

**INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL GEOGRAPHICAL CLUB “PENEPLENA”
AT THE JULIUSZ SLOWACKI HIGH SCHOOL
IN THE ACADEMIC JUNIOR & SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL IN CHORZÓW
(ESTABLISHED 1977)**

The scientific patron of Peneplena is the Polish Geographical Society

The Geographical Club “Peneplena” gathers pupils and former pupils of the Juliusz Slowacki High School (so called Slowak) in Chorzow (Upper Silesia) - one of the best high schools in Poland. Its strong position is a result of the teachers’ and students’ enthusiasm and unselfish work, as well as the wide educational offer - from European education through popularizing of the Polish speech in Polish communities in the Ukraine and Zaolzie, up to the annual ski-camps. The wide range of the projects the school realizes as well as encouraging active participation in the school and public life, cause that Slowak’s graduates belong to the group of so called successful people. Undoubtedly, the most famous of them is professor Jerzy Buzek – the Chairman of European Parliament and a former Prime Minister of Poland.

“Peneplena” is a unique organization on the European scale at least. One of its work forms is organizing trips, journeys, outdoor workshops and tourist events in order to teach how to use students’ geographical knowledge in practice. Despite the high costs, students regularly travel round Poland and many European countries. The favourite destination are mountainous regions, where one is close to the nature and can feel the world’s real beauty.

Since 1978 our Geographical Circle has been organizing an all-Polish tourist event -“Rajd Slowaka”. Its participants are teenagers from the high schools all over the country in which Juliusz Slowacki is the patron. This event gives a perfect occasion to make friends with peers from the whole country as well as broaden our knowledge about Beskid Śląski and Zywiecki where the event traditionally takes place. In 1987 the action of cleaning mountain trails was also initiated. Through the campaign “Clean Mountains” the young want to reinstate at least a part of the mountains’ original charm.

The Club does not limit the range of its activity only to this type of actions. Its members traditionally give a lot of talks and lectures alongside with slide-shows, which introduce the society into the world of travelling and show the beauty of our world. “Peneplena” members are often guests in the media, especially in the Polish Television and radio broadcasting stations. In this way they share their unusual experiences with others. Another autumn tradition in our school - the “Days of Mountains and Travelling ” give you the possibility to see interesting films and hear talks and lectures about treks, tours, mountaineering or meet with globetrotters, geographers and other geography-related scientists.

The event crowning the many years’ activity of “Peneplena” was the 1st Geographical Expedition “India-Nepal-Himalaya ‘91”. Thanks to the great help of sponsors, our Club members could explore such impressive places and sites as Kathmandu and Pokhara (Nepal), Varanasi, Khajuraho, Agra, Fatehpur Sikri, Jaipur and Delhi in India. The highlight of this expedition was the ten-day-long trekking in Langtang Himal region that ended with reaching Tsergo Ri peak (5,033 m above sea level). Souvenirs and ethnographic exhibits were placed in our school’s geographical museum while the considerably enriched collection of minerals won again the first place in the International Exhibition and Exchange of Minerals and Fossils in Sosnowiec in November 1994.

The India and Nepal expedition was the first undertaking of this kind in Poland. Therefore, it obtained wide publicity all over the country. As it turned out, it was also the first organized climbing up the Himalayas of the young people (according to the information of the Ministry of Tourism in Nepal and Royal Geographical Society in London). For this expedition “Peneplena” was honoured with the membership of The Young Explorers Trust attached to The Royal Geographical Society in London.

At the beginning of 1993 the Club members repeated the success of their older friends and completed the project of the 2nd Geographical Expedition “India-Nepal-Himalaya ‘93”. This time the route was leading from Delhi through Jaipur, Agra, Khajuraho, Benares, Chitwan to Kathmandu, from where an 11-person group set out on a two-week-long trekking in the Mount Everest area, ended with climbing Kala Pathar (5,545 m above sea level - the highest ascent of teenage climbers in the world). Under the south wall of Lhotse young climbers set up a commemorating plate dedicated to those who remained in the mountains forever. Having descended the mountains the expedition went through Darjeeling and Calcutta to Bombay from where, after an eight-week-long stay on the Indian subcontinent, they came back to Poland. This time again our school museum was enriched with many valuable exhibits and “Peneplena” was awarded with the membership of the National Geographic Society in Washington.

