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There are many religious traditions connected to Easter: remembering the final days, the death and the resurrection of Jesus. For many Czech people, however, their popular customs – which originate from the Pagan time of the pre-Christian period – are the core of the Easter holidays. These traditions celebrate the beginning of spring and the renewal of life that are associated with this time of year.

In some villages, people continue the tradition of making a straw figure to represent *Morana* – the Slavic goddess of death – to symbolise the end of the harsh winter season. It is tradition to dress Morana in old skirts, shirts and head scarves and whilst everybody sings, they take Morana to a nearby river or stream to be drowned. This ritual is practiced with the belief it brings a new summer into the village.

It is more common, however, to practice the art of painting Easter eggs and to take part in the Easter Monday carolling – especially for the women – whilst the men spend their time braiding Easter whips out of young willow branches called '*pomlázka*', or in some regions '*tatar*'. The Easter egg itself stands for the renewal of life and the return of spring. For centuries, it has been brightly coloured and decorated, often red in colour, which also gives its name to the Easter eggs: '*kraslice*'. The colour 'red' was not called '*červená*' in old Slavic as it is today in Czech, but rather '*krásná*', which means 'beautiful' in modern Czech. Interestingly, *krásná* still stands for 'red' today in other Slavic languages, such as Russian. In the past, the Easter eggs were decorated when boiled. Nowadays, if the egg should serve for decoration rather than Easter carolling, people only decorate the empty, blown-out egg shells which can be preserved – these are often on sale at Easter markets around the town. On Easter Monday, the carollers still get the boiled eggs, however, whilst the children receive chocolate ones. When visiting households, adults are often gifted with a shot of alcohol instead of an egg and it is common courtesy to present a thank-you gift in return for visiting their household.

In more traditional regions, like Southern Moravia, for example, groups of young men gather together early in the morning of Easter Monday. They then proceed to wander around the whole village, visiting the young girls and women to give them a ritual 'beating' with the Easter whips that they have made. Touching the backside of the girl with the '*pomlázka*' aims to bring her health, youth and also fertility.

As well as giving the young men a painted egg or shot of alcohol, the women also tie a coloured ribbon to the top of their Easter whips – and the man with the largest collection of ribbons marks the best caroller at the end of the day. Additionally, when it is a leap year – such as in 2016 – women and men can reverse the traditional Easter roles, thus allowing the women to use the Easter whip. However, this only happens in some regions and is not typical for the whole country.

At Charles University's Faculty of Arts, it has been a long-standing tradition of the Erasmus Club to invite Erasmus students to get together shortly before Easter, in order to learn more about the traditional way of celebrating Easter in the Czech Republic. This event is called 'Czech Easter Afternoon' and always proves to be popular. This year, the event was held last Friday afternoon (March 18) and was attended by over 30 students who spent nearly three hours painting eggs to celebrate the Easter season. Students from Croatia, Hungary and Germany had all previously decorated eggs, however, for students from Spain and France, this was a brand new experience. A novel experience for all was the process of painting eggs with wax – a process which was tried by half of the students. They all agreed the experience was a special one and that they were happy to have tried it. The Easter eggs which the Erasmus students created on this occasion were all brightly coloured and often decorated with spring motives such as flowers or the sun – which has helped to bring the spirit of spring into Charles University.

Anna Kindness is a 3rd year English and Film student from Edinburgh, Scotland, who is studying for one semester at Charles University in Prague. Anna has a variety of interests, including arts and culture, adventure, travel, the great outdoors and writing. The decision to write for iForum was an easy one to make, as it is an excellent opportunity to develop both writing and editing skills within a work environment, whilst simultaneously getting to meet like-minded people.