
Learning Czech in Udine

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University of Udine (Italy) belongs to universities with a well-known study programme in Czech language. Students from this university visit Charles University frequently, mainly through the Erasmus programme. On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Erasmus programme, we have approached one of them to share her experience of learning Czech at their home university and at the Charles University.

Martina Stach comes from a small mountain village belonging to the community of Belluno in Dolomites. In the years 2000-2007 she studied Czech, Russian and German at the University of Udine. She joined Charles University in Prague for the Erasmus Program in academic year 2004/05, together with her study colleague and friend Elena Ribis.

Martina, what leads an Italian girl to study Czech? Is it the fact that there are many Czechs visiting the Italian coast and its skiing resorts - or did you have other reasons?

Tourists and workers from the Czech Republic and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe started to arrive in my region when I was about twenty. I have always been interested in languages, history and culture since I was a child. Being in contact with people of same age as me who had different childhoods, due to the history of their countries, was for me very important. It helped me to understand the idea of a European Union. I decided to study Slavic languages and German in the university to combine my passions and to have a better chance of finding a job in this field.

You studied three foreign languages. Was Czech indeed the most complicated one as people usually claim it to be? How does the approach to teaching it differ in Udine compared to at Charles University?

After learning English and German at school, I first started to study Russian at the university. It was like climbing up a wall due to the different alphabet, conjugations and very different vocabulary. As a second step, I started learning Czech that sounds similar to Russian and for this reason it was a little easier for me. The only problem was, and still remains, to not mix words and conjugations of these two languages.

During my first semester of study at Charles University I did not feel very well: my Czech colleagues spoke not only Russian fluently, but also German. The grammar and the vocabulary was explained entirely in the foreign language that we were supposed to learn; this is different, as in Italy only some parts of the lessons are in the foreign language. The beginning was very discouraging for me - but step by step it became better.

Unlike many other Erasmus students, when you and your friend and colleague Elena Ribis decided to live in Prague in a shared flat, you gave up the idea of living in the city centre where the majority of flats is rented by foreigners, and moved to Lužiny (about 30 minutes by subway from your host faculty) for the sake of being able to live with Czech people. In retrospect, was this a good decision? Do you still keep in touch with your flatmates? And your other Czech friends?

Yes, it was definitely a good decision – I was determined to learn the most possible in the months I spent in Prague. My flatmates spoke only Czech, so I was forced to speak Czech with them and I could also learn how to cook typical Czech food, etc.

I'm still in contact with my best friends I know from Prague. I do not spend a lot of time chatting on skype or facebook, however, so I usually write emails or send postcards to them. But the very best thing is to organize a visit with them - in Prague!

You finished your studies several years ago, and returned back to your home region where you not only work now but also prepare various cultural events. What do you do exactly? Do you use Czech in your job?

When I finished my university time in Udine in 2007 I returned to my home region where I immediately found a job (in the company where I still work). I am in contact with our foreign customers for commercial and marketing purposes. I accept orders, organise the shipment of goods, and distribute information about our products. I also translated the website of the company to other languages. My knowledge of several foreign languages helped me greatly to get my job, because in my graduation year (2007) the period of economical crisis started in Italy.

My second biggest customer is a company from Brno – and this is one example of the possibilities of how I can get work with the languages I know. It is really satisfactory for me.

As for the place I live: I wanted to return to my home region because I love the place where I was born and I wanted to spend my extra energy in organising activities there. So far I have prepared, for example, an exhibition of old rural equipment, sport and music events. Now I am trying to enter into the political field to develop the tourism, sport and cultural activities of my region.

Thank you for the answers.