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# It is strange to learn so much about French history in the Czech Republic

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*Interview with French participants of the Europe Meets School Erasmus programme Annabelle Chiffre and Romain Mailho.*

*Annabelle Chiffre and Romain Mailho are two Erasmus students from the south of France, the Université Toulouse II - Le Mirail, who are studying at the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts at Charles University this year. They are part of a group of 25 Erasmus students at the university who have joined a complementary Erasmus programme called Europe Meets School (better known as Europa Macht Schule since the programme is originally German) in the 2009/10 academic year.*



**You arrived at the Charles University in Prague in autumn 2009. I will start with an obvious question: Why have you decided to spend your study year abroad in Prague in the Czech Republic?**

Annabelle: To be honest, I came to Prague by chance. Last year, one of our teachers advised all of us to study for a year abroad, saying that we should use the possibilities that the Erasmus programme offered to us. He spoke about Charles University and the Czech-French History seminar at the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts in Prague – and now here I am! It's a great experience. My home university, the Université Toulouse II - Le Mirail has cooperation with many universities abroad – in the History Department there were three places available for study in Charles University.

Romain: For me Prague was the first choice between all of the Erasmus destinations on offer. I like this city and its atmosphere. Not only does the city of Prague have unique historical heritage but also the whole country is very beautiful, and very different from the south of France. I'm very happy to have the opportunity to live in Prague for my Erasmus year – it was my wish and now I am trying to make the most out of it.

**Your host institute in Prague is the Institute of Czech History at the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts. I know that a Czech-French History seminar is offered there and you attend it. Can you tell us a bit more about this interesting programme?**

Annabelle: The Czech-French History seminar is held once a week. In each class the associate professor Martin Nejedlý (the teacher of the seminar) introduces a historian to us, who then holds a lecture on a subject of their choice. During the first semester we were visited by French historians from the universities of Lille, Amiens, Paris, Louvain, Lyon, Montpellier and from the EHESS (School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences). This class is really interesting because we discover much about a certain area which we hadn't known about before. Each history student has a topic and a historical period they dedicate their research to, but these lectures enabled us to learn about many unfamiliar historical issues.

Romain: The Czech-French History seminar is one of the most interesting courses that I attend in Prague, even though it is very strange to learn so much about French history in the Czech Republic! In this course professors from various French universities introduce their historical research to us. It certainly enriches my knowledge of history when I am introduced to so many different approaches to a subject by experts. I learnt a great deal about different historical methods and the geographical and chronological context of the subject. I don't think I would have ever discovered this in France.

**Do you yourself work on a Czech-French history project? If yes, please tell us a few words about it – if not, what is your topic of interest in history?**

Annabelle: I am researching a *mémoire* about Guillaume de Machaut, a 14<sup>th</sup> century French poet, who served the king of Bohemia, John of Luxembourg, the father of the famous Charles IV, the Roman Emperor. I learnt about the chivalrous society in central Europe in the Middle Ages thanks to the poems of Guillaume de Machaut. The relationship between Czech and French nobles is of great interest to me.

Romain: Unlike Annabelle, I prefer the contemporary history to the Middle Ages and I don't have a Czech-French history project. I am working on a project for my upcoming Masters exams. It's a thesis on Czech integration into the European Union and its new links with other countries, particularly with Ukraine and Russia. The Czech Republic is a very interesting topic to study, both the past, the present and problems that may arise in the future.

**In the winter semester 2009/10 you were two of our first students to join this year's programme *Europe Meets School / Europa Macht Schule*. What motivated you to take part in this programme?**

Annabelle: I think it's a really good way to learn more about Czech people and culture, while meeting the young generation. Moreover, I'd like to become a teacher and therefore it's an excellent opportunity for me to discover more about the profession. I started to learn Czech this year too, and I believed that participating in the programme would help me to improve my knowledge of it.

