



The Island La Mirinda
Erik Tantal

A special
learning experience

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Preface

Languages can be learned at any age. It is a special challenge if you try to do it without textbooks. You also do not need special courses. Think of small children. They do not use any written words and nevertheless acquire language in a playful manner. Well, this might not be so easy for older people. Maybe they have tried other successful methods in their lives. But it is worth trying. Come along with the protagonist on his journey to the island La Mirinda and join him in his learning experience. The consequences for his further life were unforeseeable.

Since there are some Esperanto words in the text one should know that in Esperanto you always stress the next to last syllable. Some letters have a special pronunciation (given in **bold** print):

c cats

s said

v vase

z rose

ĉ church

g great

ĝ gym

h ach

j hallelujah

ĵ pleasure

ŝ show

ŭ quit, always becomes one with the preceding vowel

The following story is purely fictional. Any similarity with living or dead persons or events is accidental.

Original versions: „Die Insel La Mirinda“ (1.0 / German) and „La Insulo La Mirinda“ (1.1 / Esperanto).

Part 1

Arrival

It was exactly as he had imagined. He did not understand a single word. „Saluton, kien vi iras?“ the good-looking lady at the checkpoint asked. Martin liked her dark-blue uniform, but right now he needed to get the right bus. Shyly he presented a card with his registration number and the dates of his stay. But the friendly controller seemed to want something else, „Via pasporto!“ Okay, that was easy. At once Martin showed his passport and was allowed to enter without problems. But he still did not know where to go and stuttered, “Hm, where do I find my bus?” She seemed to understand and put a small piece of paper in his hand, along with some friendly words, “Prenu la buson numero tridek kvin. Vi trovos ĝin tie.” With her outstretched arm she showed him the direction. He was able to decipher the number: 35. The piece of paper also gave a small plan of the departure areas. Martin thanked her and rushed to the bus. At entering it he only had to show his registration card. He was seated in the front area, as he had hoped for. The trip was to last at least for an hour. It was a welcome break after the turbulent crossing. The waves had been quite a problem for Martin. The movements of the bus were a pleasant contrast. Finally he had arrived on the island La Mirinda. His colleagues had declared him crazy for undertaking this journey at such a short notice and with only one year of working at school left. No one else but teacher Martin Beckst had been willing to go. It was a project of the linguistics department at university. The goal was to get along on La Mirinda without any knowledge of the language for a month. This did not put Martin off. The offer was a welcome opportunity for him to take part in a vocational training for the last time in his career. Additionally it offered elements of what would you might expect from a holiday tour.

On La Mirinda a community had established itself that was unique in

the world. After decades of hard negotiations the council finally was allowed to “take over” its island. Of course they were not its real owners. The island still remained a part of the huge state of Asistan, which also claimed part of the taxes collected on La Mirinda. However, the negotiations with the government looked like they would get autonomy. Matters were established according to international law. The whole island was made available by the council of the Esperanto Foundation. They wanted to develop a complete community with Esperanto as its official language. The first settlement on the island thus became a place of the beginning. So it was given the name Komencejo. In the meantime it had become the capital of the island, with many hotels. This is where Martin was taken by the bus.

Welcome

“Bonvenon Sinjoro Beckst” were the words on a big cardboard held up to the bus passengers by a footboy. Martin could not get lost. At least he had picked up the word for welcome and called out loudly “Saluton!” That was all he could contribute to the conversation. It was enough for the beginning. The attendant took his baggage and went ahead saying, “Sekvu min, via ĉambro estas en la tria etaĝo.” Martin was relieved. He had understood the words for room and third floor. Probably he would have to pick up many words like this during the next days. He did not dare, though, to think of any possible active use of the language on his own yet. This was a problem that was part of the preparation meeting for the journey. He was told never to take any notes. It was supposed to be an “all natural” learning experience. “And that at my age,” he had thought. His room was very elegantly furnished. At one wall there was a large picture of La Mirinda. It was a projection that could be controlled by a device on the table. Martin’s hope to get the news in his language this way was not fulfilled. Every channel only used Esperanto.

Martin placed everything that he had in his baggage in the closet and wanted to enter the bathroom to refresh himself, when the attendant

knocked at the door and asked to come in. „Sinjoro Beckst, ĉu vi vidis la naĝejon?“, he asked and led him to the balcony, from where you could overview a large part of the hotel area. „Jen la naĝejo!“, he repeated several times and pointed at the swimming pool that was surrounded by a large lawn. Finally Martin understood. He took off his clothes and put on his bathing trunks, got a towel and followed the attendant to the pool. „Via ĉambro estas en la tria etaĝo. La numero estas dek kvar!“ Then the attendant left him him. Martin had a feeling that he had wanted to tell him his room number, which he had not understood, of course, but “third floor” would do, he told himself. He took a shower and jumped into the clear water. He was not alone. An elderly man and a young woman also used the pool. It was a very welcome refreshment on this warm summer day. After swimming for a while Martin took a rest at the side. When the young woman came close to him he tried to hide his big stomach. She said, „Vi certe estas nia nova gasto.“ He understood “nova gasto” but he did not know what to answer. So he just nodded and repeated, “Nova gasto.” The friendly lady saw right away that he obviously had no knowledge of Esperanto but she still tried to get into a conversation. “Mi estas Petra,” she said and pointed at herself with her right hand. Then she said the sentence again and helped Martin with this addition, which she also repeated several times, “Mi kaj vi”, pointing at herself and then him alternately. Then she went on, “Mi estas Petra kaj vi estas ...” It helped. Martin risked saying, “Mi estas Martin,” and he was proud about his accomplishment like a schoolboy. Petra laughed, splashed some water with her flat hand and said good-bye, “Mi estas Petra kaj vi estas Martin. Ĝis revido!“ Then she quickly swam across the pool and got out. Martin had no chance to follow her.

