liked listening to this story let me know by rising your thumbs up into the air if not turn your thumps to the floor and then maybe we should not do this project!“ 24 thumbs went up. I felt relieved. Now we truly could begin.

I explained that in the first year we – the other storytellers in our partner classes – would pick up wonder tales from all the nationalities which are represented in a class. So each of them have to tell me their name, which languages they know or speak at home and and a bit about themselves. That took a long time as most to them had a hard time to express themselves. 5 had less then rudimentary speaking skills in German, 4 understood hardly anything although they had listened vividly. With the help of class mates, their teacher and translation they understood then what to do and were able to say their name and name their country.

Sixteen nationalities are represented in this class: Turkey, Syria, Czech Republic, Kamerun, Serbia, Rumania, Bulgaria, Russia, Hungary, Vietnam, Spain, Poland, Croatia, Algeria, South Sudan, Kurdistan (2 children explained that this is their country although it doesn’t exist anymore because of war)

Now our „normal“ sequence continued. They were allowed to go outside and run around the court yard – allowed with their masks on. Something that would happen after each telling. On return I told them that it was now up to them to express themselves, by drawing a picture and pick something of the tale they heard. But what it was they decided for themselves. All of their pictures would be collected and turned into a fairy tale picture book at the end of the school year. Each child would create his/her very own book.

I had laid out paper, crayons and colored pencils on their desks while they were outside. But a few told me that they have nice colored pencils themselves and don't need mine. They showed them to me ever so proud. And then they started. Well not all of them though. One little boy Benjamin from Hungary said he did not have an idea. So I told the class, that sometimes if one did not have an idea one would get one when seeing something. So they could walk around the class room looking at the pictures of the others to get inspired. As our hours differ from the normal sessions we would be doing things differently as well. Here copying is seen as a good thing. One idea starts another. It is like telling an old tale. It doesn't belong to me but when I tell it it takes on my way of being. We discussed then that all of their pictures are inspired by their own minds. If we go to the land of the fairies everything is possible and no picture will get the attribution good or bad. Imagination rules here. And fantasy can't be judged.

### **Some observations about some children.**

Well Benjamin didn't get an inspiration. He sat in front of his blank paper and sulked. Well you do not have to draw! I told him it just would be nice. The girl sitting next to him took his paper and drew some grass on it. He then added a few more blades. Fine with me, if you are fine with that! He nodded. That went on for good 2 month. Since then he draws after having heard a tale. „I have ideas“ he told me. Was his fantasy awakened?

Continuing to walk around the class room Mrs. van Scheeven and I looked at what the pupils were doing, praising them, or listening to their stories, about what they were drawing. I then noticed one little boy in the first row who just sat motionless in front of his paper. Badr from Syria said that he did not like to draw. He insisted in not liking it with 3 words. He understood German quite well but could hardly express himself. He came to Germany a year ago. I looked at him and saw him grinning a bit. Well this little guy is making that up I thought to myself. „Would you like to make a cartoon or a sketch!“ I asked. He shrugged his shoulders. „Did you like the tale?“ He nodded his head. „Well let's make a deal. I will tell a story and you listen. But then you have to draw something even just one single object from the tale. OK?“ Another nod. It turned out that he is a fine painter and draws great pictures. His favorite objects are houses. This little interface took place all year long. I don't like drawing! I know you do! And a wonderful picture will unfold with more and more details while the year was progressing and his German got better and better.

Alexander from Poland has very good language skills, listens avidly and partakes often during the telling, which is fine with me. His pictures are another story. They are dripping with blood. He explains that often one of the super heroes – he puts them into his drawings – are needed to help the person in the tale. Their weapons are important to kill all enemies because there are monsters everywhere even if I did not talk about them. A lot of them are invisible. One of his pictures differs. The one before Christmas: a wonder tale from the Elsass where a poor family with the help of two trees find the Christmas fairy who gives them presents for the children and decoration for the tree. His tree trimmings were red globes and a warm fire in the fire place to keep them all warm. After the break he returned to his „normal pictures: weapons and blood and sometimes a super hero“.

