



Basque civilization class at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt

Germans get wrapped up in Basque language and culture

Spearheading the Frankfurt experience is Martin Petrus, an enthusiastic teacher – self-defined as half Catalanian, half German – who explained how the initiative of bringing Basque language and culture to the German city was developed. He discovered that on a personal level this activity helped him “to adapt and reconcile his German heritage with the multicultural circumstances around him.”

“All of it began with an Agreement of Cooperation signed between the Basque Departments of Education and Culture, the Basque Secretariat for Foreign Action and Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, more specifically, the Institutes of Comparative Languages, Social Sciences and Romance Languages,” Petrus said. “The agreement,” he added “contained a series of goals, including the creation and maintenance of a central Euskal Liburutegia for Germany; interdisciplinary courses with Basque subject matter incorporated in student study programs; the creation and publication of methods for teaching Euskara to Germans; support for the publication of scientific and/or literary papers on Basque-related subjects; and reinforcing all of these activities with cultural events such as Basque film screenings, etc.”

Since the program got under way, a great deal of activity has been taken place. “So far we’ve offered two courses per semester, put together a radio program and Basque film sessions, and created the first Basque grammar for Germans. A book is also being written, and literary presentations have been set up in connection with the 2003, 2004 and 2005 book fairs. And a gathering of German experts on Basque studies was held at the Expolingua Fair in Berlin in 2005. All of these efforts now fall under the German Center for Basque Studies, now officially named the ‘Euskal Ikaskuntzen Alemaniako Etxea.’ Right now we’re working with the Basque Government to draw up a new agreement to ensure that our activities continue and to



gradually extend the scope of our Basque studies in Germany in cooperation with other Basque-German scientific and cultural organizations.”

The courses began in summer 2003 with an introductory course on Basque culture, history and civilization. Euskara classes have been offered since the 2003-2004 academic year. The students are divided into levels: beginning and advanced classes, and classes that focus on reading, which includes Basque literature and texts on different aspects of Basque culture.

Students meet for two hours a week, and there is a written exam at the end of each semester. The classes are held at the University, at the institutes mentioned above on the new Westend Campus, and at the Institute of Comparative Languages. More women than men enroll in the classes. Most of the students are in their early twenties, although some are over fifty.

Petrus explained the reasons why German students are interested in Basque language and culture: “Some students sign up to earn credits toward their degrees, since the classes are part of the institutes’ curricula. In the case of Comparative Languages students, clearly they’re interested in the fact that Euskara is the oldest and perhaps the ‘most unusual’ language in Europe. One of the radio programs we broadcast explores Basque ties in Germany. The people in our Basque community are thrilled to take part and, in a certain sense, ‘show’ others what it means to be Basque. In other words, beside our regular university activities, *euskaldunes* from the community like to get involved. And of course the contacts already made in other cities and regions of Germany, Austria and Switzerland demonstrate the increasing interest in ‘things Basque’ on the part of Basques residing in Germany, or of Germans with personal, cultural or business ties to the Basque community.