In the hotel

Martin found his room with no difficulties. Even without the number he remembered the door to his room. What did the attendant say? Dek kvar. Yes, that was 14. It was time to learn about the numbers, but he was not supposed to use books. Well, it will work out somehow, he

told himself. No preparation of lessons, no grading of papers, no teachers' meetings, no meetings with parents. "This is how to enjoy the remaining time before retirement," he philosophised, and after taking a shower he lay down on the comfortable sofa. He even did not need to take any notes about his experiences on La Mirinda. After taking part in the project a seminar was to follow at which time the evaluation was planned. The coming weeks would be very relaxed for him.

Still, he had some doubts. How did he do in picking up new words? Did things really work well today? Which words did he actually understand? He became sleepy and started a nap. "Saluton – pasporto – buso – tridek kvin - ĉambro - tria - etaĝo - naĝejo - nova - gasto - mi - vi – Petra!" These words he heard, in a very low voice, and in his dream Martin repeated every single word. His lips moved during his sleep. Somebody should have seen his face! With every word it expressed great contentedness. Waves moved in the background of his dream. Hills, trees and houses passed by the driving bus until he suddenly was back in the swimming pool and he clearly heard the word "Petra". He was startled. The sound was louder and different from the words that he had heard in a low voice. He also noticed that someone knocked at his door. "Mi estas Petra," he heard. So his dream had ended. Quickly he put on his bathrobe and went to the door. And really, there was Petra, along with the elderly gentleman who had been in the pool, too. „Pardonu nin. Ni invitas vin iri al la kafejo.“ Martin only understood excuse me and café but did not know how to react. He was embarrassed and looked at the man who waited at his door along with Petra. Then he remembered his first lesson from the pool and shook the man's hand, saying, „Saluton, mi estas Martin.“ Without hesitation, the man answered, „Mi estas Logan, la patro de Petra.“ So that was settled. Martin was invited for a coffee with Petra and her father. Martin pointed at his clothes, which he needed to put on. Petra and Logan understood without words. They moved back a few steps and waited in the hallway. Then the three went to the elevator. Martin saw that there were many labels in the hall. Along

with small pictograms he noticed small signs, like LIFTO, ELIRO, ŜTUPARO, TERASO. In the elevator he found an overview plan, which also showed him the café in the second floor. Petra and Logan knew the way and went ahead. Outside the café you could sit under large umbrellas. The waitress was very thoughtful and put three glasses filled with cool water in front of them first. „Ĉu vi ŝatas trinki kafon sen aŭ kun lakto?“, she asked. “Kun lakto”, answered Petra, and Logan ordered “Sen lakto”, and Martin placed the same order. When the black coffee came he saw that he had guessed correctly that “sen” meant “without”. He had taken the first hurdle. Without asking, Logan next ordered three pieces of apple cake with whipped cream. This had created a sound basis for the communication in the small group. “How do you say thank you?” Martin asked; but although his new friends did not speak any English Logan bent over to Martin and whispered into his ear, “Dankon.” Esperanto uses words from many languages. Petra said, „Dankon pro la kuko“ and showed her plate that was almost empty already. Martin lifted his cup and risked saying, „Dankon pro la kafo“, coming back to the contented look that he had practiced in his dream on the sofa already. Learning is fun, he thought. And he wondered how he might help his students enjoy learning in the same way during his last year before retirement. But he had to concentrate on the present situation and enjoyed eating the last part of the cake. Petra and Logan seemed to have plans for the afternoon and said good-bye to him, „Ĝis revido“ and „Ĝis baldaŭ“. Sounded like “See you soon,” Martin thought and reacted by also saying, „Ĝis baldaŭ“.

La Mirinda

During the next few days Martin did not dare to explore much. He stayed in the hotel and its surroundings and met many people. Everybody was very sympathetic. He did not speak any real Esperanto, but what to expect after such a short time? Martin had the impression that he understood more and more. Many words contained elements which he already knew from English and other languages.

He also noticed that Esperanto combines such elements with special syllables. Now he understood that kafejo was a combination of kaf, ej, and o, with ej meaning the place and o meaning a noun. As a beginner he depended on slow and careful pronunciation by his partners. But he was lucky. Everybody was very considerate and put in a lot of effort. It looked as if they knew his situation. And indeed it was common on La Mirinda to place newcomers in just one hotel in which staff and guests perfectly spoke Esperanto and were asked to assist them as much as possible.

