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"You're the first person from Iceland I've met." This is a comment Björn Reynir Halldórsson, a young historian from the University Haskoli Islands in Reykjavík heard a lot when making new friends during his time as an Erasmus student at Charles University in Prague, in the academic year 2011/12. Charles University had 5 Erasmus students from Iceland last year; an increase from the usual 2 or 3 Icelandic students normally attending. However it still represents a very small percentage of the 1206 Erasmus that came to study at Charles University for that year.

There is much more to Björn than just the fact he comes from Iceland. He is one of the leading members of the Icelandic International Students of History Association (ISHA) and he also delivered an interesting project on Iceland to Czech children as part of the Europe Meets School programme while studying in Prague. And, believe it or not, he met the current president of Iceland for the first time whilst on the Erasmus programme at Charles University. We have invited Björn to share his experience with us.

Björn, how did it feel to suddenly be perceived as "exotic"? Were you surprised that there were very few Icelandic students at Charles University in Prague? Were you in contact with other Icelandic students who were at Charles University like you?

I got pretty used to it, although it is kind of fun sometimes to feel special. It was amazing how many people were surprised to meet someone from Iceland. I was not that surprised that there were only 5 students from Iceland, as the population of Iceland is only 320,000; we are not everywhere like Germans. However the good thing about Erasmus is that you meet people from all over the world.

I knew that there would probably be two more students travelling to Prague from Iceland for the first semester after speaking with the international representative at my home university. I guess that is a big number from university with about 15,000 students. I did not go out of my way to contact them; I befriended the people I met during my stay in Prague, and got to know them instead. I found meeting people, and making friends with people from countries all across the world very exciting. However during my second semester I met another Icelandic student by coincidence at an Erasmus event, and then met two more Icelandic students from Prague Film and TV School (FAMU) at a party held by a mutual friend from Greece.

Even though you did not have many Icelandic friends during your year long study at Charles University you were definitely not alone. It is uncommon for students from such a distant country to arrive in Prague already knowing some locals, and meeting them and becoming friends is even less likely. You were the lucky one. Did your membership of ISHA help in that respect? Can you tell us a bit about it and your duties as a member, prior to your coming to Prague?

I actually knew one Czech student even before joining ISHA. He was with me in a Danish "Højskole". In April 2011 I went to the Annual Conference of ISHA held in Pula, Croatia. There were 6 students from Charles University separated into two of the work groups. I obviously made a special effort to get to know them, unfortunately I was unable to meet all the students at the conference as over a hundred attended from all over Europe. This was the second time I had attended an event by ISHA. The first one was a New Year's seminar in cold Berlin, held before the Czech students joined ISHA. When I got to Prague one of the Czech students I met in Pula, Jiří, picked me up at the airport and showed me the way to my hall of residence, Kolej Hostivař. Jiří helped me with a lot of practical problems I had to sort out, I called him my lifesaver during my first few weeks in Prague. I also learnt about [FFabula](#), the History students' organisation at Faculty of Arts through Jiří and went to a few of its events in [K4 student club](#).

During your study stay in Prague you participated in several activities offered by ISHA, and also visited many of your ISHA friends. Where did you travel during the year?

I went to the autumn seminar in Turku/Abo, Finland at the end of September 2011, and therefore I unfortunately missed the Orientation Week at Faculty of Arts. In April 2012 I went to my fourth ISHA event held in Jena, Germany. I carpooled with two Czech students and it only took us 3 hours to get there, nice and easy.

In the meantime I took advantage of living in central Europe and did some travelling. When I finished my winter term exams I had some three weeks until the next semester started. I decide to go on a trip through Eastern Europe. I went to Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia and Austria. I stayed with ISHA friends in Osijek, Zagreb and Ljubljana. I also met some friends from the organisation living in Budapest and in Beograd. It was probably the worst possible time to travel as it was -20 °C everywhere. Everyone thought I would be used to the cold weather being from Iceland, however it was still above zero in Iceland.

