
Czech Christmas Afternoon

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To celebrate Christmas, the Erasmus students gathered at Charles University in Prague, Faculty of Arts building for the special Christmas themed evening prepared by the Erasmus Club of Faculty of Arts. The event started by decorating gingerbread biscuits with white icing, whilst listening to traditional Czech Christmas carols. Once they were decorated the biscuits were put to one side as the students set about preparing the potato salad which is traditionally eaten as part of the main Christmas meal in the Czech Republic (together with fried carp). They peeled and chopped the vegetables which were then mixed together. The salad is served cold so the students started eating it immediately. During the tasting of the salad a short presentation was given outlining traditions and customs associated with a Czech Christmas.

First the students were taught the Czech names for the days of Christmas:

Christmas Eve: *Štědrý den* (This directly translates as *Generous Day* as this when presents are exchanged and the traditional Christmas dinner of carp and potato salad is eaten. Since carp is the main dish on Christmas during the last week of advent all the squares become full of carp pools where live fish are sold and (on request) killed and gutted to be taken home for the meal. This custom is often unpopular with tourists, especially those who are vegetarian or were not expecting to see this.)

Christmas Day: *První svátek vánoční* or *Boží hod vánoční* (Having spent the previous day gift giving, cooking and eating, Christmas day in the Czech Republic is spent relaxing and visiting relatives. The usual lunch is goose with bread dumplings and cabbage.)

Boxing Day/The Feast of St. Stephen: *Druhý svátek vánoční* or *Štěpán* (The day is spent similarly as the previous one.)

New Year's Eve: *Silvestr*

New Year's Day: *Nový rok* (Please, beware that unlike most countries in the Czech Republic they often have firework displays on New Year's Day instead of the New Year's Eve. This is because holding it on this day, short after the nightfall proved more convenient for people with young children, as it was difficult for them to be able to get into Prague on the midnight of the New Year's Eve.)

The students then learnt the Czech Christmas greetings:

Merry Christmas: *Veselé Vánoce*

Happy New Year: *Šťastný nový rok*

The presentation also discussed Josef Lada (1887-1957). Lada is famous throughout the Czech Republic for his interesting art style. He was born into a family of cobblers and after an accident as a child he lost his sight in one eye. This resulted in his developing a unique way of viewing things. He often painted Christmas scenes showing rural life in the Czech countries and various landscapes of snow covered villages. His work is very popular and can be seen on Christmas Cards.

Afterwards the students watched a clip from the famous Czech fairy-tale film *The Proud Princess* (*Pyšná princezna*), probably the most favourite Czech Christmas film ever. It was made in the 1950's and tells the tale of a king who wishes to marry a neighbouring princess but, as the title suggests she is rather obnoxious. Thus the hero sets out on a light hearted adventure to win the girl. The film is a prime example of the kind of films Czech people watch on Christmas, as there is a tradition for watching fairy-tales. *The Proud Princess* is on TV programme each Christmas Eve since many years now. Nativity scenes are also very popular here, despite the majority of the population being atheist. In the churches scenes will be set up, sometimes with figures almost life size, depicting the stable scene with Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus. People will often queue up for hours to visit the scene in Church of the Virgin Mary Angelic at Prague Castle. The Christmas tradition of children reviving presents is also slightly different here. Instead of Father Christmas/Santa Claus/St. Nicholas delivering presents in the Czech Republic *Ježíšek* fulfils this role. *Ježíšek* is the name the Czech people give to the Infant Jesus, the idea is that he flies about unseen and leaves the presents for the children.

Recipe for Potato Salad

Ingredients

- about 1 1/2 kg of potatoes
- 4 medium sized carrots
- 3 large red onions or 4 smaller ones
- 1 jar of pickles
- about 2/3 jar of mayonnaise
- 1/2 table spoon of salt

- 1 1/2 table spoon of mustard
 - 1/2 teaspoon of pepper
1. First boil the potatoes and carrots in unsalted water for about 45 minutes.
 2. When the potatoes and carrots are done wait for them to cool before peeling them.
 3. Dice the potatoes, carrots, pickles, and onions in small cubes.
 4. Place all of the ingredients into a bowl and stir until they are mixed well.
 5. Best served cold.

Keziah Garratt-Smithson is a second year student currently on an ERASMUS placement at Charles University in Prague. At home Keziah attends Aberystwyth University, where she studies medieval and early modern history. In her spare time she is a keen reader, loves films, and enjoys horse riding. She chose to write for the iForum because it was a great way to meet like minded individuals, whilst having fun and gaining useful work experience.