

## ***Being in Koda***

On the following pages I would like to provide a brief excursion over my time spent in Koda – earlier unknown dot on a map, which – filled by the meanings, memories and experience(s) – became significant and unforgettable place and space in my mind afterwards.

Let's start from the beginning. Actually, it is a question, which point should be called as the starting point for this whole journey. Is it a moment when I read the information that I was accepted for the internship? Is it the first seminars week? Or the second one? Is it a second when the plane has soared over the Prague land? Or the landing moment in Tbilisi? For me, it is quite difficult and unclear to identify just one breaking moment. The whole time, which I call „my GLEN period“, was as a journey – a journey filled by uncountably funny, weird, enriching, angry, surprising, disillusioned and amazing moments. It has been a while since I came back, sitting at home and trying to recall and describe my internship in a few pages. It is impossible to cover all aspects experienced during this period and present the whole picture of my stay in Georgia, it is sorely transferable. Rather, perceive this text as a piece of a puzzle, as a part of the story about individuals' internship and life in Georgia... So, here we go...

The internship I am writing about took place from September to November 2016 in Koda – a Georgian village, located 20 minutes driving south from Tbilisi, the Georgian capital, and one hour driving north from the Armenian – Georgian border. Its position near to the Capital and right on the main road to Yerevan implied the excellent reachability by the public transport (so called „*marshrutka*“ – imagine it as a mini bus).



*Walking across Koda*

The village itself has a church, several shops, a kindergarden, a school, a cultural centre, a police station and also the place where you can get a draft (Czech) beer. But, the most important for us and the reason of our presence there was the „KODA CEC“ – Community Education Centre, run by the people who were enforced to leave their houses in the region of South Osetia (situated about 2 hours driving north from Koda - geografically still in Georgia, but politically disputable area), impacted by the war with Russia and stayed in their new-gained „homes“ from 2008. The special term is used for the refugees within the national boarder – IDP – „*internally displaced people*“.



*Koda CEC*

The Centre is situated in the neighbourhood where the most of IDP's in Koda live – the area of former military houses with particular small flats, which were given to those families by the government.

Koda CEC is one of the organisations all over the Georgia, which is trying to empower the (socially and economically disadvantaged) people from the cities and villages affected by the conflict with Russia (besides the mentioned one - South Osetia - it is the region of Abkhazia, situated on the north seacoast of the country, borders with Russia) and improve their position on the labour market - organising the courses of English, PC, accounting, stitching... Another target group is the youth – the Centre run two clubs: for kids - intended for those between 6 and 12 years; and for youngsters – for those between 13 – 16 years (the boundaries are moreless fluid) and, using the methods of non-formal education, provide them a platform for spending time meaningfully, time for their activities, education.



*A tandem dream team*

As the previous couples (understand „ a tandem partner“) we – two girls randomly chosen, from Czech republic and Germany, both at the age of 27 - have been accomodated in the same area as the IDPs live, about 3 minutes walking from work (which was amazing!). From the very begining we decided to use our two-rooms flat as the shared space with one bedroom (intended for sleeping) and one living room (a space for resting, planning, skyping, having fun). Since we moreless shared our daily schedule, on the working and personal level, I evaluate this idea as one of the best we had.

The one floor up lived Madona– the director of Koda CEC, the lady who was constantly at work (at least we perceived her like this). But, to be honest, she did not speak or share to much with us (and other way around), and I think the main reason was the communication. She spoke Georgian and a bit Russian. Both of us have been struggling a lot with Georgian and despite the effort to learn something more than the basic phrases, I failed with it (and even the Georgian aplhabet hanging on the kitchens wall for the three months did not help). And as it was emerged, her Russian is just not enough for broader communication.



*We, the people*

So, our „reference point“ became Ilja – the 22 years old English speaking smiling guy, who was presented there almost everyday. He was really nice and always willing to help us with anything (in the most cases it was the issues concerning communication). Jemal, his brother, was officially our contact person, unfortunately, he did not come to the Centre everyday, since he has just started to work in Tbilisi and did not have capacity to mediate our issues on the everyday basis. But he has never let us down in any (longer-term) matter, always heard our questions or demands and reacted on it via email or phone promptly. There was also Darleene – the Peace Corps volunteers from US. She spent a lot of time in the Centre and helped us sometimes with mediation, since she spoke Georgian a bit. The rest of the stable staff members (two ladies) spoke just Georgian, so the communication between us was or mediated or based on the gestures, mimics and made-up mixed words.