Esperanto really had become the official language of the island in the course of the last decades. Most newcomers had arrived with a good knowledge of the language. In the families a new generation grew up that spoke Esperanto as its mother tongue. Beginners, “komencantoj”, had become rare. Only lately did more tourists and participants in linguistic projects, like Martin, show up. It was a question of honour for all inhabitants of the island to give special assistance to these newcomers. At the same time, it was an unwritten law not to use the language of the guest, as far as possible. Of course, people living on the island also spoke other languages. But their use in the presence of beginners was frowned upon. The custom was well publicised among tourist enterprises and their guests were informed about it beforehand. The islanders’ “stubbornness” in this matter had become a real hallmark of La Mirinda. Martin was affected very closely by this characteristic. Since he had no contacts with English-speaking people here at all and he could not even make use of his French, which was not bad, he had no opportunity to get into any deeper discussions. Any communication had to stay on the surface and to deal with simple matters, just smalltalk.

There were presentations of different subjects in the auditorium of the hotel which were somewhat more demanding. They offered longer stretches of Esperanto and were accompanied by the use of different media so that newcomers could understand more. That was passive learning, of course. In the entrance hall there was a poster saying, „Por

turistoj: Prelego pri La Mirinda, 16:00, Malgranda Salono, dua Etaĝo“. That looked like a presentation about the island, which Martin did not want to miss by any means. A handful of tourists had assembled in the small hall, among them Petra and Logan. The show began with a video that presented the island from the air. La Mirinda covered an area of 935 km² with about 18 000 inhabitants. The mainland was only two and a half hours away. Besides Komencejo, the capital, there were three other towns, among them the pretty harbour in the south. Most of the island was sparsely populated. Its eastern part was largely used for agricultural purposes. In the west there were mountains with forests. In the north there was a coltan mine, a mineral that is important for electronics. It was an important source of income for the island. Other important sources were fishing and tourism. For over 20 years La Mirinda had also been a significant international site for university training. And there were several renowned schools for the teaching of Esperanto. Every year about a thousand students come to the island to learn. They live with host families or on modern campuses.

Next the capital, Komencejo, was presented, where the larger part of the inhabitants lived. There were few characteristic buildings, except for the impressive university. A detailed view of the different living quarters along with their streets was of special interest. First the camera showed a district that looked like an old Chinese or Korean town, with labyrinths of alleys and typical roofs. Outside the houses and shops all kinds of goods were piled up. People here were mostly of Asian origin. The next street might have been found in France. Outside the restaurants people sat on chairs and had coffee. And at the next crossing one had the impression of being in the USA. And so the camera went on until a typical English street was shown. Martin felt at home right away. The only difference seemed to be that all the shops had names in English and Esperanto: Baker-Bakejo, Barber-Barbiro, Taylor-Tajlorejo etc. The film also showed how people spoke with each other in their mother tongues. This was something that Martin had not expected. Esperanto was the only official language on La

Mirinda, but naturally people had brought along their own languages and used them in the family and, as the film showed, in their close contacts. Nevertheless they all were able to use Esperanto at any time. Martin planned to look for the English district during his next excursion.

Socialising

When he left the small auditorium he met Petra and Logan. Petra addressed him, „Bonan vesperon, Martin. Venu kun ni al la manĝejo!“ He did not understand what she said but she pointed at a sign in the hallway that had an arrow and the word “Manĝejo” on it, along with a pictogram showing knife and fork. Yes, it was almost 6 p.m. and time for a meal. In friendly company the food would taste much better, he thought. The chairs in the dining hall had been rearranged. At the wall a long table had been prepared with an opulent buffet. From loudspeakers came classical music. Most guests were already seated at small round tables. Every table had six chairs. Petra headed for a table at which a young couple sat already. „Ĉu estas loko?“, she asked them about empty seats. „Jes vi povas sidi tie,“ the young man answered. There were empty seats. Politely he got up and introduced himself, „Mi estas Hugo, studento el Parizo kaj mia amikino estas Lina, ŝi ankaŭ studas en Parizo.“ Now everybody introduced themselves and said their names. Martin did so, too, and courageously said, „Mi estas Martin, instruisto el Hamburgo.“ He had learned the word “instruisto” from Logan, who was in the teaching business, too. When Logan wanted to continue the conversation the music abruptly stopped and the elegantly dressed hotel boss entered the podium, asking for silence. Obviously he explained what was planned for the evening. Martin did not understand anything. He looked around for assistance but there were only compassionate looks. After a few minutes he had finished and the buffet was opened. Everybody went there and a long line formed. Logan seemed to know such occasions and quietly stayed behind. He pointed at the bar next to the buffet. Nobody was there. So you could get a supply of drinks and be relaxed. There was enough

