

My own memoir
- my big journey -

Antonia Nietsch

It all started in the middle of the summer holidays 2015 when my mum first told me about the son of an employee of her's. He was going to do an exchange year in the U.K. from the end of those summer holidays until June 2016. As I know my best friend was also going to do an exchange year from the end of the summer holidays 2016 until June 2017, the idea of being an exchange student as well wasn't that strange anymore.

Days went by and I was really thinking of becoming an exchange student: but the thought of leaving my family, friends and boyfriend as well. After I got used to the idea of just being away for five months and, that it's not that far away from my life in Germany, just to the U.K. I felt sure I want to be an exchange student in the U.K. for 5 months, and I got really excited.

To go to another country as an exchange student you need to be in touch with an organisation, which will search for a host family for you, organize all the stuff with the school, your flight and so much other stuff even I don't know what they do.

To find on, or at least get an impression of these many organisations, my parents and I went to an exchange mass. The mass was in a big hall and everything was very bright. When I first saw this I felt a little bit nervous but way more excited. The organisations each had a booth and I went through every booth that looked interesting to me.

A few days before the mass I went to one organisation, which is based in Hamburg; there were many other students trying to accomplish the same goal as I was. The organisation told us many things about their work, their experiences through many years, and there were two 'Returnees', that are students, who just came back, and they told us about their experiences.

The same organisation was there and had a booth that day. I went to their booth and another Returnee told me about her exchange year, but in the United States and for 10 months. Actually, every Returnee I asked went to the U.S. for 10 months and as I talked to some other organisations, most told me they don't offer programs for exchange students to go to the U.K. at the moment, because the relationship to an exchange year in the U.K. and their families is not that good. The reason behind this is, that every family there get paid for hosting an exchange student, because the living costs are very high and otherwise most of the families wouldn't host an exchange student. As I was told about that, I got to know, that many families are just doing it to get some extra money and the student has to pay for everything, even though the families get money. That made me feel kinda sad. I put so much energy and happiness in looking forward being an exchange student there, and now so many people said it's actually a really bad idea going there.

The next thing I didn't expect was, that I would need to repeat the grade in Germany. That means, if I just finished the 10th grade in Germany, the exchange year would be something

like a year on vacation. It doesn't count as a regular school year. So as soon as I will come back I will just continue in the 11th grade. That was a hit right in my belly, I didn't know that. And honestly it hurted.

For the German graduation, called Abitur, you need the grades from the 11th and 12th grade. So as I want to go to another country in my regular 11th grade, I need to go back and "repeat" a grade. And when my friends, who I was in a class with will make the 12th grade when I'll come back, I will do the 11th grade.

This made me furious and sad for a long time. After hearing this news I didn't want to be an exchange student anymore. I didn't feel ready yet for going away for ten months. Especially, so far away; to the United States! More weeks went by and I wasn't even sure if I really want to be away for the whole next school year, to leave all my friends and my family.

In the next weeks I talked a lot to my parents, my boyfriend and my friends in school about being an exchange student. But as many as said, they would be afraid of doing this, as many said they would go if they would be me and would love to have an opportunity like this.

"This is a great chance and you don't get this chance again in your life. You are young and your whole life is still in front of you. If I would had the chance as I was your age, I would say yes ten times. So why don't you feel free to do it ??" I don't know why, but this saying from my aunt, who is very important to me, made me feel better and gave me courage and strength. It made me feel more safe about the idea of leaving Germany.

