What Erasmus Means to Me

This article was submitted by Flynn Faithfull, an Erasmus student from Uppsala University in Sweden, at present hosted by the Faculty of Education of Charles University. The article is a part of the competition "30 years of the Erasmus Programme" organized by the European Office. It is the winner of the second, winter semester round of the competition, in the category "your Erasmus story".

Erasmus was the name of the dorky child of a German-speaking physics teacher at my school. This is what Erasmus firstly means to me: dungarees and schwarzbrot. But then, this was nothing unusual for my school, the European school, where about a quarter of the students fitted that description – including me, depending on how my mother was feeling when she was making my lunch for me. If she was feeling more Swedish on a certain day, then it would instead be dungarees and squeezy-out-of-the-tube-fish paste. And for those who weren't like me – half English, quarter Swedish, and quarter German – other combinations would apply: moussaka and sideburns or brie and cigarettes. The school, which was near Oxford, unapologetically liked to see itself as a microcosm of the European Union, a fact which irked many little-Englanders. A headline in the world-class journalism of the Daily Mail read: 'Elite European Schools: how the eurocrats' kids get the gravy and you pay for it'. My parents were certainly not so-called eurocrats: my mother was then a part-time Swedish teacher and my father a self-employed carpenter-cum-handyman. Neither did the British public pay for my education. It was funded by my grandfather, who paid a lesser fee on the grounds of my family's low income.

While the article was clearly intended to be incendiary, and was intended for a certain type of reader, it still partly formed my opinion of how England viewed me. What did the people who drove past the crumbling Victorian building and its grey extensions that constituted my school think? Did they think we were sipping on champagne while praying to Robert Schuman? In fact, none of my class-mates were fanatic supporters of the European Union, especially not when we were made to mumble along to the so-called anthem of Europe (which includes stirring words such as "we enter, drunk with fire" – what the hell is that all about?) outside in the rain on Europe day. We, like most teenagers, were more concerned about body odour, braces, and the opposite gender (or in my case, the same gender). Nonetheless, we still saw ourselves
as having a slightly different identity to the rest of England: we had our own identity as the mongrel children of Europe.

Towards the end of school, Erasmus gained a new meaning. Our well-to-do careers advisor constantly stressed the importance of needing to be proactive now for the sake of our CVs, our careers and our future existence. Future me depended on current me to make the right decision. And one of those options was taking a year out from university on an Erasmus programme (named after another dorky Erasmus who lived in the 16th century). I found it daunting. How was I supposed to know what future me wanted? After spending the vast majority of my childhood in England, I didn't feel brave enough to live in Europe. For the first time in my life I decided to commit myself to England, and I started studying there. I hated it. I quit after a year. My heart (and this is unbelievably cheesy) was in Europe. I had a longing to explore not only Europe but also to explore myself (again, unbelievably cheesy). On a long-winded route to my Erasmus programme at Charles University in Prague, I found myself in a whirlwind of identity crises, which included coming out as gay and having my first experience with a guy. All of this I felt comfortable enough to do in Europe: far enough from home to express myself freely but not too far to feel lost. My timeline was exactly this: moved to Sweden and lived with my grandparents; moved to another city in Sweden by myself; spent a New Years’ weekend in Berlin with my former class-mate who was there on an Erasmus programme; moved to Italy to work as an au pair; moved back to Sweden where another class-mate was on an Erasmus programme. I started studying in Sweden, when I finally had some semblance of what a future me wanted.

Thus, at this point in my life, Erasmus meant having the support network of my former class-mates across Europe. I wasn't able to take part in it but I was able to reap the social benefits of it. It resulted in me being able to settle in a place where I felt tremendously content, and it was only after establishing a way of life for myself in Sweden that it was my turn to take part in the Erasmus programme. But as always, this was also somewhat accidental. It wasn't necessarily what a future me needed but it was just what people my age do. Everybody I knew had done Erasmus, which meant I needed to do it too. This is where Erasmus took on another meaning for me: the thing to do. I am a part of the Erasmus generation. I have, since my time at the European School, had the persistent feeling that I need to be able to connect with the people around me, so that I am not again the gravy-guzzling eurocrat. Yet, what is remarkable here is that the Erasmus generation has gained the same identity that I had with my European School class-mates: the European mongrel. What was once something that was limited to me and a handful of others has expanded to all university-goers in Europe. We all feel partly foreign while bringing our quirks (and our smelly packed-lunches) from our respective countries.
I cannot make the case that I am more prepared for living in Europe because of my background and my experiences: I had no idea what Prague was going to be like. And I still don’t really know what it is like now that I am here. I still experience moments of surrealism, like how my first day at university consisted of me standing in queues and filling in various forms for several hours (I can’t resist the urge to describe it as Kafkaesque). I am just on the verge of accepting that queuing seems to be a Czech national past time – which means something coming from a Brit. I also have to admit that I find the hyper-formality of Czech people consistently saying ‘dобрый ден’ humorous: I was unsettled when I was in the changing room at the gym and a man who was completely naked innocently said ‘добрый ден’ to me. The same is true when I was in the elevator (although clothed). What is the point of saying ‘dобрый ден’ when entering an elevator, and ‘на шледаноу’ when exiting? It would make sense if everybody in the elevator then engaged in conversation but the reality is that they then simply stared at their feet.

In some form or another, this is something that all Erasmus students will be experiencing in Prague, or any other foreign European city. Ultimately, I feel privileged to be a part of that. What Erasmus means for me is being able to study in a beautiful city, learning about a new way life, and connecting with others (in particular, a wonderful Spanish guy also on an Erasmus programme who I get to go on dates with). From my perspective, we have all become that little dorky German Erasmus kid. And the gravy is delicious.