
How I Made My First Easter Whip

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Easter Monday is the core of the non-religious Czech Easter celebrations - a popular festivity with the Czechs which is sometimes frowned upon by people from abroad because the traditional 'beating' of women is misunderstood. Here, this ritual 'beating' is practised as it is believed to bring youth and good health to the girls or young women involved. Usually, the woman is only touched by the Easter whip on her backside to symbolise this Easter tradition, hence it is not an actual beating. This ritual is carried out by young men who have the Easter whips when they visit households for the Easter Monday carolling. The Easter whip is called a '*pomlázka*' in Czech, and it is usually made out of eight young willow branches.

Funnily enough, in my family, my mother was the one to braid it for my father. Now, thanks to the student society PAKET - which hosts events and activities such as the traditional painting of Easter eggs - I am the second woman in my family that knows how to make the whip.

In case you are not aware, PAKET is an association of Ethnology students at Charles University's Faculty of Arts, which aims to revive some of the half-forgotten Czech traditions, such as St. Lucy's Day Carolling in December. It also aims to increase the popularity of others, such as Easter, whilst inviting their study peers from both the Institute of Ethnology and the rest of the university to share their knowledge with them. Their abbreviated name, PAKET, actually stands for: 'Pro aktivní etnologii', or 'Pro-Active Ethnology', which coincidentally, is their ultimate goal.

This Easter, PAKET held an Easter Afternoon Workshop at the Faculty of Arts, which offered the opportunity to paint Easter eggs alongside special guest, Mrs. Jiřina Ceehová. Jiřina Ceehová is an experienced and knowledgeable painter of Easter eggs, which is otherwise known as being a '*maléřečka*'. Mrs. Ceehová has been an active painter of Easter eggs for over 30 years and she regularly shares her art with audiences - not only at Charles University - but also in other well-known Czech institutions, such as the National Museum.

During the Easter afternoon, two traditional egg painting techniques were introduced - wax relief and wax batik. The first, a more modern technique, requires a pre-coloured egg or blown-out egg shell - ideally painted in a darker or bolder colour such as dark blue or red - which is then decorated by a hot white wax mixture. To create the mixture, you need a white wax crayon and either bee wax or white paraffin to mix it together with.

The more traditional wax batik method is in fact centuries old. To do this, you need a white boiled egg or egg shell, plain bee wax and several colours for the egg decoration. First of all, you dissolve the wax over a candle flame - or another heat source - and then paint the areas of the egg that you want to remain white. Next, the egg is dipped into yellow, which covers the rest of the egg. After the egg has dried, the next layer of wax decoration is applied, and this is used to preserve the yellow colour underneath. Once this stage is complete the process is simply repeated. The egg is dipped into another colour, which traditionally would be red. Hot wax is then used to cover the egg and preserve the red parts. Finally, the egg is coloured again, this time in a darker colour. Traditionally this would be black in the Czech countryside, but dark blue also works well.

Once the last layer of colour has dried, you can start removing the wax protection layers from the egg. This is easily done, for example, over a gas flame - or even in a pre-heated oven. Take care if using a candle flame, however, as the smoke can damage the decoration. Once this stage has been completed, you can then remove the melted wax from the egg with a soft fabric cloth - preferably one made of cotton. A small portion of the wax will remain on the egg shell during this process, making it shiny. After the rest of the wax is completely removed by the cloth, the full beauty of the finished egg will be revealed.

At Easter, I enjoy painting eggs - I do it every year. For many years now, I have taught the wax relief technique to Erasmus students during the Czech Easter Afternoon, held by the Erasmus Club in the Faculty of Arts. Believe it or not, however, the wax batik technique always seemed so difficult to me that I had never even attempted to try it. Therefore, I really appreciate the opportunity PAKET have given me to try out this new technique. Admittedly, I am still far from perfect, but now I know how this decoration technique is done, I will certainly try to improve through practice in the years to come. Additionally, another skill I learned during the PAKET Easter event was, as previously mentioned, braiding the Czech Easter whip called a '*pomlázka*'. Again, this was something else I had previously thought would be very difficult to make. I have to admit, I did have some trouble keeping count of the young willow branches used for braiding the whip. Eight of them in total are laid over each other again and again, alternating one branch from the left side and another from the right. However, with the help of the young Ethnologists, I eventually succeeded with it - and made myself very proud in the process!

For those of you who have not heard of the PAKET student society, I recommend that you look for events prepared by them. They definitely offer opportunities for you to enrich your life whilst studying at Charles University, as well as allowing you to expand your knowledge of Czech culture and traditions in a very entertaining way.

Anna Kindness is a 3rd year English and Film student from Edinburgh, Scotland, who is studying for one semester at Charles University in Prague. Anna has a variety of interests, including arts and culture, adventure, travel, the great outdoors and writing. The decision to write for iForum was an easy one to make, as it is an excellent opportunity to develop both writing and editing skills within a work environment, whilst simultaneously getting to meet like-minded people.