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Elizabeth Preece from the University of Leeds joined the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University for the period of the winter semester 2011/12. Similarly to other students, she was studying not only Theology here in Prague but also her other subject, History of Art, and next to dedicating her time to her studies, she, like her Erasmus peers, enjoyed exploring Prague, the Czech Republic and the surrounding countries. But there is also something different about Elizabeth – she is also (a bit) older than the regular Erasmus students. On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Erasmus programme, we have asked her to share her experiences of the Erasmus study stay with us.



Elizabeth Preece on the left

Elizabeth, a typical Erasmus exchange student is between 20 and 25 years of age, has usually no big obligations back at home and also not much work experience. We don't receive many older Erasmus students – we believe that the main reason is that the older students are already bound to their home city or region either by having a family there or a job they wouldn't like to quit. Do you agree? What have you yourself left behind back at home? Was it more difficult for you to join the Erasmus programme than for the standard Erasmus students?

I had the great advantage of 'retiring' at a relatively young age (49 years), hence I never use the word retirement but regard leaving my profession as just that – leaving – to begin something else. The 'something else' was to study a joint honours degree in History of Art and Theology and Religious Studies, as a part-time student, at Leeds University. This degree combined two of my life's interests and most people will know that there is quite an overlap in the two fields, e.g. there was a time when the use of art was essential to promote the understanding of Christianity.

The point I am making is that I do not work and so had no job to leave behind which usually must be the big concern of mature students. I was able to leave home to study in Prague because I am in a strong financial position. I have a generous pension and I receive income from a flat that I rent out. I also have a supportive partner who agreed to take responsibility for our three dogs and my parrot – no small commitment. I do not have any children and so, if I had any worries at all, it was leaving the animals. All that said I would not have wanted to be away for a whole academic year and the opportunity to come for the semester suited me ideally.

I had no difficulty in being accepted onto the Erasmus programme. In fact I was encouraged and supported by staff at Leeds University.

At present, you are majoring in Theology and History of Art. Have you studied before (when being as old as the typical Erasmus students)? If yes, have you participated in some study exchange programme at that time? What is your original occupation?

My first Bachelor's degree is in Law (LLB hon.) which I also studied at Leeds. I completed this degree part-time while I was working in my late 20's. I also have a master's degree – Masters in Business Administration (MBA) from Bradford University. Again this was studied as a part-time student while working and undertaken in my 30's. These two degrees were taken as part of my development as a senior police officer. This is in contrast to my current studies which are for

enjoyment and interest. I completed 31 years in the British Police and reached the rank of Chief Superintendent. I now have a part-time job as a field teacher with the RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds), a large British charity.

Why did you decide to join your current study programme?

For interest, enjoyment and increasing my knowledge. I chose the subjects because they were so different from what I had previously studied in a professional capacity.



After having joined the university (this time), had you been interested in the Erasmus (or another exchange) programme from the very beginning? Or had you rather considered it impossible or difficult for you at that time?

As soon as I became aware of it I was interested in the possibility of taking part. In particular the opportunity to study for one semester only. Incidentally the exchange between Leeds and Prague was the only one which offered the single semester option – all others required an exchange for the whole academic year.

What were your reasons to decide upon Charles University in Prague? Are you satisfied with your study stay here? Are there any subjects that you wouldn't be able to study back at home and that are of great interest for you here?

The single semester option suited my personal circumstances. Also I appreciated, through my studies, the huge significance of the city in the historical timeline.

You have been joining the Erasmus Club activities regularly with the other Erasmus students and are also otherwise in contact with them, as well as with the Czech tutors and your tandem language exchange partners. Do you feel yourself to be an integrate part of the Erasmus community at Charles University? Or do you feel singled out a little?

I felt thoroughly integrated with the Erasmus Community. I got involved in the trips, visits to the theatre and the tandem language exchange, all of which enabled me to make good friends in the Czech Republic and to understand the rich history and culture.

What do you like the best about Prague and your study stay here?

Without doubt my favourite memories of Prague will be the number of well-cared-for dogs to be seen everywhere, from the lovely park next to where I lived (*note of the redaction: Elizabeth lived in Vršovice in Prague 10*), to all the bars and restaurants – wonderful. Dogs are always welcome – unlike at home in England where the ‘Nanny State’ excludes them from practically everywhere. My other great love is the tram system – particularly the 22. I would be able to write a review of restaurants and bars on the 22 route. I have a picture of a 22 tram framed and hanging in my dining room and so I can see it every day.

Apart from the dogs and the 22 tram, I loved the gothic art and architecture – Charles Bridge and St Vitus and the magnificent paintings in the Convent of St Agnes.



Elizabeth Preece’s dogs in the university bar

Final thought. One thing I did do which helped make my final decision to come to Prague was to visit for a long weekend early in the year. On this short visit I met the staff in the International Department at the Protestant Theological Faculty where I was to study. I also found my accommodation. This was very important as I would not have wanted to come out to Prague and have had to find accommodation at the same time I was beginning my studies. Equally, I would not have wanted to stay in the student accommodation at Hostivař or other halls of residence. I doubt that any mature student would find it suitable...

Thank you for the interview.