In the autumn, end of October, I searched for many organisations with my mum and slowly we got an impression of all these many many organisations. We made a list, where we compared all the organisations, their offers, costs and experiences. With the time we separated some organisations out and at the end we had our top three. I first sent a short online application about me to all organisations. Every organisation contacted me and I had to do a selection interview with every of those. As the first organisation contacted me I just had to fill something online out, but they didn't answer in a while. The second organisation contacted me and we had a conversation on skype, but it wasn't something like a selection interview. They just asked for general information about me and for usually they look at interviews like this if I would fit to their organisation and stuff. As soon as this interview was over, I was really disappointed, because I expected something different. But there was still one organisation left, I had all my hopes in. So the third organisation contacted me and we made a date for my selection interview. The Local Coordinator from this organisation went to my house and this was so personal and it was just perfect. We talked about two hours and she asked me things about, what I would do if I

get homesick and what to get in contact with people and stuff like this. As soon as she left, I was so happy about our conversation and I knew: this is my perfect organisation. I felt ready.

I wanted to sign the contract as soon as possible and two weeks later the contract was in our mailbox. Before I signed the contract my mum asked me: "Is this really what you want? As soon as you have signed this contract, you are not able to go back and can't do it undone."

I did understand.

My parents and I signed the contract and sent it back to the organisation. Now it was set: I would be an exchange student for 10 months in the United States of America.

A few days later I got a letter from my organisation and now the real work began. I got an online logged-in, where I could work on my application, whenever I wanted to. My goal was to finish my online application before Christmas. To get done I first had to fill out many general things about me. What do I like to eat? What do I not like to eat? What are my hobbies? And much more questions like this. Then I had to create an online photo album of me, my home, my friends and my family. As I did this, I had a wonderful view about my life. It was special for me to see all these pictures and see, how many great friends I do have and how great my life is. That was the first time I realized, how great my parents are and that they were giving a big offering to me. And now I would leave all this for 10 months. But I made the decision to leave them by myself and I really want to become an exchange student. And soon I got to know why.

I also had to write a letter to my future host family and that was the real challenge. I didn't expect that to be so hard. I first wrote the letter in German, but I rewrote it almost 10 times. As soon as I was happy with my letter I translated it and that was easier than I thought and it went very quick.

Then there was Christmas, my due date. And I finished my application.

At the end of January there was a camp from the organisation over a weekend with many other kids, who want to become an exchange student. On this weekend I learned a lot about how to act, behave and that it's my own decision, if I'll be just a memory for the host family or if I'll be a real family member. The weekend was very important for me, because they showed me, that there will be many things, that'll tear me down, but as soon as I'll get through these things, there will be so much more good things, that will make me happy. At this time I really understood, what it means to be an exchange student, and the main part was; I felt happy and ready for it.

At the end of the weekend my parents picked me up and on the whole way home I told them about the weekend and what I learned. I think, this was hard for my parents, because then they really noticed, that their only child will be away for whole 10 months. In another country. With another family. But they were more than happy for me as well, because they can give me that

great opportunity, and I knew, they, especially my mum, would've loved to had the same opportunity as I now have.

In the next months not much happened. I was just waiting for a host family. And to wait for this felt endless. Six days after my birthday, May 24th, I got a call from my german local coordinator and she told me, they do have a host family for me. This feeling was incredible. I was so happy and didn't stop smiling. For the first time in the last 5 months I felt really happy. My friends and my family were happy for me, too. On the same day I contacted my host family and we talked a lot, over an hour. They were so nice and I was already sure, that this is my perfect match. I already felt like a family member, because they acted like I already was.

One week later I booked my flight. But now, as it was safe, I do have a host family and I do have a flight and there were only two months left, everybody knew, we don't have that much time anymore. The next two months I finished my 10th grade in school, then I had summerholidays and I went on vacation with me parents and my boyfriend to enjoy the last days. Actually I didn't really felt for flying to the USA in the next week; on my own.

August 7th, the big day was there and we went to the airport. It was a happy day, the sun was shining and there were many family members as a surprise. I felt very important, because everybody was just there to say goodbye to me. As soon as we were heading up, so that I could go through the safety check, I got sad, very sad. I had to say Goodbye. I cried, a lot and still as I already sat in the plane to my new home. But it felt good as well.

I was now on the way to a new life, my big journey, because an exchange year isn't a year in your life, it's a life in a year.