
Young Natural Scientists' St. Nicholas Afternoon

Young Natural Scientists' St. Nicholas Afternoon

On the evening of 5th December the Faculty of Science of Charles University in Prague held a special event to celebrate St. Nicholas Eve. The evening was aimed at families with young children, and planned give them a fun night whilst encouraging them to take an interest in science. The students and staff of the faculty ran the stalls which each had a different activity. When you entered the faculty building at the Albertov campus there were two stalls set up. One was a drink stand where they sold interesting beverages; there were e.g. cocktails made using dry ice. This was fascinating as it made the drink smoke and bubble. There were however also more traditional hot wines, and soft drinks on offer for the children. On the other side of the stairs they were selling science themed gifts, such as T-shirts, mugs, pencils, and toy dinosaurs.

At the top of the stairs the landing was lined with tables, each with a different activity. The first had the opportunity to make a Christmas decoration. The children first filled a small pot with sand and soil, then added various decoration pieces – for instance a candle, cinnamon sticks, and a pine cutting. These were all glued in place and then left to set.

The next stall offered the opportunity to make bauble like decorations for trees. Children could pick from a selection of Styrofoam shapes and would then paint whatever patterns and pictures they liked on them. They were then set aside to dry whilst the children visited other stalls.

There was also the opportunity to make perfume. It was slightly different from how perfume we buy in shops is made, but was essentially the same process. First they had jars full of the flavour, for example there was orange, cinnamon, and pine. The flavour had been left in the jar with alcohol for sometime so that it could ferment. The children picked which one(s) they liked the best and then used a pipette to remove a small amount of the fermented liquid which was then put into a Petri dish. Once mixed with some alcohol the liquid was then heated. Afterwards it produced the fragrance. This fragrance mixed with alcohol was then put into small cases for the children to take home.

The children also had the opportunity to learn about Dendrochronology. This is the science of dating trees. All one has to do is take a cross section from the tree, inside you may have noticed the tree trunk is made up of a series of rings. Each ring represents a year in the trees life and so if you count them it will tell you how old the tree was. There were several samples of tree trunks for the children to date and if they were correct they won a small prize.

Finally the last stall gave the children the chance to make a cast of a fossil to take home. There was a selection of moulds for the children to choose from. Each was taken from a real fossil in the Faculties collection, including plants and ammonites. The mould was then filled with a plaster solution and left to set for twenty minutes. When the child returned a perfect cast of a fossil was removed from their chosen mould. I had great fun making one of an ammonite.

In addition to the stalls there were also three students greeting the children. One was dressed as St. Nicholas, one as a devil, and the other as an angel. This comes from a traditional Czech custom for St. Nicholas' Eve where Czech people will travel about the town dressed as St. Nicholas, an angel, or a devil and will greet the children. If the child has been good they will receive a small gift, if they have been bad they will be given a symbolic beating, coal or a potato. Parents often arrange for the group to visit their house to treat or frighten their child in a good humoured way. I encountered the three students on the landing where I received a potato!

The evening was one of a number of events Charles University's Faculty of Science holds every so often for Young Natural Scientists, which is a group they have to encourage children to become more enthusiastic about science. Other events they hold are e.g. special tours of the science museums in Prague.

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.