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# Glitz and Glamour at Charles University: the First Republic Returns to Prague

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On Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> February 2014, Charles University students stepped back in time at the Faculty of Art's annual ball, which was held in celebration and commemoration of the First Republic of Czechoslovakia, covering the period of 1918-1938. Complete with a swing and jazz band and a dance floor ready to be filled, we headed out to the fancy dress shops and slipped on the suits and flapper dresses...

The formal dance was one of many held by the university and is a yearly occurrence with thousands of guests attending including students, guests and teachers. This year's however, was a little bit special, following the trend of fascination with the First Republic found in Czech television, theatre, magazines, and in particular films, good examples of still regularly screened movies from the 1930s being *Kristián*, *Eva Tropí Hlouposti* and *Dívka v Modrém*. More recently the First Republic has attracted humongous audiences in the highly-acclaimed TV series *První Republika* (which has been compared to the British *Downton Abbey*) that I'm sure readers will recognise from billboard and metro advertisements around the city. I encourage all foreign students living in the Czech Republic to look up these fairy-tale television dramas and films (you can find them online) of family and romanticism or to have a read of the current, interesting magazine features wistfully telling stories about the First Republic's development, creativity and sophistication. It's a part of Czech history that I believe we all as cultural visitors should endorse ourselves in – all of these media commentaries mirror the rose-tinted gaze that Czechs often have of this period of self-expression, sharp suits, pearls and prosperity in the 1920s and early 1930s. We were lucky enough to have this brought back to life again for students and staff at Charles University at the ball, which was hosted at the neo-Renaissance style Rudolfinum Music Hall and Gallery on Jan Palach Square next to the Faculty of Arts main building; home of the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra and to hundreds of high-profile events and shows every year.

The venue was packed with chattering students hurrying up the stairs to the dance floor and wandering around socialising and drinking in elegant cocktail dresses, head pieces and kitten heels. The dome ceilings had fantastic acoustics for the music, which carried itself through the lengths of the corridors and greeted us at the door with the sounds of saxophone, clarinet and guitars. We were very honoured to have the Felix Slováček Big Band performing, who are led by Felix Slováček, a famous Czech conductor, saxophonist and clarinet player from Zlín, who has sold over two million albums during his career as a musician, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s. The well-known touring band were charismatic, fiery and played effortlessly all night – I was also told that their crammed performing schedule and high demand left Charles University little chance of securing a booking, so we were very privileged to have them there.

The Rudolfinum Gallery was just as magnificent outside as it was inside – towering hand-painted ceilings, marble pillars, wide red carpeted stairs and classic gold and bronze tinted décor. We truly had time travelled thanks to the efforts that guests made to dress up and look the part. The famed Czech swing band, who played a mixture of genres to the expected ballroom jigs, were the finishing touch to a convincing setting and an all-round lively evening, keeping everyone on their feet until the early hours. Starting at 7, the bars had their work cut out serving thousands of guests Czech beer, wine and shots and the evening was fragmented well with the commentating of a humorous announcer who welcomed, entertained and ran the various dance contests. There was also a raffle and strips of tickets could be bought by guests in the hope of winning gifts and a top prize of a holiday for two to Italy.

The atmosphere was inviting, with undercurrents of nostalgia towards a time of sweetness glamour and future prospect in the newly founded state of Czechoslovakia; mostly because of the energy of the overcrowded dance floor, where Czech and Slovak students demonstrated their skills and endurance. Most of them arrived ready with a dance partner glued to their arm and managed to impress everyone with their experience and agility. This however shouldn't be any surprise, since that most Czech and Slovak people are taught these traditional formal dances from a young age, and it is an expected and widespread ability. I was very pleasantly surprised, and regarded this to be a very unique and special corner of Czech education and knowledge that is very rare in Britain and other Western European countries, where there's sadly not as much emphasis or value placed on such traditional or national hobbies. Regardless, we made some attempts at salsa, cha-cha, waltz, tango, foxtrot, rumba, jive and polka, but sadly didn't compete to the standard of the Czechs.

The party continued after midnight at the K4 student bar and café at the Charles University building in Celetná, where we boogied with cheap beer to some salsa/latino/jazz mixes and rested our swollen feet on the sofas. It was a social

and memorable night, perfectly themed and a superb opportunity to see the students dressed a bit swankier than in their 9am lectures. Most importantly, it was wonderful to see them bask in and relive their heritage, past and traditions, and a window for us Erasmus students to observe, learn and enjoy it too.

The classiness did slip slightly at the end of the night however, when Prague city saw a wave of students spill out from the venues, carrying their shoes (and often their dance partners) home with blisters and a stomach full of wine... a success, then!



**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.