The fascination with Indian culture, customs and varied geographical environment does not wane. What is more, it is constantly increasing. Thanks to firms, institutions and private persons’ help the 3rd Geographical Expedition “India-Pakistan-Karakorum ‘94” was organized in summer 1994. This time they not only penetrated

the north - western India (Delhi, Amritsar, Jammu, Srinagar, Leh, Manali, Chandigarh, Agra, Mathura) but also the northern part of Pakistan (Lahore, Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Gilgit, Karimabad). The participants covered the well-known Karakorum Highway as well as made a one-week-long trekking in the Batura Mustagh area.

Since their return to Poland they shared their observations and impressions from the stay in Asia with others. The lectures, talks, articles, TV and radio programmes together with a specially made film allowed to introduce and show the beauty and exoticism of culture of the Indian subcontinent to many young people.

The 4th Geographical Expedition, which took place in winter 1996, included mainly southern India (Bombay, Goa, Mangalore, Mysore, Cochin, Madras, Mahabalipuram, Kancheepuram, Bhubaneswar, Konarak, Puri, Kalkuta, Patna) and a one-month stay in Nepal. In Calcutta the expedition members met Mother Theresa herself. There they also donated medicines and medical equipment. Their visit to Nepal was connected with exploring Kathmandu Valley, trekking in Helambu Himal, rafting on the Trisuli River and a photo safari in the Terai Lowlands. On their way back to Delhi they stopped in Varanasi, Agra and Jaipur.

On the 500th anniversary of discovering the seaway to India by Vasco da Gama our Club organized the 5th Geographical Expedition under the honorary patronage of the Ambassador of India to Poland and the President of Chorzow with the media support of Radio Katowice. It was one of the longest (62 days) and at the same time the most numerous (18 members and a radio reporter) expedition. The organizers intended to commemorate the anniversary of reaching the Indian coast by the Portuguese fleet in 1498. The trail of the expedition led through southern India (Madras, Calcutta), Bangladesh (Khulna, Bagherhat, Dhaka), north-eastern India (Agartala, Shillong, Guwahati, Gangtok, Darjeeling), Nepal (Terai Lowlands, Kathmandu, trekking in the Annapurna area, Lumbini) and also northern India (Kushinagar, Varanasi, Agra, Jaipur, Delhi). Traditionally they handed over gifts in the form of medicines to one of the Indian hospitals and the Sisters of Mercy Congregation, where prayers were said over the grave of Mother Teresa. Such donations are greatly appreciated by doctors and therefore the information about them and the expeditions appear in the national press ("The Times of India"). The 5th expedition resulted in issuing a wide publication, which also included a list of sponsors whose generosity made the journey possible. For the first time the photographs taken during the expedition were displayed on exhibitions, among others, at the Club of International Press and Book in Katowice, Polish Radio Gallery in Katowice and the Municipal Museum in Chorzow.

1999 is the School Jubilee Year and the "Ślowacki over Frontiers Year". The Geographical Club "Peneplena" decided to celebrate it by organising a month-long escapade to the islands of the Malay Archipelago. The 6th School Expedition "Indonesia '99" let the young people explore the intact nature (equatorial rainforest, volcanoes, coral reefs), traces of the ancient Asian civilisations and a diversified tribal mosaic of the islands: Flores, Sumbawa, Lombok, Bali and Java. On Komodo island the young explorers stood face to face with the longest lizards in the world - famous "Komodo dragons". Many photographs, from among several thousand taken on the southern hemisphere, could be admired on photo exhibitions in Katowice, Cracow, Bielsko-Biala, Munich, Koln, Essen and in the Museum in Chorzow during the Great School Reunion, whose honorary patrons and guests were: the former Prime Minister of Poland – Mr. Jerzy Buzek – a graduate of our school in 1957 – now the Chairman of European Parliament and the President of Chorzow – Mr. Marek Kopel. During each exhibition a list of sponsors was presented.

The next project – exploration of one of the African countries was quite unconventional. The 7th School Geographical Expedition "Ethiopia – Semien 2001" made it its aim to explore the only Christian country in Africa – Ethiopia. The route was divided into some stages, the first being the northern part of the country rich in the monuments and remnants of the Christian culture connected with the Coptic tradition. Among places which we visited: Bahar Dar and the nearby waterfalls of the Blue Nile, Lake Tana, Gonder, Aksum, Debre Damo and Lalibela, the last to seem to be especially noteworthy. The South proved to be a totally different story. Local national parks are "above all" rich in ... people. Travelling through the African bush we came across one of the most dangerous tribes of the Dark Continent – Mursi. In Muslim Harer in the east of the country we participated in an extraordinary show of feeding hyenas using... mouth-to-mouth method. At the beginning of September the expedition came back to Poland and its participants were warmly welcomed at the airport in Katowice by the Prime Minister of Poland and Silesian authorities.