food on the long table and no reason to fear that you might not get what you wanted. After a while the crowd at the buffet was gone and Logan and his neighbours were able to pick what they liked without any hurry. But Martin did not have much chance to eat. The young student couple tried to explain every item in simple “That is” sentences in Esperanto. „Tio estas fromaĝo, tio estas kuko, tio estas salato kun majonezo“ etc. After a short time people began to move again since the small plates and glasses were empty and had to be refilled again. As the beer tasted very good and Martin could not talk very much he probably drank too quickly and too much. Logan noticed and smiled, “Sanon!” (to your health) at every glass that he saw, lifting his glass, too. This was a common saying among Esperanto speakers. Martin replied, “Sanon!” and every time his voice became louder. The others joined the game and the atmosphere became very relaxed. This was what the host had wanted. In the meantime, a singer had gone to the podium and tried to get attention with his music. The dinner gradually became a dance event, in which Martin did not want to participate. He left, saying, „Ĝis revido, mi promenas en la ĝardeno!“ He wanted to take a walk in the garden.

Stroll in the town

The next day he was alone in town for the first time. Martin felt somewhat insecure but he knew a few simple sentences already and “kie?” meant “where?”, “kien?” meant “what direction?” That would suffice. And the capital was not that big. He had gotten along in larger cities before. From the hotel he walked directly to the centre. He wanted to start at the central place in front of the town hall. From there the streets led to the different parts of the town, as he had seen it in the film. And well enough, first he came to the Chinese quarter with its many tourists. The shops offered plenty of goods, clothing, technical equipment, food, toys, even live animals like hens and rabbits. Cookshops had prepared all kinds of food for the visitors. One would never get hungry, provided you had the money. Martin did not feel hungry yet. And he looked for the English streets, hoping to find a

pub like at home. But this took its time. First he ran into the Italian corner. Although it was not yet noon it was warm and he treated himself to a big ice cream. No knowledge of the language was needed for that. At the next corner he finally came to an English-looking street. The houses looked like a small town in the north of England. There was even a fish and chips and he ordered a large portion. Everything could be done in his mother tongue. The shop attendants looked like at home, and they probably thought he was a migrant from England. He sat down at a window and started eating. “May I sit next to you?” a bearded, friendly-looking man asked who also had his fish and chips. Finally Martin had a chance to really talk to someone. The man turned out to be Brian Baldall, who had been living on the island for more than ten years. Today was his day off and he liked to use it in the English street. He had a job at the other side of town and taught Esperanto and English at the university. On La Mirinda courses in many languages were offered, and it was very convenient that it was no problem to find host parents who spoke the students’ mother tongue. And they easily found partners for conversation in the different streets of the capital.

“What does Mirinda mean? I only know a kind of lemonade by that name,” Martin asked the man. “It means wonderful or admirable,” he answered and added, “that is what the famous lemonade has been called for decades. People say that the owner of the company was a speaker of Esperanto.” Martin finally had an opportunity to ask more questions that had come up. Brian understood his situation. Normally beginners would not be left on their own that much. And Martin had not been prepared well enough. He had come to the island with insufficient information. Now he learned that Asistan had several goals in mind with the island of La Mirinda. First of all the big power wanted to show the world with this near-autonomous Esperanto state how much it cared about international relations. But economy also played a role. Many tourists came to La Mirinda every year. Usually they used their stay to see the mainland, too. But most important was the improvement of international business contacts along with science

and technology exchanges. The educational facilities on La Mirinda had a large impact on this. And this was also what the founders of the Esperanto state wanted. Never before had there been better circumstances for the spreading of the Esperanto idea. Martin had to admit that all this was new to him, and that he had much too little knowledge about Esperanto. His colleagues at school also had no real idea. Most had heard that Esperanto had been developed as a planned language to improve international communication, but the number of its adherents had always been relatively small. “This will certainly change,” Brian said, “because now we have someone who has his first-hand experience of Esperanto. This will surely have its impact.” With these words he said good-bye. Before they left they exchanged addresses.

Reflections

On his way back to the hotel Martin thought about many things. What had he gotten into here? Should he really learn a new language in his old age? And what for? He knew French and a little German and he had gotten along with that quite well so far. Honestly, languages were not really his business. He taught science and was not involved in bilingual education, as some other colleagues were. Yes, it was true that he was delighted sometimes when he understood a foreign pop song in the radio or the news. But recently new words had come up that he had not learned at school. Never had he cared about his French in all these years after leaving school. “What a huge waste of teaching time. Probably most people feel like this,” he thought, and he remembered his travels to foreign countries when he had to use “hands and feet” to communicate because of the lack of his knowledge of the language. Martin saw that his short stay on La Mirinda would not supply him with a well-founded knowledge. He had seen this as a playful diversion, and it was fun when he suddenly understood something here and there, and it was even greater fun when he was able to say something in Esperanto himself. But it was extremely difficult. It took him infinitely long to find the right words.

And too many were missing. Sooner or later he would have to start memorising words. So much was clear. But did he really want to do this? He became doubtful. What should he do during the last two weeks? Suddenly he was interrupted in his thoughts.

