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GPS – New ways to Basketry Craft in Germany, Poland and Slovakia

report from a study trip, Cieszyn, September 29 – October 3, 2025

The members of the Zentrum europäischer Flechtkultur Lichtenfels(ZEF), Serfenta, and the Združenie košikárov Slovenska (ZKS) have known each other for several years. We have carried out a number of joint activities in all three countries. But as we noted when saying goodbye on our first Erasmus+ study trip, we have never had such an opportunity for in-depth interaction.

We see this as a unique aspect of the Erasmus+ program, which, in today's fast-paced world, has allowed us to sit down in peace, talk, exchange experiences and energy, and jointly seek common ground in the topic we are working on. Thanks to this, our initially disparate ideas are beginning to come together into a more systematic whole.

Working day 1 – Tuesday, September 30:

Getting deeper to our project

Since we are all new to Erasmus+ programme, we spent the first working day of our stay in Cieszyn explaining the formal processes of how the program works. And we also discussed in more detail the goal we set for our project: to open up to each other and explore in greater depth how each partner operates. The aim is to uncover positive examples of good practice that can be used in each country to improve the status of basketry and basket makers.

The working methods and backgrounds of each partner are different and can be an inspiration for other partners to expand or improve their own activities in the future. Each of us encounters certain limitations in our own countries that hinder our activities.

After introducing ourselves and explaining our motivations for joining the Erasmus+ program, we realized one basic thing: that although we are different, we share a common goal. We want to outline a possible scenario for further joint development. Our motivation in this is also the existence of the Network of European Basketry Organisations, founded in 2019 by Manfred Rauh. It brings together 16 organizations from 10 European countries, and its members expect the results of our Erasmus+ project to be a promising impetus for further, broader joint development of basketry in Europe.

European basket makers meet regularly, mainly at the “Korbmarkt”, international basket weaving culture festival in Lichtenfels, Germany, and once every four years at the World Festival of Wickerwork and Basket Weaving in Nowy Tomyśl, Poland.

That is why, logically, on the very first day, our discussions led to the question of what the outcome of our project would be. And furthermore, what impact it would have not only on our associations, but more broadly on the situation in European basketry:

1. We believe that the present is open and requires precisely such joint projects. A joint approach based on the sincere interest of those involved provides an opportunity for high-quality basket makers in Europe to be competitive and for baskets and other products to gain greater popularity. Since their production requires minimal machine input and mostly uses natural local materials, they are a unique alternative to artificial materials, which are energy-intensive to produce and also burden the environment and, through the release of microparticles, are dangerous to the human health. Willow and other natural materials used for weaving is binding carbondioxide, store the carbon part and produce oxygen as they grow, meaning they have a negative carbon footprint. Based on these ideas

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(and in view of the common European fight against climate change), we ask ourselves a perhaps bold question: Can we imagine every European household having at least one basket made of natural wicker? And if so, who will make it? Do we have enough basket makers? And will these baskets be competitive? Will people be willing and able to pay a fair price for the work of a European basket maker? The idea of "a basket in every household" could be a nice challenge for Europe and support the efforts of politicians (if they are serious) to move towards green policies and promote self-sufficiency.

2. Basket making is proof of the uniqueness of human work. It is connected to nature, the local environment, sustainability, and independent creation with one's own head and hands. Our initiative to support this craft is also interesting in the light of a growing role of artificial intelligence, which is gradually penetrating activities previously performed by humans and making them more impersonal. This progressive trend will "sideline" many people in the coming years, calling into question their role in the work process and in the society in general.

3. In current age of automation and specialization of services, creating things with one's own hands is on the decline and unknown to many of our contemporaries. They don´t know the feeling of "success" or satisfaction from their own creation, the experience of being able to create something themselves. We are more like consumers, what after a certain time can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction, the origin of which we cannot even rationally identify. However, psychologists have now clearly defined that one of the "cure" for these problems is precisely creating something with our own hands. The Serfenta association consciously develops this dimension of basket weaving through its activities.

We experienced it firsthand on second working day during our study trip in Cieszyn, and it was enriching for all of us, showing us an original approach to teaching craft courses. Serfenta's primary goal is not to offer participants a finished product or a basic training. Rather, they offer them the experience of creating something with their own hands. Through contact with natural materials like cattail, straw, reeds and other natural fibers, through conscious and kind guidance through the process of transforming them into an own creation. Many people encounter psychological limitations in the creative process because they do not engage in manual work on a regular basis. The experiential craft course at Serfenta is therefore also an opportunity to overcome these limitations.

