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# About Colonies and Milk Cows – Germans in Uruguay

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Julia Enge, in summer 2011 married Neumann, arrived to the Charles University in the frame of the Erasmus programme in the winter semester 2010/11 from the German University of Erfurt. By the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Erasmus programme, we have asked her to share with us her experience with learning Czech as well as her voluntary year in Uruguay, in one of the German 'colonies, as the local settlements of Germans are called. Julia prepared also a Europe Meets School project about this experience - and the history of the German emmigration to Southern America. Her project in the Třebizského Primary School in Kralupy nad Vltavou was titled 'About Colonies and Milk Cows – Germans in Uruguay.'

**Julia, you study languages at the University of Erfurt. One of your chosen study fields is Czech – which lead you also to Charles University in Prague as Erasmus exchange student in the winter semester 2010/11. Why have you decided to study Czech, a language that many people claim to be one of the most difficult languages in the world? Do you agree with them? Are there any difficulties you still have with it?**

I have always loved studying languages and after learning the 'bigger' Western European languages at school (English, Spanish, French), I wanted to start with something different and maybe more challenging at the university. As linguists strive to understand language in its complexity, it is important for us to get to know language structures that are quite different from our mother tongue.

Czech was particularly interesting for me as my family lives close to the border to the Czech Republic and we had been there a few times during my childhood. I also have a close friend who speaks Czech as her mother is from Czech Republic, and she always used to tell me what a wonderful language it is, so I gave it a try and liked it.

As for Czech being very difficult to learn, I have to say that I agree only to some degree. It was certainly more difficult for me than Spanish or English, and I still mix up the case-endings and get my tongue twisted when I'm trying to pronounce some of the Czech 'funny' words which don't have any vowels. But still, Czech has quite a lot of connections to German, for example in the way words or sentences are built, and surprisingly some proverbs and idioms can be translated word by word from German into Czech. I have started studying Arabic a year ago and there you have a system that is so entirely different from the European languages that it is far more difficult to get used to.

**Living close to Chemnitz, you come from a region neighbouring to the Czech Republic. Are there any Czech classes offered in the schools? Have you studied the language before joining the university? Did any of your study colleagues?**

As far as I know, there are very few schools in Saxony (and in Germany in general) where Czech can be learnt, but I can't offer any numbers. There weren't any classes at my school, so I started to learn Czech only when I began my university studies. For most of the people in our course (we were about 15), it was like this; there was only one guy who had some previous knowledge of Czech, as he had been living in the Czech Republic for one year.

**You are currently enrolled in the last year of Bachelor, so you will soon have to decide what your MA will be about. Are you going to study languages then as well? What kind of work would you like to have after you have finished the university? Do you think the knowledge of Czech will be useful for you then?**

My MA will for sure deal with languages – at the moment I'm checking out different possibilities. One option would be to do a MA in German as a Second Language in order to become a teacher, either for immigrants to Germany or in another country. Another field I'm interested in is the creation of language teaching material. I believe that for both these options any foreign language I have studied is potentially useful and so I hope that I will have the opportunity to make use of my Czech then.

**After joining the Charles University in Prague, you decided to participate in Europe Meets School programme of the Erasmus Club of Faculty of Arts. The topic you presented was the German settlements in Southern America, particularly Uruguay. The topic was selected since you spent a year before coming to Prague as a volunteer in this particular region, working in one of the German settlements there. Could you tell us something about this experience?**

It was really a wonderful time for me. I had chosen to go to South America after studying Spanish at the high school, because I loved this beautiful language and also because I wanted to get to know life outside the 'European standards'. The organisation I applied to work with offered me a place in Uruguay, and as I did hardly know anything about this small country, I thought 'Great, a chance to get to know something entirely new' and went there.

For 12 months I lived and worked in a children's home which was founded by the German settlers in a small Uruguayan village. I did a lot of house work, cooking, cleaning and things like this, and I also tried to be something like an older sister for the kids – I helped them with their homework, played with them and we did all kinds of crazy things together. I really enjoyed this experience and I learnt so much – I can only recommend it!

**How and when were the German settlements in South America created and how do they keep their „autonomy“? How is the life there today?**

The people who founded the German settlements (called 'colonies') belonged to the (Protestant) Mennonite church and originally lived in the regions around Gdansk which now belong to Poland.