Romain: I wanted to learn more about the way of thinking of the next generation of Czechs and to exchange differing points of view and thoughts in the first instance. Additionally, this programme has also helped to improve my knowledge of the Czech language.

**You prepared two historical projects to introduce your home country, France, to pupils from two different French language classes at the Commercial High School in Vlašim. Can you explain your choice of topics and tell us a few words about each of the projects?**

Annabelle: I chose to introduce Jeanne d'Arc (Joan of Arc) to the pupils, because I think this historical character and her life is an interesting topic for young pupils. Jeanne's life is linked to a lot of important historical events in late medieval French history; it has been told and recounted by many historians and researchers, and it has also been a big source of inspiration for painters and artists in general. Therefore, I prepared a PowerPoint presentation on Jeanne d'Arc for my class, showing various pictures documenting Jeanne's life and accompanied it with texts in French and Czech (yes, I really tried!). I think the pupils will remember the name and the story of this French personality well.



Romain: My project focused on Napoleon Bonaparte. I wanted to offer not only a biography of his life but also an introduction to the historical setting in Europe at the time. I devoted my work not only to Napoleon's life, but also the consequences of the Napoleonic era for France and for each European country. To make the problems visual, I searched for pictures of paintings from this period and put them together in a PowerPoint presentation with short Czech explanations. The topic also bridged contemporary history because we spoke with the class about the present image of Napoleon in each European country and in the Czech Republic, of course.

It was more than a simple presentation, I wanted to offer a comprehensive vision of one of the most important periods in European history to the pupils, and then reflect on problematics in the present world.

**The school you joined for the programme is located in a regional Czech town Vlašim. How did you like Vlašim and how was the cooperation with the school?**

Annabelle: First of all, I have to say that the teachers and the coordinator of the programme in Vlašim, Lucie Svobodová, made us feel very welcome. We were both able to visit the whole school with the French teacher from the project. We could speak with the pupils and other teachers about Vlašim and the school. The coordinator asked me if I would like to see another class who had just begun learning French, and it was really nice too! And although Vlašim is a quite small place, it's a nice town. I didn't have much time to do sightseeing, but I saw my first snow in the Czech Republic there! And I know I will go back again some day as a tourist.

Romain: Vlašim is a very nice town, but it's very different from the popular tourist cities of the Czech Republic. For me, it's important to discover the generally unknown parts of the Czech Republic because in my opinion mass tourism destroys the traditional culture and the ways of Czech society. I was very pleasantly surprised by the Commercial High School of Vlašim! Firstly, by the enthusiasm of the teachers for the Europe Meets School programme, but also by the school itself, its good equipment and its excellent staff. It is very good to find such a school regionally – the pupils in Vlašim are very lucky!



**For the majority of your pupils you were the first French people they ever had to interact with. Was it difficult for you to work with them?**

Annabelle: Definitely not. Most of them were just shy in the beginning – so was I. But they asked some interesting questions and were curious and interested in the French culture. I'm happy if I was the first French person they ever met, and I hope I gave them a good impression and motivated them to continue with their French language studies! It's a very difficult language to learn, especially during high school when you have so many subjects and so much work to concentrate on. Meeting those pupils was rewarding.

Romain: It was very interesting for me to be in contact with these pupils. In the beginning, the communication was difficult because the pupils were shy, but after the first discussion they started to ask me questions individually. By the way, my class consisted mainly of girls – there was only one boy! The pupils showed different levels of interest in the subject, but the majority of the class found it interesting and they were also curious about it! For me the contact with these Czech pupils was a great experience.

**I know that your projects were very successful and the school asked you to return to teach there once more during the summer semester. Do you already know what your next projects are going to be there?**

Annabelle: My next project will be about France, concerning French culture and French habits. My pupils were really interested in the French way of life (especially of young French people I guess!). I will probably show them a lot of pictures, some videos if I can find anything of interest, and explain everything they want to know about France and life there. I know from my own experience how interesting it is to see how similar, but how different life can be in another country at the same time.