“Saluton, Martin. Kien vi iras?” asked Lina, who had also been on a stroll in town with her friend Hugo. She wanted to know where he was going. “Mi iras al la hotelo,” Martin answered, applying what he was already able to say. Hugo said that there was time for a glass of wine before dinner and approached the next bistro. Martin understood only a part of what he said but he saw the restaurant and agreed to go. They sat down and when the waiter came Martin insisted on placing the order. “Ni trinkas vino“, he said. But he had not thought of the many different wines that were offered. So he needed Hugo’s help. When they lifted their glasses, saying “Sanon!” he was cheerful again. Lina tried to turn the situation into a small language exercise. She wanted to help Martin because his last sentence had not been without mistakes. On a piece of paper she drew a stickman with a glass of wine next to it. Then she began with simple sentences. “Tio estas Martin. Tio estas glaso. Tio estas vino. Ĉu vi komprenas?” He understood. His glass was almost empty and he was in a good mood. He reacted and pointed at the content of the glass. “Tio estas ruĝa vino.“ Lina was satisfied that her new student had become an active learner and went on. “Martin trinkas vinon“, emphasizing the last letter “n”. But Martin did not notice and repeated “Martin trinkas vino”. Lina had to restart several times until Martin understood that the ending “n” referred to an accusative object. She drew a milk bottle, a glass of beer and a cup of coffee and completed the sentence “Martin trinkas” with “lakton, bieron, kafon, vinon”, every time stressing the accusative ending “n”. Hugo pitied him and ordered another glass of wine for everyone, thus ending the teaching unit elegantly. Martin took it all in good humour and paid for all of them. “True,” he thought, “in this way I could learn much more. But it would still be quite an effort, not to speak of all the glasses of wine that have to be emptied.”

Final spurt

The last two weeks went by very quickly. Martin was intent on getting to know as much of the island as possible. First he took a bus tour around the island, then a boat tour and finally even a mountain tour with a trained guide. Petra and Logan took part in this last tour, too. The guide talked with everyone in the group, asking about their health and giving hints for the hike. For safety reasons he even tried to speak with them in their mother tongue, asking other participants for help in translating if needed. The group only walked as fast as the slowest was able to go. The landscape was breathtaking. And the weather was fine. There were some clouds but no rain. The high temperature was no problem as there was a slight, cool wind. “Mi amas la montojn“ Petra said enthusiastically. Her love of the mountains could be seen in the large number of pictures that she took. Martin liked the mountains, too, but he was honest. He did not like climbing very much. With a smile he said, “Mi amas la maron”. The sea was not so stressful. And he feared the way back down with all its stress.

Once again he met Brian, this time in a pub. In the hotel he said goodbye to all his new acquaintances, and then it was already time to leave. With a nostalgic feeling he looked out of the coach, and from the ferry he took his last pictures of La Mirinda.

Part 2

Daily routine

The evaluation seminar for the Mirinda project did not take place immediately after Martin’s return. It was rescheduled to the week after the autumn break. That meant he was back to normal school routine. Martin was happy that he could use the weekend to prepare lessons. His idea was to tell his students many things about his journey. There was, however, not much time to do so because the written exams were coming and he needed to teach them a firm foundation of facts. He

had to collaborate closely with his colleagues who had done his job while he was away.

Suddenly they all envied him. Repeatedly he heard, “Oh, what a good time you had! I wish I had joined in that project, too!” The headteacher asked Martin to give a full report at the next teachers’ meeting. The parents also were interested. So a convenient date in the evening had to be found soon. It looked like a lot of work, not like a quiet last year before retirement. Martin always prepared such presentations carefully in great detail. He would have liked more time to do so because he wanted to present well-founded information about Esperanto. It was a great advantage that in the next big big city there was an Esperanto club, where he found help. In this way Martin automatically started a new school subject although Esperanto still had not become an official subject at schools yet. So there was not much time to relax after the journey. And during the weekend a journalist called him. Somebody must have told him about Martin’s journey to La Mirinda and he wanted to get an interview. Martin had not imagined that much of a hustle and bustle. In the inbox of his mails he found, among many others, letters from his new Esperanto friends on the island. These were, of course, in Esperanto. Martin almost could not cope with all this. It helped a lot when he found out that the computer could translate them for him but he was not in a hurry to answer them.

Reactions

The newspaper article about the Mirinda project was published only a few days later. At school people were interested in more information. Martin noticed that his students suddenly began to look for information about Esperanto themselves. They got it from the net and shared it. One student even came to Martin after lessons and asked for help because he wanted to start an Esperanto group at school. Parents also helped. It turned out that one of the fathers was an Esperanto speaker and he offered his assistance in planning and organising an

Esperanto project week at school. But there was a negative response from the staff. Maybe many feared that they would have to start taking up this unknown subject soon. With all the burdens they had already this was understandable. Others had a firm opinion and did not think that Esperanto had any chance of success. Often they said, “This will never work. We have got English as a world language. Why get into this Esperanto?” Whether he wanted or not, Martin had to react. He was not against English at all, or against its being so widespread. It was something positive that so many people were able to communicate in this language. He remembered his short stay at Tokio airport when he had a problem with his luggage and he was happy that someone spoke English and solved the problem quickly. He would have been just as happy if they had found another language that they had in common, like French. And why not Esperanto? The question was answered in a radio report. The journalist had read the newspaper account of Martin’s journey and informed his listeners about it. The title of the broadcast was highly exaggerated, though, “British teacher learns Esperanto on a distant island within one month.” Fortunately the speaker showed that such a result cannot really be expected. He presented a wide range of information about La Mirinda and especially the idea of Esperanto.

