



Claire

from Mississauga West

to

Switzerland

'Glückspilz!'

One day while talking to my classmate, she jokingly told me in a passing comment that I was a "Glückspilz", which translates literally into "lucky mushroom". This is used in German to describe a person who has a lot of luck. That was the first time I had heard the term. And ever since, it always comes to mind because during my exchange year I am constantly reminded that I must be the luckiest person in the world.

This year, I've found myself constantly thinking: "What an incredible life I get to live!" These moments always slip into my day at the most unexpected moments. I might be riding the train back home at night with some friends, tired but still laughing so hard my stomach hurts. I might be biking with my host parents along the winding country roads, whizzing past fields of bright yellow flowers. I might be in the backyard wearing my pyjamas, enjoying breakfast under the warmth of the sun. And suddenly, the thought hits me. It is in these moments when my heart is filled with gratitude, warmth, and a lightness that's difficult to explain. I think these are moments of pure joy. I have gone to bed many times with a full heart, happy with my day. I have once read a quote that states that "joy is what happens to us when we allow ourselves to recognize how good things really are", and during my exchange year I have learned how true this is.

I cannot believe that I have been in Switzerland for almost a year. And as I realize what little time I have left, time just seems to go faster and I wish it would slow down. But time has been a good reminder for me to reflect on the wonderful year I've had and savour all of the time I have left.

These past couple of weeks have been especially busy. I recently had my spring holidays, and between a school trip to Torino, Italy and outings almost every day with my host family, Swiss, and exchange friends, I've barely had time to catch my breath! And with my return date approaching closer and closer, I'm trying to fill up my schedule as much as possible.

During my travels, I realized that I am incredibly lucky to be in Switzerland. Given the size of the country and the ease of public transportation, you can travel to any corner of the country and back within a day! And Switzerland is a breathtakingly beautiful country, with something to discover in every corner. Given the cultural and language diversity, you can travel to the Italian and French areas and feel like you've travelled to Italy or France for the day! There are charming villages, extraordinary mountains, unbelievably blue lakes, bright flower meadows, and gorgeous architectural works; the list could go on. And although I've really appreciated where I've been able to live, the reason why my exchange was so extraordinary was that I met such lovely, wonderful people. My host families always treated me like family. My classmates always took care of me. The Rotarians always made me feel welcome. The exchange students always kept me laughing. And even complete strangers have helped me out and have made my day more times than I can count. I will never forget the kindness and friendship that people have shown me.

It's crazy how much happens in a year, as short as it feels. I've learned, experienced, and grown so much. Next to the friendships I have made, I think the most valuable thing that I have gotten out of my exchange is my personal growth. I've been forced out of my comfort zone; forced to problem solve, make mistakes, and still get back up and try again. I truly feel ready to take on any bigger challenges in my life. I am proud of the person I am growing in to.

The biggest lesson that I've learned while on exchange is to truly make the best of every situation. This means trying my best when things are tough. This means not being afraid to try something new and make mistakes. This means being grateful for what I have and finding happiness in the seemingly small things. Since my time here is limited, I've learned to not let any slipups keep me down. I think this is such an important mindset that I would like to carry with me beyond my exchange year.

At this point, however, I cannot imagine having to leave; Switzerland has truly become my second home. It is surreal to think that, in a few short weeks, I will have to say goodbye to this beautiful land and to people I love. But the thought that I will always have friends, family, and a home in Switzerland makes my heart feel full.

I could never thank Rotary enough for the amazing dedication and passion they put into the youth exchange program. Having this opportunity has made me the happiest person in the world- and I can most certainly confirm that I am also the luckiest.

Alles, alles Gute!

Claire