To study History in Iceland must be a very specific experience since your country's language and your parliamentary system has roots extending back to the middle-ages. The population of Iceland is not huge and as you have told me many of you are at least distantly related. Are there any differences between studying History in Iceland to studying it here in Prague?

Studying history in Iceland is not any different to studying it elsewhere. It is based on a few methodology / theoretical courses, introductory courses about history of Iceland and the World and then we can choose the rest of the courses (about 2/3 of the courses are elective.) Obviously a lot of the courses are about Icelandic history but there are also many on World history. Sadly, there are rarely courses about the history of central Europe on offer, so in that sense the difference can perhaps be described as regional. Then there is the obvious factor that it is a small department, so courses that are taught depend on the teacher and what their specialism.

I would say that the majority of History courses at my home university relate to different aspects of 19th and 20th century history. For example, we have courses about communism. Surprisingly, there are hardly any courses covering the era the *Althingi* (the Icelandic parliament) was founded. There are also some Master programs in Icelandic medieval studies, for example, one is taught together with other Nordic universities. Here one is able to learn more about the medieval period in Scandinavia.

Many students who receive a degree in History go on to teach the subject. During your stay in Prague you joined the Europe Meets School programme of Erasmus Club at the Faculty of Arts. This gave you a great opportunity to try teaching at a Primary School during the second semester of your Erasmus. Did you enjoy this experience? Would I be correct in assuming you would prefer to work and teach at a university or a research institute, rather than a school in the future?

Well, I enjoyed teaching those kids about my country, and they seemed to be very interested. I already had some experience working with children previously and I found passing my knowledge on to children very rewarding.

However, I am still not sure what job I want to do in the future. The good thing about studying History is it does not lead you into a specific job category, but instead opens lot of doors, with a range of job opportunities to choose from. For now, I am just enjoying gaining more information and experiences from the working world. Nevertheless I do like to contribute to the expansion of our knowledge, and that's why I think I would prefer working at a university or a research institute. Or perhaps I'll do something completely different like Michael Palin (from Monty Python) and become a comedian. (Well, on the other hand, I am not that funny...)

My next question is to do with the visit we received from the President of Iceland, Mr. Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, at Charles University in spring 2012. Was it strange to meet your Head of State in the Czech Republic rather than in Iceland?

He greeted me in English rather than Icelandic, which certainly was weird. However, it was not the first time I met our Head of State, but it was my first time meeting our current president. I had often met his predecessor, Mrs. Vigdís Finnbogadóttir. My father was her secretary in the early 80's and she now lives in a house just next to my grandmother's. I think she is much more interesting than our current Head of State as she was the first woman in the world ever to be elected as president in a democratic election.

At the moment I am not very fond of our current president. I didn't like his campaign before the elections last summer. However, it was certainly interesting that he visited Charles University at the same time I studied there.

Last question. When the Erasmus Club of Faculty of Arts organized the trip to the Brewery Kozel in Velké Popovice and the small village of Hrusice, you were one of the few Erasmus students who were already privy with the name of Josef Lada, amongst others a painter, illustrator and author of children's books, specialised in depicting the Czech traditional village life. How is it that a History student from Iceland knows a Czech artist, very popular in Czech Republic, but much less well known beyond its borders?

Well, I didn't really know the name before coming to the Czech Republic, but I had read "Good Soldier Švejk" (*written by Jaroslav Hašek*) and was very fond of Lada's illustrations in the book. I found they added a lot to the reader's mental image of the characters.

I think that Lada's illustrations convey a kind of warmth in the characters, and his drawings and paintings of the various holidays and seasonal traditions (*popular in the Czech Republic as Christmas or Easter wishes cards*) also give quite a romantic view of life in Czech villages and the countryside in the past where everyone seems to be happy. I almost want to start a good pub fight now, just speaking of it... (*one of Lada's most popular works is called a Pub Fight*).

Thank you for the interview.