A closer look at the associations and their motivation for participating in the project

Zentrum europäischer Flechtkultur Lichtenfels

This association is for a large part funded by the city of Lichtenfels. According to city officials, the association is important to them because, in addition to organising the international “Korbmarkt” festival, it provides professional activities throughout the year for this "capital of German basketry". However, compared to previous years, the association has to cope with less funding from the city than in previous years (as a result of declining public budgets in general), so only Manfred Rauh works for it on a quarter-time basis throughout the year. Jennifer Rubach, who also had a position in the association for the past two years, was approached this year only to participate to the preparation of international “Korbmarkt” festival. This is one of the reasons why the Centre feels it is necessary to diversify its activities more to the international level, including projects. In addition to the foundation of the Network of European Basketry Institutions in 2019, this situation motivated the Centre to put a new major focus on to international cooperations. Jennifer Rubach is a trained basket maker who works on a self-employed basis. However, in order to be able to devote herself more to basket weaving after reducing activities with ZEF, she has been working part-time in a retirement house since this year.

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Association of Slovak Basketmakers

The association was founded in 2018 by Tomáš Mikolaj, an employee of the state organisation for the promotion of crafts, the Centre for Folk Art Production (ÚĽUV). The establishment had preceded by a trip to the French basketry Centre Fayl-Billot in 2017, where there is a basketry school with an annual teaching program, as well as the association for the support and development of basketry. It was that model of supporting basketry through various projects that inspired the Slovaks. Today, the association has about twenty members who are not professional basket makers. They meet throughout the year for various activities, share their experiences, visit basketry festivals abroad (Nowy Tomyśl, Lichtenfels), and actively collaborate on ÚĽUV projects. Their collaboration with the German ZEF on the installation of an exhibition dedicated to Slovak basketry after 1945, *Searching for an Expression*, as part of the Lichtenfels "Korbmarkt" festival in 2024, led them to this Erasmus+ partnership. The vision is to develop Slovak basketry with new ideas and contribute to the better functioning of the Network of European Basketry Associations. The second member of the Slovak delegation to Cieszyn was Erika Rudíková. A programmer by profession, she is an excellent basket maker who weaves from willow rods and has extensive experience with basketry abroad. This year alone, for example, she completed a three-week stay with the famous professional French basket maker François Desplanches as part of the Erasmus+ mobility program, participated in a trip by European basket makers to a crafts festival in Chengdu, China, and regularly attends master classes in England organised by Eddie Glew.

Over time we have also redefined the main goals that our project could potentially lead to in the future:

- to raise the profile of basketry, make it more attractive, even to the point of becoming a job that young people aspire to;
- to make it attractive both to those interested in the craft itself and to customers so that the courses or products are attractive and there is a wide selection;
- our joint efforts will involve also beginners and professionals as well;
- teaching basketry formally will not only focus on manual skills – today, skills related to running a craft workshop, marketing or product sales, are also important for basket maker:
    - this could also be of interest to ÚĽUV, which runs informal craft courses, if it wanted to offer retraining courses or to ZKS, if it wanted to take on this task, e.g., in preparing a basket weaver job card, which it was recently asked to do,
    - and the same applies to the vocational school of basketry in Lichtenfels, whose graduates are left to fend for themselves after completing their 3 years training; moreover, the school itself could be on the long run in existential danger due to the lack of teaching these skills, because graduates often do not continue in the profession of basket makers, and start to make a living doing something other as they were trained,
    - similar courses are now offered by Serfenta, which, for example, offers schools a course on calculating the price of a basket as part of their extended mathematics teaching; this helps children (and adults also) to better understand why manual labour is more expensive than products from industrially mass-production;
- the "green footprint" of basketry runs through our entire thinking:
    - sustainability in the broader context of European efforts (development of the local economy, use of local natural materials, etc.),
    - low carbon footprint,
    - potential economic model utilizing the work of European people who will be paid decently for their work (increasing competitiveness).

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We also summarized the division of responsibilities for individual activities in the project:

- project management – ZEF
- communication and promotion – Serfenta
- reports from study trips and final text report – ZKS; the final report will be in English and include photos (text provided by ZKS, photos provided by Serfenta)
- project website – ZEF and ZKS
- short film – directed by Jennifer Rubach (she has already started shooting the first scenes and interviews in Cieszyn)
- database of photos and videos related to the project – ZEF webmaster

We also touched on the preparation of a panel exhibition, which will be another professional and visual output of our project. It will not be extensive and will present the basic principles and results of the project. But the presentation of this panel exhibition (associated with discussions) will be important – it is planned for September 2026 at the World Festival of Wickery and Basketry in Nowy Tomyśl, possibly also at the ÚĽUV Days of Masters in Bratislava and, above all, at the international "Korbmarkt" festival in Lichtenfels, where there will also be an opportunity to evaluate the project with representatives of basketry organisations from other European countries.