Sara Maria loves to draw. Great colourful pictures emerge full of details off the specific tale. When she introduced herself she said she is „arabic“. It was in March when she told me that she wants a tale from her country and that she is from Algeria. Nobody had this information about the family so far.

Asli a little Roma girl who grew up in Bulgaria and Turkey. She speaks three languages so far: Romani, Turkish and Bulgarian but unfortunately little German. She communicated with me often per hand signals. From the beginning she loved the story telling classes, greeting me from the 2<sup>nd</sup> time on with the heart signal and saying good bye likewise. She drew from the beginning one scene: a couple getting married in a meadow. The first 10 pictures were all the same but then she started to add something from the tale: a color which was mentioned, a flower. After observing this I tried to put into each story something that she could add. Maybe the color of a ribbon in the girls hair, a colour of a dress, the long hair of the young man. She picked it up but stayed herself: a meadow with a couple getting married.

## **The tales of the first year**

„The crystal ball“ Brother Grimms, Germany

„The Miracle tree“ + „The princess in the flaming mountain Bulgaria

„The little pot“ „The clever farm girl“ Turkey

„The magic drum“ + Oni and Anago“ Kamerun

„Cat, sparrow and dwarf“ + „The Zarewitsch“ Russia

„Maruschka and the four seasons“ Chez Republic

„The Christmas fairy“ The Elsass

„The two ponds“ Syria

„The emperor who wanted to marry his daughter“ Serbia

„Blanco Flor the devil'S daughter“ Spain

„The golden balloon“ Poland

„Brothers and friends“ Vietnam

„The love of the dove“ Rumania

„Willa – the boy with the thousand spots“ + „He payed the debts of the dead man!“ Croatia

„The strong Jura“ Hungary

„The wooden sword“ Algeria

„The eagle prince“ Kurdistan

The tale from South Sudan was not told as the boy did not participate in the project after 3 times as he had special German lessons at the same time.

## The booklets and the titles they chose

Glücksgeschichten  
Landesgeschichten  
Unsre Hexenwelten  
Geschichtenbilder  
MärchenWeltgeschichten  
Unsere Welt  
Königsgeschichten  
Unser Märchenbuch  
Geschichten aus unseren Ländern  
Unsere Zauberwelt  
Weltgeschichten  
Alte Geschichten von unseren Ländern



## The favorite story of year one

Choosing the favourite tale of the year how to go about it! By telling a short important phrase of a tale, or making a gesture or showing a mimic, or producing a specific sound. Of the 23 told tales only the very first tale was not really recognized. Just two children could remember it. From the second tale on 90% of them recognized the tale when hearing or seeing a phrase, a mimic, a gesture or a sound. They started to tell each other the tale in detail and were having fun remembering. An interesting factor was to observe which child learns how. One girl wanted to know the title of each tale. She remembered them through this. Several children recognized a phrase or the beginning. Some of them needed the sound or the melody to remember, some recognized a specific gesture or a mimic. The decoding was widely spread and really impressive. To pick a favourite tale was done quite fast. One tale received 22 votes followed by three others which got 21 votes each. The tale is the „Eagle prince!“

# Erasmus+ project „The Children of Sheherazade“ Germany – Year 2 (2022–23) – Storyteller’s Report

**School:** GGS Düppelstraße, Aachen, Germany

**Facilitator (Storyteller):** Regina Sommer

I was greeted happily when I entered the classroom and I felt the same. I greeted everyone personally and the hugs and squeezing lasted for several minutes.

Then I noticed that 2 children were missing: Badr from Syria and Moanrian from South Sudan. I asked about them and the children said that Badr had moved away and that Moanrian was repeating the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade: „He had never been to school before and otherwise everything would be too difficult for him!“ I was told.

