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## **My first day at the boarding school**

Being handicapped with cerebral palsy, a type of brain injury, I am unable to walk since birth. In spite the handicap I've always tried to make things work in such a way so that I would not be perceived as too much different from my friends. Of course, this was not always as easy as it may seem.

The most important turning point in my life probably was, when I turned seven and my parents had to decide, which school was I supposed to go to. The choice wasn't very broad; in fact I believe there were only two schools to choose from: Dom Janeza Levca for children with slight mental disabilities in Ljubljana (which is the city I at the time did and still do live in) and a boarding school, Zavod za usposabljanje invalidne mladine (An Institution for enabling handicapped children and youths) in Kamnik, which is suitable for children who are disabled only physically, but not also mentally. As far as I know this is still the only such school in Slovenia. However, choosing this school also meant I would have stay there for the whole week and return home only for weekends, since Kamnik and Ljubljana are about 25 kilometres apart. In the end my parents chose the latter one and although I wasn't thrilled with their decision at the time, looking back I do admit it was the correct one.

I did not really believe that I was actually leaving for Kamnik until my mother started packing the day before departure. I still remember vividly being driven to Kamnik for the first time. I was not particularly happy about it, but I was not sad either. There were so many things around me and I was too preoccupied with them and did not really feel anything except being nervous. Everything was new to me and I was determined not to miss anything.

My astonishment graduated when we finally reached our destination. The building was huge, quite contrary from what I imagined it would be like. For the first time in my life I felt small and unimportant in comparison with something. I was afraid of it. I started asking myself whether coming here was really such a good idea. Still, I plucked up what was left of my courage and headed for the entrance. There were already some of the first-graders with their parents waiting in the hall and soon the board of teachers and pedagogues greeted us. We were also given a grand tour of the whole school and I still remember how lost and bewildered I felt when I was trying to take note of all of the rooms and classes and their locations. I was never good at remembering locations and how to get to them. Not when I was younger and not now. But it was very much different back then. I had this terrible feeling that I will never be able to remember all of them. Luckily I never had to.

The most notable difference between the "regular" primary schools and the one in Kamnik is, as I have already mentioned, that it is a boarding school. And since it is the only school, which is adapted to the needs of physically handicapped children (including specially trained personnel), all such pupils of the whole country are gathered there. Moreover, I started attending primary school at the time when the war in ex Yugoslavia started, thus much of the handicapped refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia who fled to Slovenia were also sent there. I still keep in touch with some of those who I had the pleasure to meet on that day.

I shared a room with two refugees, one from Croatia and one from Bosnia. Soon after all the parents left, they sent all three of us to our room in order "to have a rest" as the pedagogues informed us. An hour spent in that room must have been the worst part of the day. Naturally, we were all too excited to sleep and to add insult to injury, both of my roommates started to cry, because, as far as I could understand, they were afraid of being left in Slovenia, while their parents would return back to respective countries. I felt sorry for them and tried to comfort them as much as I could with my, back then limited, vocabulary of their language. It

was pointless, as they would not listen to anything I said. I too started to feel depressed, partly because of failing to comfort them and partly, because I started to miss my family. Also, because no one came, I realized that I will have to be much more independent as I was at home. After an hour or so someone finally came and led us to the classroom.

I always adored learning something new. I taught myself how to read when I was five and started reading fairytales, so I was quite well equipped with knowledge when I entered primary school. At the time I was also reading shorter adventure novels by Enid Blyton, taught myself some algebra (my brother is one year older than I am and I picked a thing or two from him) and spoke very basic English, which I learned through courses. I was really looking forward to learning more.

Another peculiarity of the institution's regulations was, that there were only five or six, at most seven pupils per class. I was surprised at that, since many older friends were trying to scare with the "there are so many of us in a single classroom, that no one notices you" routine. The second surprise to me was, that I knew most of the material, which we were supposed to learn in the first few months. I was disappointed. I always thought of school as a challenge, but looking back at everything today, I believe secondary school was the first real challenge I came across with. I believe that quite a few of my schoolmates were quite stressed out with everything they've been through so the teacher tried to calm us all down by simply talking to us. This took me by surprise again, as I was convinced that school means hard work, not chitchat. I do not remember what else we did on the first day, but I do remember that classes were over at five o' clock.

I remember feeling weird on that day about not sleeping at home. I was not sad, just a little bewildered. My roommates would not want to talk to me, they were still very nervous and stressed out. They were sleeping soon. As for me, I could not get to sleep for a long time and I remember thinking about what to make of everything. I was asking myself whether I really want to stay here. I could not answer that question that day, but the next day after I made friends with some of the schoolmates all my doubts vanished.

One must think that the first day in school was the worst day of my life and in a way it probably was. But on the other hand, that day was the first I came to realize how many people have problems similar to the ones I had. I knew I will fit right in and I was not mistaken.