The prime reasons given for learning this planned language were its neutral character and the fact that it takes comparatively little time to learn it. Esperanto is called a “neutral” means of communication because normally both partners of the conversation have to learn it first. If one partner uses his mother tongue he has an advantage over the other partner, to whom it is a foreign language. On La Mirinda things are a little different because there are already quite a number of Esperanto native speakers. The second reason, that it is easy to learn, sounded more convincing. But Martin was unable to give a final judgment because he had only learned the new language in a playful fashion so far. The evaluation seminar after the return from La Mirinda showed, however, that almost all participants in the project had excellent test results. And that in spite of the short time they were

there. There had been ten teachers who visited the island at different times. Their feedback was almost universally positive. Only more mentoring was seen as desirable.

Commitment

Then suddenly there was this question on Martin's answering machine, "Saluton Martin, this is Bill Taylor. I heard your story about La Mirinda. Could you please get in touch with me?" Martin did not know a Bill Taylor but he was curious. At first he had hoped that he might be of help with the coming project week. One of the parents had already signalled his cooperation. But things turned out quite differently. Bill needed his assistance. He had founded a group called Esperanto for Europe and needed to collect several thousand signatures to register for the coming European elections. Actually, nobody expected great success in the elections. But this was a good opportunity to bring up the subject of Esperanto. Plus it showed that Esperantists were willing to take up political responsibility. It turned out that still far too many people had never heard about the language. Many refused to give their signature, saying, "This group is much too small and insignificant. It can never be a success." So there would certainly be a lot of frustration when you collected these signatures. Bill brought up the idea that the reports about La Mirinda improved the situation clearly. He then concluded, saying, "You are exactly the right person for us. How do you feel? Would you like to assist in collecting the signatures?" Martin asked for time to think. He had not even started to really learn Esperanto. On the one hand the request was quite tempting. For some years already he had played with the idea of becoming active politically, even before Esperanto. The stress at work did not permit it, though. But his coming retirement made this excuse invalid. And after all, this was "just" a collection of signatures. He liked the group's programme, so he imagined he could support Bill. He started with his family and people in the neighbourhood. He did not dare to go to the street all on his own. But he told his old school friend Gerald about his new activity, and he was

lucky. Together they began standing at busy streets that were not too wide and simply showed passers-by the empty forms. Many were curious and asked; sometimes this even led to a longer discussion. The fact that Martin had just returned from the “Esperanto island” was helpful in convincing them because he was able to inform about living Esperanto authentically. This caused great surprise to many. Along with Gerald they were able to collect more than 200 signatures during six afternoons. The activity in the whole country was a success. The required number of signatures was reached and sent in before the due date. Bill thanked all his helpers and eagerly looked forward to the coming elections. His group would stand up along with all the others. Now he needed supporters again, this time voters. That was not easy. The group had almost no financial means. All the helpers were volunteers. Donations were very rare. Bill had used them to print 200 000 leaflets, which had to be distributed all over the country. But who wanted to do it? Everyone who had done something like that before knew what drudgery it meant. You often stood at a windy corner of a station and were happy when people even noticed the leaflets offered. Sometimes they were even accepted. But then, when the person thought he was far enough away he just dropped it. And it is not much better if you put them in the letterboxes. Only that you do not see it. You can just hope that people are willing to look at the information. But imagine how many steps you must go to put a thousand leaflets into the letterboxes of an area of terraced houses. At least you have a chance to get to know this part of town much better.

Discussion

Martin started to attend meetings of the local Esperanto club once a week now. They started at 7.30 pm but he wanted to be there an hour early. Last month he had begun to study Esperanto intensely. Every day he set aside some time for exercises and learning new words. He did all this on his own. So he was happy that Jim, a club member, agreed to check his work during the hour before the official start of meetings for the next few weeks. Jim was astonished at the speed at

which Martin progressed in such a short time. After this extra lesson the club meeting began. Today the subject was very fitting. It dealt with Martin's special activity.