The 8th School Geographical Expedition "India – Himalaya 2003" was one of the most successful and effective journeys. The route, measuring 10,000 km, led through the lepers' colony in Puri, which was founded and is run by the Polish missionary – Marian Zelazek – a candidate for the World Peace Nobel Award and through the highest road pass in the world – Khardung La (5,620m above sea level). The participants give lectures to young people in such popular venues as Travellers' Club "Wagabunda" in Cracow, Student Travellers' Circle "Denali" at the Silesian University, Polish Geographical Society, schools and cultural centres or during workshops for teachers of geography.

During summer holidays 2004 another 9th School Geographical Expedition of a 15-person group took place. This time, the main destination were the countries of the Indo-China Peninsula with their interesting culture and

nature: Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand. The area turned out to be extremely diversified both economically and ethnically. On the one hand, we experienced unusual adventures like repairing a road in Laos or escaping a huge elephant in the jungle and on the other hand, we could see the horrifying enormity of crimes committed by Red Khmers. The expedition was as usual an extraordinary lesson of geography and history.

In the end of 2004 all the students of our school have been deeply struck and shocked by the tragedy of people of south-eastern Asia, India and Sri Lanka caused by the unexpected natural disaster – the tsunami. They decided together with their parents and teachers to raise some financial funds for the charity help in this region. We think that it was a good idea to support and help young people from another country. That is why we had found contact with a school in Sri Lanka – C.W.W. Kannangara Maha Vidyalaya in Galle – to be in close touch with its students and teachers. We supported them financially and visited them during our stay in their country in the summer 2005.

The itinerary of the 11th School Geographical Expedition in 2007 included India and Nepal. The travelers from Chorzów covered 15000 km visiting on their way fabulous monuments of Nepal, forcing through the monsoon - flooded state of Bihar, admiring ancient cities of Ajanta and Ellora, and prehistoric rock paintings of Bhimbetka. On 31st August 2007 the group of 31 students and graduates of our school had the honour of the private audience at His Holiness XIV Dalailama of Tibet. The Dalailama, through the hands of our students, sent a special message to all the Polish youth.

In summer 2008 the 12th School Geographical Expedition set off to explore another region of Asia – the Malay Peninsula and Archipelago. This time the participants were mainly concentrating on the observation of nature, both animate and inanimate. The former could be admired from the boats on the river Kinabatangan in the northern part of Borneo or during the face to face meeting with orangutans. Having visited the monuments of Bali and Java, the travellers stopped on Sumatra crossing there the equator and wandering among countless volcanoes. One of the trips was crowned with reaching the top of the active volcano - Mount Sibayak. Its roaring and gurgling crater reminded us all of the power lurking in the heart of our planet.

The last project we have organized took place in 2009 under the honorable patronage of H.E. Anil Wadhwa – the former Ambassador of India to Poland. The group consisting of 20 students and their tutors spent the first three weeks of the journey in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. For more than one month we explored Kashmir and Ladakh visiting such places as Srinagar, Leh and its surroundings, Nubra Valley and high-mountains salt lakes like Tso Moriri and Tso Pangong as well.

In the nearest future young explorers from Chorzow are planning to organize next expeditions. The 14th one is planned for the summer holiday in 2011 and its geographical destination will be the countries of southern Asia: India and probably Nepal.

The main educational aims of the expeditions are:

- exploring geographical environment of various countries
- studying culture and religious diversity of the region
- carrying out naturalistic and sociological observations - gathering, processing and using them
- developing tolerance and sensitivity
- creating an open society - free from chauvinism, national superstitions and religious prejudice
- shaping organisational skills
- learning how to behave in non-typical situations
- deepening ecological awareness
- developing cognitive passions
- preparing photographic materials and enriching ethnographic collection for exhibition purposes
- preparing slide-shows and presentations for school peers and university students and also for travel festivals in Cracow and Katowice

Further information together with the gallery of photos from different expeditions can be found at the web sites: www.peneplena.slowacki.edu.pl and www.slowacki.edu.pl

The School Geographical Club „Peneplena”