
Quo vadis? WEST! – visit of German Embassy in Prague

Quo vadis? WEST! – visit of German Embassy in Prague

It was on one of the few snowy and freezing days in Prague this winter when the Erasmus Club of the Faculty of Arts paid a special visit to the German Embassy in Prague, located in Lobkowitz Palace near Malostranské náměstí (Malostranské Square). This was an exciting opportunity to have a guided tour around the building and take a glimpse in to a place where one of the impulses for the fall of communism in 1989 originated – a story that's hardly imaginable in 2014 but one that still fascinates us all.

The Lobkowitz Palace has been utilised for official purposes since the 18th century. Previously to that, the building was surprisingly operating as a beer brewery and the function and owner of the grounds changed frequently. The Lobkowitz family held ownership of the palace from 1753 onwards but during the era of the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938) it was bought by the state. Nevertheless, it still retained its historical name under the Lobkowitz family. The dominant feature of this wonderful piece of Barock architecture is the round room in the cupola, used even today for concerts and other special occasions. The frescos on walls and ceilings in the interior were breath taking, but most of our tour found the dainty, decoratively pruned garden to be their favourite part of the grounds. Although it was a fine-sized garden for a palace not far from the city centre, one would image it to be much larger. After all, this garden had hosted more than 5,000 refugees at a time!

In 1989, just a few months before the Wall in Berlin fell, hundreds of Germans from East Germany fled to the embassy in Prague in an attempt to access West Germany. What started as a trip for freedom for dozens, soon turned into an enormous wave of immigrants climbing over the fence of the embassy's garden. Arriving with just essentials, this was a sign of desperation and the press, the police and the Red Cross were swift to respond. However, the embassy was soon overcrowded and overworked. Due to this, the conditions in the palace were disastrous. The embassy, housing some three thousand people at a time, had only two showers and about twelve toilets. Tents were built in the garden for the men; women and children were squeezed on to bunk beds everywhere possible inside. A school for all the children was organised in the garden, and there was even a baby born in the palace. Finally on 30th September 1989, the Foreign Minister of West Germany, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, arrived in Prague and offered the refugees a way out. Special trains were thus prepared that carried the people after some necessary procedures to West Germany.

But it was not over yet for the German Embassy. Having heard on the TV and the radio about the successes of their fellow citizens, more and more GDR-Germans headed for Prague, which seemed like their only option because they did not require a visa as they would, for example, to go to Hungary. Consequently, before even having finished the clean-up after the first wave, the second wave of migrants flooded the premises of the Lobkowitz Palace again. The international media were present and the whole world was watching in anticipation to see how the desperate situation would develop. The embassy got so crowded that the Red Cross advised officials not to accept any more people as the hygiene conditions became catastrophic. Despite the discomfort, all new incomings were greeted and other refugees sneaked them over the palace fencing. The police soon surrounded the embassy and would not let any more people enter the building, resulting in a huge crowd gathering on the small square in front of the palace. Finally, buses started to arrive to carry more people to Western Germany.

During our visit, we were shown the documentary "Fluchtpunkt Prag", made by German TV station ARD, which is composed of various films shot of the actual events. If it wasn't for this, the story our guide was telling us would have been hardly believable. Yet, the silent and peaceful Lobkowitz Palace is jaded with the physical marks of the people who made it their temporary home – the guide pointed out to us the damaged stripes of the frescoes downstairs caused by all the beds squeezed into the place. A monument to commemorate these busy autumn days was made by David Černý (a controversial Czech artist famous for his piece *Entropa*). The statue is called *Quo vadis* and is of a walking Trabant car; a tribute to all the Germans that left their Trabants in Prague on their journey West.

Altogether, around 15,000 East Germans emigrated through the embassy in Prague in 1989. Yearly, around 170 groups of visitors visit the German embassy in Prague nowadays. Visiting the embassy was a time-travelling experience that gave me a significant realisation. When reviewing such events from today's perspective, you realise how grateful we should be for our freedoms and the possibilities we have to travel; as young people, as students, as Europeans. We should never forget that and remind ourselves to be grateful.

By:

Helena Hradilová is a student of Translation and Interpreting (Czech, English and German) at the Institute of Translation Studies of Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague. She is



very fond of languages, meeting new people and getting to know other cultures, which is one of the reasons she became a tutor of the Erasmus Club of Faculty of Arts at Charles University. To further support Erasmus students in exploring the Czech culture and student life at Charles University, she joined also iForum, which she sees as a great opportunity to maintain contact between students of different cultures and as a possibility to improve their journalism and communication skills.



Proofreading:

Poppy Gerrard-Abbott is an Erasmus student studying BA Humanities at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University and her home university is the University of Essex in England. She chose to write for the iForum to build on her journalism skills and meet other aspiring journalists; to grow closer to the social and creative life of Charles University and to learn more about Czech culture and life in Prague through attending local events and researching Czech issues and current affairs.

Poppy saw the iForum as an exciting opportunity to pursue her interests in politics, culture and history whilst meeting other Erasmus students. She thinks it's a very worthwhile and fun experience that has brought some exciting opportunities her way, extended her writing skills and her knowledge of the Czech Republic, and hopes Charles University continues to offer such placements to future students.