„And now: you tell the story and we draw!“ came the next question. I said yes, but a little differently, because now it was not their countries of origin that determined the stories, but they themselves. They could choose topics that I would then tell stories about. After we had decided what the topics were, the first ideas came.

Everything was written on the board and then it was a matter of choosing, because we couldn’t cover all the topics. To avoid any arguments or „I’ll go with what the person who is announced chooses!“ I asked everyone to put their head on the desk and raise their hand if a topic came up that they liked!“ They could choose as many topics as they wanted.





Then there were two run-offs until the 3 or 4 topics were decided. Halloween stories, Christmas stories, giants and witches of the world.

There was then a discussion on the topic of Halloween about which stories would fit: ghosts, spectres, zombies, werewolves. But then ... he said he would like to know how Halloween came about. Where does it really come from, what does this day or night mean. It must be said here that this boy is 2 years older than the others and only joined the class shortly before the summer holidays. Kathleen von Scheven had agreed to take him in because otherwise he would have been sent to a special school because of emotional difficulties. He came from the other school. This suggestion was enthusiastically received by everyone. Even when I explained that we would then have to go to Ireland for the beginnings of Halloween, the Celtic festival of Samhain. But their ghosts, specters and zombie stories would not be included. We ended this first session with the story of Jimmy Dudu. A Jamaican story about a soul bird that is only seen from October 31<sup>st</sup> to November 1<sup>st</sup> and that must not be killed.

This really challenged the class, because for the next six weeks I told Celtic stories that dealt with the discovery of Ireland by the Tuatha da Dananns (Bronze Age) as well as the creation of other worlds. And everyone joined in. Lots of questions were asked. We looked at quantum physics, which talks about parallel universes, just like in the stories. We were able to answer some things together, but some things remain mysterious. „Maybe we'll know something when we're as old as you, Mrs. Sommer!“ said Beni. Benjamin is a Roma who, in his first year, refused to paint or do anything else after the story for most of his time. He said „No!“ to everything. And now! Like a different person. He listens with an intensity that motivates me to tell the story differently. He immediately picks up a sheet of paper and starts painting. His pictures are colorful and detailed.

Just in time for the start of Advent, we were able to tackle our second topic: Christmas stories, which turned out to be a challenge for me. Christmas stories! Here too, the question was: what is the meaning of Christmas? We thought about it together and decided. Christmas is about giving something and experiencing miracles. First, I told the story of the holly branch, where a stingy old man learns to be generous.

One student's painted answer was his house, his Benz and his bag full of gold!  
The picture by Asli, who had only painted a wedding couple in a meadow in the first year, showed the beggar and the dark house before the stingy old man's transformation. Ecrin divided her picture into two halves: before and after the realization. The range of what is meant by giving is wide.

As everyone wanted to continue working on the topic after the Christmas holidays, I suggested telling the story of Hans Christian Andersen's Snow Queen. This dragged on for the next 6 weeks, but everyone joined in enthusiastically. And so, in the end, a book within a book, "Christmas Stories," was created.

The last topic was split into two. Here I took up an idea from my Danish colleague Maria, who wanted to deal with two topics more or less at the same time and always told them in turn. I asked my children if that was OK with them and they said yes. And they always knew exactly whether it was the giants' or the witches' turn!

The children still love the storytelling sessions. They are enthusiastic about it and now have a lot to tell. After running, which some still need to do, others decide to stay where they are, they get a piece of paper and start talking about what they think is important to draw. Sometimes there is just one object or one figure that reflects the essence of the stories for them. We discuss how much truth the fairy tales or stories have. Whether it is all just fantasy. Quantum physics, brain research or even knowledge of nature can make a contribution here and it is now a given that we sometimes go online to track something down or someone. The I-pads that were purchased due to Corona are coming into their own.

At the end of the school year they were curious about what we would be doing next year. „You will invent and develop your own stories!“ was received with curiosity but also with some scepticism. „Let yourself be surprised! It will be fun!“ I said. „That's always the case with you and storytelling!“ was the comment that I happily took off into the summer holidays with.