One of our goals is to use the project's vision to attract additional partners to a larger Erasmus+ project that we would like to implement in the future. The long-term goal of our actual efforts is to create a practical educational basketry network across European countries. In order to make it easier for those interested in studying basketry or purchasing basketry products to access the basketry field (education, creative workshops, shops, etc.) and to increase the number of people connected with basketry and the quality of their work, which could also be of interest to potential sponsors or donors.

If we improve the conditions for education in basketry in individual countries, the number of high-quality basket makers will also increase. And if there are enough high-quality basket makers, we can set further long-term goals, such as for example the aforementioned campaign for "a basket made of natural weaving material in every European household".

External communication about the project:

- Germany – print newspapers, Network of European Basketry Organizations
- Poland – social networks
- Slovakia – RUD magazine, German editorial office of Radio Slovakia International

Further meetings within the project:

- Two more face-to-face study trips are planned (end of January in Lichtenfels and beginning of March in Slovakia)
- We will continue to share our findings and work results (reports, articles on social networks and other media, new ideas) via email
- Our next online meeting will take place on December 17 at 9:00 a.m.

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Working day 2 – Wednesday, October 1:

Research – design thinking – business: a closer look at the working principles of Serfenta

As we have already mentioned, our three associations are different, but we have a common goal. That is why it was interesting for us to learn how the small civic association Serfenta works, which currently has a major impact in the field of cultural heritage development.

Serfenta has been based in the border town of Cieszyn for 13 years. The leader of the association is Paulina Adamska, who combines several skills. Among other things she is an anthropologist and has a background in education. Łucja Cieslar spreads information about Serfenta's activities wherever she can, and also teaches courses with a cattail. Urszula Szwed is an external business consultant for the association in the process of economization. It was thanks to her that the members of Serfenta decided not only to be just a non-profit organization, but to turn their activities into a full-fledged job. Serfenta also has a team of craft instructors (mostly women) who are skilled basket weavers and lead creative workshops.

In the process of developing the association, they often heard from people that crafts are dying out and do not attract young people. Many had experienced that when they wanted to learn a craft, the masters did not have time to teach them just for fun. That is why Serfenta communicates the word CHANGE to people. Through its activities, it revives places and opportunities that many think are no longer alive. It wants to show new ways for tradition. However, it does not change tradition – it only changes the way it is presented.

How to work with cultural heritage to attract a larger audience? This is a question that Serfenta has been asking itself from the very beginning. It all started with ethnographic research by Paulina Adamska and her team, in which they investigated, who works in the field of basketry, with what materials, and also WHY. This was an important research question. Why do you sell your products? The research captured the stories and, above all, the skills of several Polish basket makers, and these skills are still the basis of Serfenta's work today.

Ethnographic research into knowledge and skills is working with tradition. However, in order to transform it into a product for the public, it is also necessary to familiarise oneself with people's needs. You may have many excellent ideas and present them in a practical way, you may try to obtain grants for their implementation – but people are not interested in them. This is because you are not connected to their needs. Serfenta also went through this stage of development... And so they acquired another skill, which is market knowledge. It is a state where you adapt your offer to people's needs, their hearts, their feelings. Because people are willing to pay for a product when they think it's worth it. That they really need it – whether it's a product, a craft course, or your know-how on how to make the cultural heritage you deal with more attractive.

This model is referred to in professional circles as the *design thinking process*. This structured framework encourages teams to empathise with users, clearly define the problem, come up with creative solutions, create prototypes, and test them thoroughly. Whether you are designing a product, service, or experience, *design thinking* ensures that the final solution will be desirable and functional. It promotes innovation by systematically combining empathy, creativity, and rationality. Thanks to this approach, Serfenta has gradually expanded its activities from basketry to other areas of intangible cultural heritage. They connect ideas with solutions and solutions with the market.

