

Görlitz, Germany and Zgorzelec, Poland: A Case Study for Regional Cooperation

Robert Kosciuk, of Zgorzelec, Poland, just wanted to become a printer. Four months ago the printing company Maxroi in Görlitz, Germany, offered him an apprenticeship. Every morning he would take the urban bridge from Zgorzelec to Görlitz, crossing the Neisse River which has been marking the border between Germany and Poland since 1945, and which in those days divided the old city of Görlitz into a German and Polish section. He needed less than thirty minutes to get to work.

The manager of Maxroi, Clark Robbins, chose the young Pole consciously. He wanted to train him together with the German apprentices so that he could be sure of having a specialist for the texts in the Polish language. Robbins went to the employment exchange in Görlitz and applied for permission to employ Robert Kosciuk as an international computer specialist, but his application was denied. The young Pole would have to wait until Poland was admitted into the European Union.

Unemployment in the eastern part of Germany is more than 20 percent, with thousands of young people leaving to look for work elsewhere. Görlitz and Zgorzelec seem like an idealistic match. In Zgorzelec the population is increasing as fast as it is shrinking in Görlitz. Young poles regard the old frontier city as a springboard to the west. Zgorzelec is a city full of life and bursing at the seams because of lack of housing. The mayor of Görlitz, Rolf Karbaum, would like to offer vacant apartment space in Görlitz to those across the border but he is not allowed to do so because of Germany's policy of foreign residents.

Since 1988 the two cities have been working to build the European city of Görlitz-Zgorzelec. They have applied to become a European Cultural Capital in 2010. Experts even think about a common administration for Görlitz and Zgorzelec in 2030. Major Karbaum dreams of a city where Germans and Poles live together. Then he starts talking about what he calls "chamber pot democracy", which has developed in two German-Polish kindergartens. Sitting next to each other on the chamber pots, the children manage to get playfully over the language borders.

Original German text by Jens Schneider