# Erasmus+ project „The Children of Sheherazade“

## Germany – Year 3 (2023–24) – Storyteller’s Report

**School:** GGS Düppelstraße, Aachen, Germany

**Facilitator (Storyteller):** Regina Sommer

In this final year of the project, the artist will not be telling the story. This is just about the students telling the story or making up stories. Since I announced this at the end of the last school year, they were all waiting eagerly to see how they could find stories and tell them. Some children said that I must speak good German for that. But I reassured them that this was not necessary and that they could all make up stories.

### Method 1

Method 1 consists of rhyming words.

I gave the word „*Stein*“ (stone) and the students came up with rhyming words that went with it: *dein, mein, Bein, kein, Rhein, nein* (your, my, leg, no, Rhine, no). From these, the following story was created: Once upon a time there was a stone with one leg that said „No!“ to the Rhine because it took its leg. „Oh no!“ laughed the Rhine. „Your leg is mine now!“ This story was a collaborative effort by the whole class.

Now we had a story, but how could it be told? Groups formed to think of something or someone worked alone. Asli (Bulgaria/Turkey), who has no grammar and cannot say or repeat a proper German sentence, sang the story flawlessly. Beni, a little Roma who doesn’t like school at all but loves Tuesday because he likes stories, rapped it. Ecrin (Serbia) and Maja (Bulgaria) developed a sketch. They took turns telling the story and used non-verbal communication. The stone first begged, then demanded. The river laughed, mocked, then threatened. In 60 minutes, 3 stories were invented that were coherent.

### Method 2

Method 2: develop a story from 3 rhyming words each, whereby these words always have to come at the end to get the rhyme.

*Klaus-Mouse-House* was my instruction. The children then invented *Kopf-Knopf-Topf* (head-button-pot) and there was also *Wurm-Turm-Sturm* (worm-tower-storm). Then it was time to switch from the rhyme to a normal story. Everyone developed a story using adjectives and descriptions. This was explained using the word storm. What kind of storm is there or could there be? Thunderstorm, thunderstorm, sandstorm, rainbow storm. The children started to invent fantastic things. They had fun putting words together and developing something crazy and new.

After everyone had invented a story, the question was how is it told? How do I bring a story to the stage? What do I do? We worked with mime, pantomime and gestures.



### Method 3

Method 3: develop a story from the words „fortunately“ and „unfortunately“, which always alternate.

We stood in a circle and I began with: Once upon a time there were two siblings who lived with their parents in a city. School was over and now they were on their way home. Fortunately ...

From this beginning came the story of Finn and Hannah entitled: „The Brain Worms“. 2–4 teams developed characters and drawings. At the end, everyone received their own copy of the story. The story was then performed twice as a play.

During the school year there were other methods that were tried out and from which stories emerged, e.g. Crazy Worlds: a word is created from a prefix and a noun. The title for the story! This is how the „Anhaus“ (added house), the „Halbtisch“ (half table), the „Zerrtuch“ (destructive cloth) came about, among other things. Everyone made up a story and wrote it down. There are a few examples in the appendix.

Then there was the invented street: Once upon a time there was a street in Rome that had a bakery. As in the game „I’m packing my suitcase“, each child contributes something. The invented street was drawn and then told. Once from a first-person perspective. I have to tell why I’m in Rome,... Then from the perspective of an object or a person who is in the picture. The children had a lot of fun making things up and said so over and over again. Some had a hard time at the beginning and when I asked why, they said they didn’t know the German words. But then they said it would help them learn German. Others said they could say their ideas or get some.

We ended this project with individual interviews, which they really liked.

„I feel welcomed,“ said Louis (Vietnam).

„Like in fairy tales, if you don’t see the little thing, you don’t get any further.“

Axel (Cameroon).

It was hard for all of us to say goodbye to each other.

“But Mrs. Sommer, you carry on. And tell stories with new children!”

“Yes!”

“That’s good!”