"I don't like the idea at all. What the hell does that group Esperanto for Europe mean? Esperanto was created as a second language for the whole world that is easy to learn." With these words the discussion was opened. The participants were Jim, George, Rupert, Mary, Heather and of course Martin. It became obvious that most of them were not interested in politics. Although in general every opportunity was used to lament the political situation helpful suggestions were rarely made. Martin tried to convince them, "It is no contradiction if you become active for Esperanto in Europe. Its use outside Europe is not excluded this way at all." He then spoke about his impressions on La Mirinda and said that this small, almost autonomous Esperanto state showed a very successful development. "How can it be that this is supported far away in Asistan while here in Europe we still find people who have never heard of Esperanto?" he asked them. Jim, who sat next to him, agreed, "Yes, that is what I think, too. Did you know that in 1931 Josef Zauner already suggested the use of Esperanto for communication in a united Europe? Zauner lived in Romania and at a very early time he also favoured a common European currency." Of course there were a few who disliked the Euro, but most of the group were Europe-friendly. Jim encouraged them to think about ways how Esperanto might improve the situation in Europe. He reminded them of a speech by a former president in Europe who had pointed out that a common working language in Europe was missing. As might be expected, the next subject was English. Nobody doubted that English actually was the common working language. George commented, "We have to be careful not to say anything against English. In my international contacts I use English of course, sometimes Spanish, but I notice that I do not get very far with it. My partners just don't have enough knowledge of the language. It would be a great advantage if I had access to another language that my partners understand well enough. This is were Esperanto would be very helpful." "Exactly,"

Rupert added, “and that would be ideal for business. They would have to offer their services in very few foreign languages only, the ones that are most in use. And the more exotic ones would be covered by Esperanto. You simply can’t communicate in all foreign languages all the time.” “But how can you teach that the politicians? They won’t even look at Esperanto!” Mary complained. She had tried several times to get in contact with political parties. Only one party could be convinced to accept the use of Esperanto as an international language in their programme for the European elections. All the others did not react at all or sent back a negative answer. Once the answer was very polite. It called Esperanto a positive idea. But as the chances of success were very small they did not have anyone in the party who supported it. At the end of the discussion they agreed to go into the subject of Europe in depth at the next meeting. Jim said he would provide more information.

Europe

“Who, after all, is a European? Everybody who is living here? Including all Americans, Asians, Africans?” Nobody knew for sure how to answer such questions. But Jim had a counter question, “And how about the British people who emigrated to Australia or Singapur? Are they still British, even if they had received the citizenship there?” What nation you belong to is not defined by your passport. It is mainly influenced by your personal feeling and that of your environment. Does e.g. an Asian person who has moved to Europe feel as a European? And are her European neighbours of the same opinion? Whatever the case may be she will still feel as an Asian after many years. Martin summed it up, “What does it matter if you feel one with different countries or groups? The only bad thing is that recently more and more forces have come up that seem to have a revival of the old nation state as their goal.” The others agreed. But the question which factors determine a European identity remained unanswered. Jim suggested a catchy phrase, “A European is someone who feels at home in Europe, who wants to stay here and who stands

up for Europe. In the same way British people are British if they feel at home in Britain, want to stay here and stand up for the country. And it's true for all the others." Then they discussed the ideas that have shaped Europe after the French revolution, namely liberty, equality and fraternity. But these were supported in other cultures, too, and could not be seen as typically European. "We need a king of Europe, who has to use Esperanto in order to show that he does not prefer any of his subjects," Mary said, and she added, "We can see how many people are fascinated by our British monarchy. Such a representative could unite all Europeans and nobody would have an identity problem any more." Some members of the group accepted this idea, but most preferred a president who was elected. And clearly such a president would have to speak Esperanto. It was not easy for Jim to redirect the group discussion to more realistic goals. He referred to pro-European movements that sprang up in different countries. They often demonstrated in large numbers and stood up against those who were anti-European and openly showed their xenophobia. Jim demanded, "We Esperantists should cooperate with the pro-European groups. We cannot accomplish anything on our own anyway."

Consequences

On his way home Martin had to think especially about the last suggestion that was about working together with other groups. He did have to wait for the results of the European elections and those for the group Esperanto for Europe. Last time it was less than .5 per thousand votes. And you could not expect more in the coming elections. How many votes would the other small parties get? Martin checked the internet for the results of the last European elections. And really, their results were better. For these elections there was no fixed percentage of votes in order to get into parliament. To get a seat you needed .6 per cent of the votes. That was far more than the Esperanto group had received. Ten other groups had .1 to .4 per cent. Why had these not joined forces before the elections? That would have meant 1.8 per cent and three seats.

Such figures went through Martin's mind, and immediately he dreamt that Esperantists could become a driving force for uniting all kinds of small parties in order to get into parliament. Now Martin really began to "mix" into politics. He prepared a proposal that he presented at the next meeting of the club Esperanto for Europe, "More peace in the world, more justice for man and the environment, for a safer future worth living! These are goals which we find with almost all political parties; they are just not put into practice convincingly. That is why so many citizens are disenchanted with politics and feel abandoned by the large parties; as a result they do not participate in elections any more. Others decide to support one of the smaller parties which offer the goals that the established parties do not have. These parties are joined by very committed people. Yet in spite of all their hard work their visible success is minimal. Usually they do not get into parliament, and before every election they have to work hard again to get the minimum number of support signatures to be admitted to the elections. Logically this leaves little time to win the public for their goals. This way they have some kind of success at best but never get close to what they want to achieve. Even if there had been a five per cent clause at the last European elections a united platform of small parties would have had no problem at all. It would have brought them closer to realising their goals. Surely this was nothing new. In the past there were many such attempts, which often failed when the larger groups suppressed the smaller ones. In the course of the fusion process the smaller partners were practically absorbed or, you might say, liquidated. In order to avoid such a development I suggest that every party that joins the platform keeps its programme and organisational structure. This takes tolerance and a capacity for finding a consensus, of course. Today the existing parties already have their different wings which pursue goals that are not exactly supported by the party as a whole. Certainly legal advice will be needed when such a platform is established. Party programmes often have passages that sound very similar, which means that a common basic version of a programme has to be worked out. This takes a larger number of interested party members who are willing to prepare the unification process.

