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Loreta Abidini from the Technological Educational Institute of Athens joined the Faculty of Education of Charles University for the Erasmus Practical Placement in the period of summer semester 2011/12, the time when the European Commission set the core of the 25th anniversary of the Erasmus programme. Being a student of photography, Loreta became the Charles University documentarian of the Erasmus 25th anniversary events of Charles University. She took photos of the Student Marathon in May 2012 as well as the selection and training of the Charles University team; her photos accompany the Erasmus anniversary articles in I-Forum, the Charles University online magazine; and Loreta also helped to prepare and realize the record Erasmus photo, an activity of the Erasmus Club of Faculty of Arts to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Erasmus programme.

Loreta, your Erasmus Practical Placement stay at Charles University was not your first academic visit to Czech Republic. You have already studied at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen in the frame of the Erasmus study exchange. Why have you decided on the Czech Republic and how different were the stays for you?

I studied in Pilsen 2 years ago. I was the first Erasmus exchange student to arrive at the University of West Bohemia, Department of Art and Design, from Greece. It was also the first year that my home university had worked with Pilsen. Studying in Pilsen gave me a chance to learn new things, to visit new countries, and to meet people from all around Europe. Living in Pilsen was not expensive and the local beer was really good. It was also my first time living alone, in a new country, and having my own accommodation. I had a lot of funny experiences, for example, I used to keep the kitchen paper and the shampoo in the fridge and sometimes I used to forget to buy toilet paper, as I was so used to my mum buying it for us back at home.

Two years later, while in Greece, I had heard and read on the Internet about the good reputation of Charles University, so I sent in an application for the Erasmus Practical Placement and was successful. So, I packed my luggage and I found myself in Prague. At first, it was strange for me being in the Czech Republic for the second time, but at the same time I felt at home.

You come from a country with big culinary tradition. Do you actually eat in the university cafeterias or do you prefer to cook for yourself? How do you like Czech food?

My first experience with Czech food was both awkward and funny. During the first day of my stay in Pilsen, I went to the supermarket to buy basic food such as bread, butter and milk. I did not know any brand names and everything was written in Czech. At the supermarket I bought cows milk, normal bread and butter – or so I thought. When I came home and started to drink the milk, I realized it had a strange taste. I was now unsure of what I had bought so I browsed on the internet and found that the “cows milk” was actually goats milk, the “normal bread” was extremely spicy, and the “butter” was fat for cooking.

After these sorts of experiences I learnt what to buy and where, but, to be honest, I still believe that the best Czech food is beer.

Your Erasmus Practical Placement at Charles University consisted of two parts – you prepared a photography project for the Faculty of Education and its Department of Art Education and you took photos of the events organized to the occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the Erasmus Programme. What were your tasks and how did you like them?

It was a real pleasure to work on an art project with my teacher, Dr. Jan Šmíd.

My project was titled “Home On-Off” and I tasked with preparing a series of 40 pictures for it. I had three months to work on the project. The old buildings under reconstruction in Prague gave me inspiration for the project. I photographed them to depict the contrasts between the old and new elements in the local architecture. I liked the variety of shapes and colours. My home city, Athens, is an ancient city by origin, but most of its old buildings have been destroyed and only a few of them are still standing. On the contrary, most of Prague’s old buildings are fully functional, which inspired me to create a project based on them.

As the Erasmus anniversary photographer, you accompanied the selection, preparation and competition of Charles University Erasmus team in the University Marathon in April and May 2012. How was it to take photos of a sport event and generally sporting people?

I felt very proud that I was the photographer for this event, since the team of Erasmus students of Charles University finished the race in 5th place (between the teams of students). It is difficult to shoot good quality pictures of sport events because people are moving all the time, and in such occasions it is better to take photos using a professional camera.

Another of your tasks as the documentarian of the Erasmus 25th anniversary at Charles University was to take (portrait) photos of students we have prepared interviews with. Is it difficult to take photos of other people so that the final photo doesn't look artificial? Do you have some specific approach to the photographed people, some "tactic" to make them look relaxed and as in a real situation?

This was the best part of my experience as I had the chance to meet new people in their working environment, to talk with them, and to learn new things. People usually enjoy talking about what they do, and that is why I asked them questions related to their work and interests initially. Only when I felt sure that they were comfortable, did I start to take the pictures.

The biggest event at which you took photos was the Erasmus anniversary record photo event of the Erasmus Club of Faculty of Arts. How is it to take a picture of more than 150 people? Was it an interesting experience for you? Have you ever photographed so many people before?

No, it was the first time that I had had to photograph 150 people. It was a great experience for me since I had to coordinate 150 Erasmus students. Their willingness to cooperate with each other and me made it much easier for me to take this Erasmus family picture.

We also tried to form the "living word" 'Erasmus' for one of these group photos. The colours I used for the final version of the composition of the word Erasmus formed by the students were inspired by the official colours of the Erasmus logo.

You will soon finish your Bachelor studies. Do you want to continue with your studies? Or would you rather start working? In which area – art or documentary photography?

Erasmus was one of my best life experiences so far, and because of that, I have decided to continue with my studies abroad. I still don't know what field I am going to study for my master degree, but I still have some time to think about it. Thank you for the interview.