It took a long time for Serfenta to adopt this way of thinking. First, they had to learn to listen. They used to sell long-term master classes to people, i.e. Or they thought that people would buy master baskets because they were unique and of high quality. However, if those interested in the course or in

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buying a basket had no craft experience, Serfenta's expectations were not met. People used to say, "We'd love to come, but only for two hours." Or, "This basket is beautiful, but too expensive." However, they were also interested in whether it was difficult to make such a basket, what material it was made of, whether they could smell it, or even try to make it themselves. And so, gradually, based on listening to people's needs, Serfenta came up with an offer that responded to them. The members of the association learned to look at things from multiple angles. It's not that they gave up on longer courses or selling master baskets – but from the clients' perspective, their expectations for immersing themselves in basketry looked different. The most important thing was clearly the experience.

Hand in hand with this approach, other business models also opened up. Once someone tried weaving with natural materials (come and try it), after the course they began to better understand how difficult basket weaving is and why it costs so much ("Now I'll buy that basket"). In this process, Serfenta stopped focusing on the product itself, which is somehow naturally expected at the end of the basketry course, and focused their attention more on the creation itself. They currently have their own unique craft program of short-term experiential courses attended by people from really all over the world. And they proudly talk about learning through experience. Their aim is to provide relaxation above all else to those interested in basket making. Come and relax with crafts! It is a joy when your hands are busy and your mind is at rest. That's what people need today. Most of us are in the online world today, and sometimes we need to break free from it. When we weave, we don't answer emails or pick up the phone. Working with our own hands, creating our own work, is a cure for our mentally exhausted contemporaries. Basketry is also connected to nature, to the local environment, which is real and not virtual. Come and touch the material, listen to the sounds it makes, smell it—it will engage all your senses...

People can become frustrated during Serfenta courses. However, this is a natural process, as many are creating something with their own hands for the first time in their lives. Therefore, mistakes are a natural part of the whole process, and this is emphasized to people during the courses. People, often from abroad, book courses in advance by email or phone according to their preferences (group, individual, using this or that material).

However, Serfenta does not make a living only from selling baskets or craft courses. An important source of income is also sharing the knowledge that Serfenta members have acquired over the years. They are certified experts in intangible cultural heritage, presenting Serfenta's business model, inspiring others to work innovatively with intangible cultural heritage, presenting intangible cultural heritage at conferences, collaborating with designers and artists...

This year, they launched a new project to help people prepare their own craft experience. For example, even more experienced craftsmen, who are sometimes afraid of leading a short-term course that may not even result in a final product. How to prepare a course so that it is still relevant to tradition? How to prepare yourself for such work with people? Or how to use social networks to tell stories about your work in an interesting way?

Serfenta's work has been noticed several times by organizations involved in cultural heritage. Perhaps the most significant award the association has received is the Europa Nostra Award 2024, which is a kind of “Oscar” in the field of cultural heritage. This year, Serfenta was the only project from Poland to be included in the New European Bauhaus Award, which focuses primarily on sustainability. Paulina Adamska and Łucja Cieslar are invited as experts to UNESCO meetings (Morocco, Paris), are advisors to the Polish Ministry of Culture in this area. Serfenta is also among the three Polish non-governmental organizations accredited by UNESCO and participated in the Japan-Poland Economic Conference in Japan. Interestingly, it was the only Polish entity at the conference to address cultural heritage, while among the Japanese participants, cultural heritage was mentioned by every

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presenting entity (even hospitals). In Japan, cultural heritage is intertwined with all aspects of life, which is why Serfenta's story was interesting to the Japanese and also increased the prestige of the Polish part of the conference. In Japan, cultural heritage is visually striking and everywhere in plain sight – whether it's kimonos, sushi, sumo, Fuji, or many other things. Also an interesting insight into our efforts to raise awareness of basketry...

The following example from Serfenta´s life is a beautiful illustration of how cultural heritage can be used to work "for the masses". All you need to do is convince a famous personality of the meaningfulness of your work and be lucky enough to have the right circumstances. Because Serfenta is also bounded with a beautiful black cat. The author of this cat is the ladywriter Agata Romaniuk, who wrote the book series for children *Kocia Szajka* (Cat Gang), set in Cieszyn. The main characters are cats who solve criminal cases. One of the cat heroes is Morfeusz, who is – a basket maker in Serfenta. He weave with *rogozina* (which Serfenta also works with) which is called a cattail in English.

This series has become a bestseller in Poland, and people from all over Poland come to Cieszyn, pick up a map of the city at the tourist office, and search for the cats from the book. These are hidden in various places, including Serfenta, which children know from the book as Morpheusz's workshop. And in it, they want to see a cattail, known in Polish as *rogozina*. However, the word "cattail" is not (or was not) a familiar word in Poland. But thanks to the book, thousands of book lovers visit Serfenta and get to know the cattail in practice, as they can hold it in their hands and, if interested, even weave with it (or with Morpheusz). In the summer, Cieszyn even hosts a three-day festival called *Kocia Szajka* (Cat Gang), during which Serfenta wove this year the world's longest cat's tail with children from cattail on the banks of the Olza River, connecting polish Cieszyn with neighboring Czech Těšín...