Having the living place right within the „community“ (I still struggle to find the proper word and I am still not sure if „community“ is the right one) I appreciate in many ways - by some time people start to recognise you on the streets, to salute you, to talk with you...and by some time you realise that your perception of your surroundings has changed, suddenly it seems to be the familiar space, familiar village which you start to like - like the place itself, like the people, despite you often do not know them, like the atmosphere. I general I think that knowing the Russian language was a huge advantage for both of us. I am not saying it would not work without it, it certainly would for the internship itself, but...we would not talk so much with our neighbours and Koda's residents without Russian, knowing the language gave us the priviledge which provided us the easier way to „get into“ a little more.



*Walking home*

Back to work. As mentioned before, our task was to work with children and youth – to be responsible for organising the clubs for this both age groups, for the content of it, for it's propagation on Facebook. I think we were lucky – we came just in the period, when no person from the center has capacity for organising the events for kids and youth clubs. The woman who was responsible for it during the previous years was spending her time doing the new agenda and many activities around, so it was up to us to take over almost all the responsibility for anything regarding both clubs. Which was cool! We had a kind of „an empty field“ in front of us and a lot of space for creativity and autonomy within the certain boundaries. Honestly, we did not the clear idea(s) what we are up to do with kids and youngsters before we came to Georgia. I had some suggestion, plans, Nora as well, but since we did not know in advance how the cooperation will look like, how much space there will be for our own contribution and realisation and what exactly do they expect from us, the concrete visions emerged moreless straight on the spot. Trying to find some meaningful, useful, overarching theme we came with the issue of the garbage. Initial idea was to take a garbage into consederation within the everyday life. Follow up to this matter, we planned to dedicate some youngsters clubs for the activities as picking the trash around Koda and making a „trash monsters“ out of it, making the costumes for the Halloween out of the plastic bottles and newspapers (we asked guys to pick up the trash during one month), sewing the fabric shopping bags in the Centre.



*Recycled dress workshop*

Finally we realised, that our imaginations, ideas and expectations did not match with the vision and values of 14 years old girls (most of the clubs participants were the girls around this age). So a lot of our plans just failed, but some of them (for example making the Halloween costumes out of trash or introducing the „barter table“ – the spot for exchanging things without using money) have been realised. Besides we organised the movie nights every Tuesday. These events I consider to be the most succesfull ones from our list. Due to it I realised how difficult it is to find the movie for the teens, which is not stupid, has a Georgian dabing, is shorter than two hours and maybe has a potential to be a bit aducational. Of course, with some choises we failed again, anyway, the attendance in general and excitement of the involved ones (including us) were pretty high. Another activity for the teens were the courses of the Russian language which were also held once a week for couple of youngsters.



*The goodbye party in our flat*

By some time we noticed that communication between us and the youngsters improved – the guys started to feel familiar with us, get used to us and our presence in the Center. So then, their English, according to my opinion, has improved, they stopped to be shy to speak it and use it within the communication with a foreigner and among themselves.

The club intended for the youngest ones was a bit different. We were meeting also once a week, on Thursdays, and despite the attendance for the very first club was maybe 15 kids, the number decreased. The average attendance was approximately 7 kids. I appreciate it, because the communication within this group was a bit more difficult, since these small guys did not know neither English nor Russian. Anyway, one boy, a bit older than the rest of the group, knew English on quite good level, so we could talk through him. Me and Nora were trying to select the activities which do not require to speak to much, so the

content was mostly based on games which are understandable without words, painting, handicraft...



*The youngest ones*

There was also the attempt to connect the Georgian kids with the Czech ones – the ones attending the club run by NGO People in Need in Pilsen. Both groups have exchanged the painted pictures displaying themselves, their family, the food they like, their dream job. Through this activity we were trying to connect the kids across the boundaries using non-verbal communication, to point out the similarities, get know more about the kids from another socio-cultural surroundings.



*The view out of the window in Koda CEC*

I would like to emphasize one thing. It is better to do not have „the big plans, visions and goals“. Because three months, despite someone could perceive it as an infinity, is not a long time period. Maybe for the first, brief insight during which both sides can get used to each other, get to know each other, get rid of the shyness. I felt like it has started to have the form, regularity, awareness, the rhythm and...bye guys, we need to go. For me personally, it was super sad and like severed a little bit to leave the clubs, the guys. But it does not mean I consider this all a pointless. On the contrary – being with the young ones, to communicate, to cooperate, to play, to watch, to be opened to new perceptions, views, energy, experience..it is the way how to learn, how to grow, how to benefit one from each other. It is not about the huge plans and goals, but having the opportunity to meet, to talk, to share – it is beneficial for both sides.

Looking back, I feel I gained a lot - thanks to people I met, the situations I was exposed to, the life I lived. Georgia provided me unforgettable experience through it's energy, it's atmosphere, it's people, it's feeling, and Koda still remains in my mind via pictures, songs or food. And a message received from time to time from some of the kids has a power to make my day.

Georgia, see you soon!



Olga Džulajová

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