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# I want to understand the people who live only about 100 km from my hometown

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Czech language with its seven cases (by the declination of nouns), numerous declination and conjugation classes and typical sounds such as the of the letter „ř“ is claimed to be one of the most difficult languages in the world. Despite that there are well motivated students of this language all around Europe, mainly in Germany, Austria, Poland, Italy, Belgium or Britain (these are the countries from which the Charles University receives the majority of the Erasmus students in this particular study field).

*For our series of the interviews to the 25th anniversary of the Erasmus programme, we have approached several of our past and present students from this group to learn more about their motivation to learn Czech, the way how it is taught back at their home universities (in comparison with the Charles University) and their future job options and wishes.*



**Our interview is with students who arrived to the Charles University in Prague from the University of Regensburg and the University of Passau, two seats of the *Bohemicum* specialized in teaching Czech language.**

**Carolin Öllinger** studied Czech (together with French, Economics and Cultural Studies) at the University of Passau and joined the Charles University, the Faculty of Arts, in the academic year 2005/6. She finished her studies in 2008, moved to Regensburg and started a job there.

**Carolin, you come from a Bavarian region neighbouring on Czech borders (Carolin's home town is Osterhofen in the valley of Danube, a place just half way between Passau and Regensburg). Was your decision to study Czech connected with the region you lived in or had you other motivations as well?**

My most important motivation to learn Czech was my love for languages. As I learned English and French at school and started Spanish at the university, I was interested in learning a language other than Germanic or Romance ones. I had to choose between Russian, Polish and Czech and as you are able to receive a deep insight in both the language and the culture of your country with the programme "Bohemicum" offered at the University of Passau, I decided to learn Czech. Another important aspect, of course, was to understand the people who live only about 100 km from my hometown.

**The University of Passau (together with the University of Regensburg) is by the German students of Czech language famous as a seat of Bohemicum, a department specialized in teaching Czech – which you also joined. How does the way Czech is taught in Passau differ from the programme offered at the Charles University? Was it of advantage for you to study in both the places?**

In my opinion, the Bohemicum in Passau and the department "Čeština pro cizince" at the Charles University in Prague do not differ too much as they both combine teaching the language and giving you an insight in Czech culture and history. Bohemicum was my first contact with the Czech language and I have to say that it is a very intensive programme. The teachers started with the similarities in both the languages, e.g. 'telefonovat' in Czech and 'telefonieren' in German (= to phone someone). That was very good to loose the fear of the language which seems very different in the first place – and most of the time even after getting to know it better.

But after one year of learning the language with this programme, I was able to orientate myself in Prague, to look for an apartment and to move in with two Czechs and a Slovak person and to speak Czech with them. That is also what made it so valuable for me to study in Prague – the combination of studying at a Czech university, to be in contact with Czech teachers and the state of research in the Czech Republic combined with living an everyday live in Prague.

It was great to learn how Czech students study, how the university system works and to experience what it is like to study in one of the oldest universities in Europe (I really like e.g. the graduation ceremony at the Karolinum) – especially as the University of Passau is a very young one.

The year at Charles University enabled me to really deepen my knowledge of Czech language as well as of Czech culture and to get to know Czech friends.

**Finally, the knowledge of Czech helped you to your job. What do you work as? Do you use Czech often?**

After returning to Germany I did an internship at "ti communication," a company based in Regensburg which provides intercultural training programmes and intercultural coachings for international companies. Later I joined this company for work.

As to what we do: experienced freelance trainers are preparing participants for an assignment abroad, i.e. living and working in another country for a longer period (usually approximately 3 years) or for cooperation in multicultural teams or for working in projects together with partners from another cultures, etc.

In 2009 me and my colleague Susanna Brökelmann joined "ti communication" founder Gerhard Hain in leading the company and we were able to broaden our international clients, e.g. in the Czech Republic.

Unfortunately, I do not need my Czech very often in my job, but my knowledge of this language also helps me to understand our Polish or other Slavonic clients – and having lived in Prague enables me to understand the cultural differences and other cultural tendencies in these cultures.

Thank you for the answers.

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**Stephanie Karl** joined the Charles University as a student of Psychology similarly to Carolin Öllinger in the academic year 2005/6. Originally from the University of Regensburg, Stephanie made use of the offer of the local department of *Bohemicum* and before coming to Prague learnt to speak Czech fluently.

**Steffi, you come from a place located very close to the Czech-Bavarian borders, Eslarn. Had you known any Czech before you decided to study this language at the Bohemicum? How is Czech actually taught at the Bohemicum?**

As far as I remember, I did not know any Czech before I joined the Bohemicum and started to learn this language there. At the Bohemicum you study both Czech language and culture. There is an offer of seminars, lectures and language courses. You have to take a certain amount of these three, but you have the choice which ones you take.

I took both language and culture courses. In my first semester (winter 2004/5) it was for example a course about Historical Monuments of Prague or a course on Women and Portraits of Women in the Czech Culture. In my second semester (summer 2004/5), I attended a course about Franz Kafka and also a course on the history of Czech language.

Usually, the language course takes 4 hours a week and the cultural courses 2 hours a week. You study your own study field and the Bohemicum – so there is more work load, but the results are well worth it.

**Was Prague (or the Czech Republic in general) your first choice of the destination for your Erasmus study stay? Was the knowledge of Czech a motivation for you – or was it the other way around and you had started to learn the language because you knew you would be studying in Prague at some later point?**

At first I wanted to spend my semester or year abroad at some university in Italy. But there was no Erasmus cooperation in my study field, Psychology, with Italy.

Then a friend asked me if I would like to attend the Bohemicum with her. And I decided to do so. While studying at the Bohemicum I made the decision to use my knowledge of Czech and to take part in the exchange program with the Charles University in Prague.

**You finished the university in 2008, moved back to Eslarn and work now in your study field, Psychology. What kind of work do you exactly have and is your knowledge of Czech of advantage there? Since you live very close to the Czech-Bavarian borders, do you speak Czech often?**

I work in an institution for psychosocial rehabilitation of addicts, "STE Lindau" in the region of Oberpfalz. I enjoy the work with our clients and my colleagues are really nice. The only disadvantage is that I have to live in the country now, but since all else is suiting me well, I am satisfied here.

Unfortunately, I do not speak Czech very often and I have also forgotten quite a lot. Only when we are in a Czech restaurant, Czech shop or Czech fuel station I try to use the language – so that I don't come fully out of the practice.

Thank you for the answers.