This story is about how to raise the profile of basketry by "stealing people's hearts". At Serfenta, they call such powerful moments *touch points*, which are part of their business model. Through your work, you touch people's needs and emotions, which goes beyond basket making itself. It's not just about promoting Serfenta's basketry workshop, but about a number of other activities that raise your profile. It's also about building a value-driven society. Serfenta is thus an institution of social change that seeks to respond to the needs of today's society.

The second working day of our stay in Cieszyn was devoted mainly to this in-depth insight into Serfenta's work. At the end of the day, it was enriching to realize how important it is to focus on a professional topic that affects people's lives, the market, and the promotion of one's work. This form makes it easier to find a target group that will appreciate your work.

Working day 3 – Thursday, October 2:

The Na Grapie Regional Museum in Jaworzynka – a visit to a place associated with the beginnings of Serfenta's activities

The third working day of our study trip in Cieszyn was an excursion. We visited the Beskydy Regional Museum "Na Grapie" in the mountain village of Jaworzynka, founded in 1993 by Jerzy Rucki – a poet, writer, and great lover of Cieszyn Silesia. He spent his life in Switzerland, where he wrote stories and poems about Jaworzynka in her archaic local dialect.

The museum's authentic collections present the former life of local highlanders – their customs, work, and art. The museum also organizes creative workshops on traditional crafts, including basket making from spruce roots.

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Research into basketry from spruce roots was one of the first activities of the Serfenta association. Its members carried out this research in the vicinity of Jaworzynka, and later, thanks to basketry master Jan Zogata (and a grant program for teaching new craft apprentices to the master, funded by the Polish Ministry of Culture), they managed to teach this old craft to three local men.

This is why the excursion to this museum was also a journey of discovery for the project partners, allowing them to learn about Serfenta's primary work – ethnographic research. In the peaceful mountain environment of the Beskydy Mountains, time seems to have stood still. Through authentic exhibits and the expert commentary of museum employee, we were transported back to a time when children learned by directly observing their parents, when people's way of life was extremely ecological, and when social bonds functioned on the principle of cooperation.

Does contemporary basketry have parallels with this period? For years, the activities of our associations and other basketry organisations have been linked with the aim of moving basketry based on sustainability and environmental friendliness towards a more systematic approach. Selflessly as in the past, with a deep immersion in the subject matter, with a common goal, respecting differences.

An interesting moment that further highlighted these principles of our project work was brought about by the theater performance *Držím ti miesto* (I'll Hold Your Place) by the Czech theater company Husa na provázku. We attended it in Cieszyn on the second working day of our study trip in the evening as part of the international theater festival *Bez hraníc* (Without Borders). The performance dealt with the relationship between two close nations – the Czechs and Slovaks, who shared a common state for 75 years in history. However, the view of this relationship was very superficial and mainly reflected the current tense situation in the nations of Central Europe, which are internally divided on the basis of political affiliation. This approach divides people, as they fight over opinions that are, at their core, anti-human.

The return to the roots in the environment of Jaworzynka, to the traditional Polish environment, to traditional basket weaving, which Serfenta's activity kept alive, spoke a different language, based on principles proven over many years. At the same time, Serfenta gave the traditional root basket, locked away for centuries in one place (and perhaps stereotypical, just as the relations between the two nations are stereotypical), a dignified place, which makes it a contemporary product that is understandable even beyond its original distribution. The reason is simple – it did so with due respect for the product, its maker, the environment, and its people and with a well-thought-out intention of positive development.

This is a solution that breaks down barriers, i.e., it is barrier-free. It differs from the relativisation of values in today's mainstream society, where people often do not connect with their hearts, even when searching for the best solutions. Rather, they negate, based on individual gain, intimidating others with their intellect or strength...

Short conclusion

Our stay in Cieszyn was excellent for the launch of our project. It opened up many philosophical and practical questions that we will certainly encounter in our search for a dignified place for basketry and basket makers. We look forward to develop them on January 2026 during our stay in Lichtenfels, Germany, where not only ZEF is based, but where the largest European basketry festival, international Lichtenfels “Korbmarkt”, has been an institution itself for half a century and where the only European vocational school offering a three-year course in basketry is located.

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