Because of their German origin, these people had to flee from their home region at the end of World War II and first came to Germany. As it was very difficult for them to start a new life in a destroyed, over-crowded post-war Germany, members from the US-American Mennonite church decided to help them to move even more far away. Uruguay and Paraguay were two of the very few countries which would take in Germans during this difficult time in history, so some of the uprooted German Mennonites came there by ships organised by their US-American fellow-believers. They built farms in areas where there was nothing before and for quite a long time kept to themselves and didn't mix up with the local people. This has been changing recently – today the colonies are not as isolated as they were before, most of the people there speak Spanish as well as German and especially the young people often couple up with Uruguayans. But still, the colonies preserve their German heritage to some degree – church services are often held in German (with Spanish translation available), they have their own primary schools where the children are taught partly in German and the families speak German at home most of the time.

**How different is the German language used in Uruguay (and Southern America) compared to the current German spoken in Europe?**

When you come from Germany and talk to the people in this region you really have a lot to smile about. First of all, people are constantly mixing up Spanish and German. Especially for modern things which didn't exist when they went away from Germany and therefore the names for them don't exist in their German language, they simply take the Spanish terms and use them in their German sentences. You can hear things like: "Gib mir bitte mein *celular!*" (= 'Please give me my *celular*.', where *celular* is the Spanish word for mobile phone – in Germany we would say *Handy*).

Apart from this, you can notice that their German is somehow old-fashioned, for example they would always say "Propaganda" for advertising, which is not used in this sense in current standard German any longer, as it reminds everybody of Nazi times.

Moreover, their German is somehow 'wearing out' and they make quite a lot of grammatical and lexical mistakes. Some of them can be really cute – for example, I heard a boy telling his mother who was driving a car: "Du kannst da drüben durchdrehen." ('You can go crazy over there.'). when what he really meant was "Du kannst da drüben umdrehen." ('You can turn around over there.').

All this was really interesting for me as a language freak, and luckily the people there like to laugh about themselves and their funny language as well.

**The children in your host class (the host school of Julia's project was Třebízského Primary School in Kralupy nad Vltavou) certainly enjoyed to learn so much about such a distant country. Have you also enjoyed teaching them? How was it to cooperate with an interpreter (Julia's project was translated by the Erasmus Club tutor Kristýna Omastová)?**

Yes, I enjoyed it very much; it really was an interesting experience. The children were really attentive and I think they had fun participating in the project – I was amazed at the creativity many of them showed in decorating the cows (see picture). I had been wondering whether this would be somehow too 'childish' for them, but they were really into it and it was fun working with them.

The cooperation with Kristýna was also great – she was really good at translating and also at animating the kids, so I was glad to have her with me. Although I speak some Czech, it would have been really hard for me to give the whole presentation in Czech, so I think that with the translation the whole thing went much more smoothly and enjoyable for everyone.

**Is a Czech school and children different from the German one(s)?**

Well, I can't really answer this question very well after visiting a Czech school for only one day. Of course there are some differences in the whole school system, so for example Primary School in Germany takes only the first four years and then the children switch either to the 'Gymnasium' or to the 'Mittelschule', according to their grades.

As for the children, at first I had the impression that they were a bit shy because they didn't ask any questions when they had the possibility after my presentation, but then I was really surprised by their motivation for designing the cows for the poster; I don't know whether this would have been possible with German kids.

**Your region, Erzgebirge, is a rather traditional area and your parents have very traditional jobs for the region (Julia's mother is creating traditional Saxon Christmas decoration and Julia's father is a Protestant Priest). What is the best to live in such environment? Are there any disadvantages?**

Well, as for me personally my faith in God is very important, I am glad that it always played a big role in our family, too. And the congregation my father is working for is a very active and nice one. One thing that I especially like is that there is good cooperation between the different Protestant churches in the region. In our village there is not only the common Protestant Church my father works for, but also two other local Protestant groups but they are not quarrelling with each other about who is right and who not, but doing a lot of activities and projects together, especially the young people.

That's also how I got to know my husband, who belonged to another Protestant group. So there were really a lot of good things going along with growing up "inside" the church.

On the other hand, there have of course also been some disadvantages. Due to his job, my father has to work most of the holidays (there are always a lot of church services on Christmas, Easter and so on). Especially Christmas, which is very important for people in the Erzgebirge, has always been a very busy time for our family and we never had the typical calm family holiday most people have. So it was a really new experience for us when my father broke his shoulder while visiting me in Prague shortly before Christmas and had to spend the whole holidays at home!

**Would you like to stay in your home region also after you have finished the university? Or do the young people from your home region prefer to move rather to bigger cities?**

Most of the young people indeed move away as there are not so many jobs and especially not well-paid jobs in our region. A lot of them go to Western Germany where the salaries are higher than in our region.

As for myself, I don't know exactly where I am going to live in the future. For now, I would like to see some more of the world. I'm planning to go abroad again soon and I also could imagine leaving Germany altogether someday. But I really don't know yet.

Thank you for the interview.