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Over the years, there have been many remarkable students who have visited the Charles University in Prague as part of the Erasmus programme. One of the bravest ones has undoubtedly been the first wheelchair-using Erasmus student whom we were able to host, Concetta Giansiracusa from the Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza", who came to the Faculty of Arts for the summer semester of 2010/2011. We certainly admire Concetta's braveness, as despite her personal assistant having to cancel her arrival in Prague at the very last moment, Concetta - known as Ketty to her friends - decided to go ahead with her arrival in Prague, a city and a university she had never been to before. Fortunately, the Office for Students with Disabilities of Charles University was able to provide a team of assistants to help her settle in.

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Erasmus programme, we have asked Concetta to share her experiences of living in Prague and studying at Charles University with us.

Concetta, you were the first wheelchair-using Erasmus student that had ever attended the Charles University in Prague. Moving to a different place without your family and friends can be very difficult even for students without a disability – was it a difficult decision for you? Did your family and friends support your decision, or did they try to discourage you from coming to Prague?

Well, I threw myself into this adventure without thinking twice. If I'd spent too much time thinking about how I was going to cope all by myself, I'd probably have given up, but this element of unknowingness allowed me to have one of the most wonderful experiences of my life. My friends and family have always been on my side; they know how stubborn I am and they were sure that everything was going to be alright.



We (the European Office of Charles University) will never forget your email from the end of 2011 in which you told us that your new assistant, who was supposed to join you for the semester in Prague, was unable to accompany you and that you did not know if you would be able to come. Was it an awful feeling to find out that she was unable to come?

The girl who was supposed to accompany me is a friend of mine. Everything had been going well and the University of Rome had given me a grant which I could use to pay the assistant. Unfortunately, she had some personal problems which prevented her from coming to Prague and, at this point, it was too late to look for another suitable person to come with me, so I had to ask for help from the Charles University. I didn't want to miss out on my opportunity to study abroad, it wouldn't have been fair!

In the end we were extremely lucky – even at this late point, the Office for Students with Disabilities of Charles University, namely Mrs. Alice Rytichová, was able to provide you with a group of Czech personal assistants who stepped in to help you. However, it meant that you would only meet your new assistants for the first time after your arrival in Prague. Were you afraid that the new assistants might not be helpful enough, or were you just relieved to have been able to come to Prague in the end?

Well, I must admit that to start with I wasn't very afraid. I was sure that the assistants would be helpful and that together we would manage. It was only when I boarded my first flight to Prague that I realised that I didn't know what was going to happen, so yes, at that time I did have some fears. It was a challenge for both me and my group of personal assistants and I will always remember and be grateful for their help and for the opportunity to study abroad that they gave me.



In retrospect, I can say that it was better for me to go to Prague alone and to have this experience all by myself. Erasmus has been a great opportunity for me to become more independent and for the first time I have realised that I can take charge of my own life. If you can have faith in other people, even if they are strangers, you can live however you want to live.

What were your personal assistants like? Did they see it as simply a job, or have you become friends? Are you still in touch with any of them?

My personal assistants were all very nice and I'm still in touch with two or three of them. Obviously, for most of them it was primarily a job, but that doesn't mean that we couldn't talk to each other or laugh together.

Your boyfriend was studying abroad at the same time as you. Did you consider going to the same city as him, or was it clear from the start that you would be going to two different destinations?

It was clear from the very beginning that we would be going to two different destinations. I had to learn the Czech language for my studies and my boyfriend wanted to go to a country which was better suited for his needs.

You studied at the Faculty of Arts and followed lectures in the main building of the faculty in náměstí Jana Palacha and in Jinonice, where you also lived. How satisfied were you with the accessibility of the university buildings and your flat?

I'm sorry to say that I did have some problems with the accessibility of the central buildings of the Faculty of Arts. In fact, when preparing my Learning Agreement, I had chosen some courses which I couldn't attend in the end because the lecture theatres or seminar rooms were too far from my flat in the Jinonice campus (note from the Editor: the subway station Jinonice, as well as the subway station Staroměstská, are unfortunately not barrier-free at the moment, so *Concetta would always have to take much longer bus and tram routes to class*). Because of this, when I arrived in Prague I had to change my study plan and I attended different lectures which took place in a building which was closer to my flat. Unfortunately, I also wasn't able to socialize much with the other Erasmus students because I lived in the Charles University hotel rather than any of the halls of residence. I could not be housed in the halls of residence because there are no places for wheelchair users.

You also travelled to other parts of Europe. Did you experience difficulties with your wheelchair everywhere or did you find that some cities or countries are more wheelchair friendly?

Yes, I have travelled a lot, all over Europe. I also spent some time in Finland for a project of the European Voluntary Service. If I had to compare all of the cities that I have been to, I would say that Barcelona is one of the most wheelchair friendly cities.

I also have to say that in Prague I definitely appreciated the public transport service. The timetables at the bus or tram stops always alerted me when an accessible bus or tram was arriving. In Rome we aren't as advanced, there isn't even a timetable!

What do you miss most about Prague? And is there something you don't miss at all?

The only thing that I don't miss about Prague is the local food. The thing that I miss the most about Prague is Prague itself. I fell in love with the city and during my five month study stay there I got to know it in a very intimate way. I was

often by myself in the city and I was always amazed to discover what was around each corner. Even after I became more familiar with the streets and buildings of the city, I was still constantly enchanted by it. It was like a spell: to paraphrase Franz Kafka, "Prague never lets you go... this dear little mother has sharp claws." I left my heart there and my shoes as well: if you go to Letná you might spot them hanging there.

If you had a chance to study in Prague again – would your decision be the same?

Yes, definitely.

Thank you for the interview.