And why should one vote for such a party that has goals which you find with all the others already? A very legitimate question. You just have to point at all the goals that are not to be found among the established parties. A good example would be the necessary economic reform. The demand for growth is still on the agenda, even though everybody knows that this will exhaust the planet, that it means shortages in many countries which are not so developed, and that wars will be the result. To me as an Esperantist it would be important that all the participating groups support Esperanto, which does not at all mean that they all have to learn it.

It seems obvious that not every party is suitable for a fusion. They would have to support the goals that were agreed upon as an alternative to the established parties. As a name for the new party I would suggest THE ROUND TABLE.”

An approving applause followed from all sides. Not just Brian, who had been present at the meeting, too, was surprised. Everybody had only seen in Martin a willing supporter who collected signatures. Now they had an active member in their group. Of course, everybody saw that it would take years to put the idea into practice. Spontaneously a committee was formed that was to get into contact with other parties. After the coming European elections these contacts were to be furthered. As the earliest possible time, a party called The Round Table could then take part in the next elections. Martin thought, “By then I will be a few years into my retirement. I should have started my political activities much earlier in my life.”

Elections

The result was .4 per cent – respectable but no seat in parliament for Esperanto for Europe. Still, it was a remarkable increase for Esperantists. The media showed great interest and some admiration. The newspaper headings were, as usual, quite sensational, e.g.

MIRINDA SOON TO BE IN EUROPE or LEARNING FROM THE ISLAND or even WILL ESPERANTO SAVE EUROPE?

There were even a few accounts of the fusion plans of small parties, accompanied by headings like THE ROUND TABLE – THE NEW MOVEMENT or THE ROUND TABLE AS THE WAY OUT!

Martin was happy that his efforts had been worth the trouble. For next summer he had booked a journey already – to LA MIRINDA, of course, all on his own.

Translated by Helmut Lasarczyk

Appendix

Words

All words are listed according to their appearance in the text. Most nouns and verbs are given in their basic form, without possible endings.

La – the

mirinda – wonderful, admirable

saluton! – hello!

Kien – what direction?

vi – you

vi iras – you go

pasporto – passport

komencejo – place where something begins

prenu – take!

Buso – bus, coach

numero – number

tri – three

dek – ten

kvin – five

tri dek kvin – 35

vi trovos – you will find

ĝi – it

tie – there

bonvenon – welcome

sinjoro – sir

sekvu min – follow me

via – your

ĉambro – room

estas – ist

en - in

tria – third
etaĝo – floor
ĉu – starts a question (“whether”)
vi vidis – you saw
naĝejo – swimming pool
jen – there
en – in
kvar – four
dek kvar – 14
certe – certainly
nova – new
gasto – guest
mi – I
kaj – and
ĝis – until
ĝis revido – see you again!
Pardonu nin – excuse us
ni invitas – we invite
vin – you (as object)
kie – where
vino – wine
iri – go
al – to
kafejo – café
patro – father
de – of
lifto – elevator
eliro – exit
ŝtuparo – stairs
teraso – porch, veranda
ĉu vi ŝatas – would you like
trinki – drink
kafo – coffee
sen – without
aŭ – or

kun – mit
dankon – thank you
pro – for
kuko – cake
baldaŭ – soon
komencanto – beginner
por – for
turistoj – tourists
prelego – lecture, presentation
pri – about
malgranda – small
salono – salon
dua – second
bakejo – bakery
barbiro – barber shop, hairdressers‘
tajlorejo – tailor shop
venu – come!
Manĝejo – dining room
loko – place, location
jes – yes
vi povas – you can
sidi – sit
studento – student
el – from
mia – my
amikino – girl friend
ŝi – she
ankaŭ – also
ŝi studas – she studies
instruisto – teacher
tio – this
fromaĝo – cheese
salato – salad
majonezo – mayonnaise
sanon! - health!

mi promenas – I go for a walk
ĝardeno – garden
ni trinkas – we drink
vino – wine
glaso – glass
vi komprenas – you understand
ruĝa – red
lakto – milk
biero – beer
mi amas – I like, I love
monto – mountain

Numbers

1 unu
2 du
3 tri
4 kvar
5 kvin
6 ses
7 sep
8 ok
9 naŭ
10 dek
11 dek unu
20 dudek
30 tridek
100 cent
999 naŭcent naŭdek naŭ
1000 mil

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