Romain: I am thinking about preparing a presentation of the *Multiples France* (= Multiple Visions of France) for my next project, because the pupils showed a big interest in France (and furthermore there are more girls in the class than boys) and I would like to introduce them to contemporary France in different aspects.

My wish is not to offer them a touristic and generally surreal image of the country, but to try to give them a true image of the real France. It's a big task but important for the cultural development of the students.

**I must praise you for being so enthusiastic about this programme. If I am not mistaken, you are going to join another partner school for the programme to Kralupy nad Vltavou in the summer semester too, this time for a history class and a project in English. Do you enjoy teaching in itself or is it an interesting way for you to meet Czech people outside of university?**

Annabelle: I think a bit of both. Personally I'd like to become a teacher, so it's obviously the perfect opportunity for me to „get a taste of the job“ once more. But it's also a great opportunity to meet Czech people, because we are living in their country and we try to share their language, their habits and their culture. When Czech and Erasmus students meet each other, it's always interesting but it remains rather formal because it takes place in an Erasmus or faculty environment. When you meet other Czech people, they ask different questions and express views other than those of university acquaintances. Of course, it depends on the person – Czech students can become more than just classmates.

Romain: It the same for me. I enjoy teaching and also meeting new people. This programme is a great opportunity for students who want to get practice in teaching, with its oral presentation in front of students from a country different from your own. I also agree with Annabelle that interaction between the Erasmus students and Czech people is normally very poor. The majority of the Erasmus students don't really come in contact with people from the host country, and that's really bad! The Europe Creates School programme is on the one hand a unique chance to get a new study experience and on the other hand a social experience, which is for me the most important part of my stay as an Erasmus student.

**Most Erasmus students I know complain about not knowing many Czech people when they leave the Czech Republic. This won't happen in your case, I think?**

Annabelle: The big problem is that Erasmus students stick together. Our university hall of residence doesn't house foreign and Czech students together. So it's not that easy to meet Czech people. Luckily, I myself could meet Czech people. Firstly, this was thanks to the Czech-French History seminar – I made some good friends in this class. I think we will also stay in touch with our Czech contact from Vlašim, Lucie, who was really nice and helpful. Moreover, I found two Czech people for a French-Czech tandem and we became friends as well. And you can also be lucky and become friends with Czech people by chance – traveling around the Czech Republic helps you to meet Czechs too.

Romain: Personally, I am trying to meet Czech people in all kinds of places simply because I'm in the Czech Republic. But Annabelle sums it up well – the Erasmus students are not very close to the local population. I don't think it is the problem of the university or because they are Erasmus students – it just depends on the motivation of the students to discover their host country.

I have met a number of Czech people since arriving in Prague in September, mainly Czech students from the Czech-French History seminar but also people from the language exchange (tandem) programme. The Czech Republic is a very nice country and I'm here to discover its culture, its history, its language and of course, its inhabitants!

Thank you for the interview.

Interview with French participants of the Europe Creates School Erasmus programme Annabelle Chiffre and Romain Mailho

by Ivana Herglová. Edited by Inga Richardson.

**Europe Creates School/Europa Macht Schule** is a voluntary programme for Erasmus students interested in teaching or simply meeting young people from their host country outside university. It was started by a group of German students and young graduates in 2006, and was expanded to the Czech Republic in the winter semester of 2008/9. The aim of the programme is to enable primary and secondary school pupils to meet young Europeans studying in their countries. The participating Erasmus students are asked to prepare a project introducing their home country in some shape or form. The programme is run by the Erasmus Club at the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts at Charles University. Its members act as interpreters in classes where a foreign language is not being taught. In 2009/10 the programme has 4 cooperating schools – Olešská Basic Art School (Praha 10 - Strašnice), K Milíčovu Primary School (Praha 4 – Háje), Třebízského Primary School (Kralupy nad Vltavou), and finally the school where Annabelle and Romain taught – Vlašim Commercial High School.