

CZECH MATE

Dr. Dehning recounts his experience as a Fulbright Scholar sent to teach and learn in the Czech Republic.

By Dr. Bruce Dehning



I think many Americans are surprised when they visit the Czech Republic, and by Prague in particular. In many ways, Prague is ahead of America and Western Europe. Given that there was almost nothing new there 15 years ago, and everything has been built since then, most of the things such as shopping malls, movie theaters, restaurants, banks, etc., are better than the equivalent we have in the United States. Plus, the old part of the city has avoided being destroyed by war for 500 years, so you have one of the best-preserved old European cities with all of the amenities of Western Europe.

The Prague Connection

So what does it take to move your family to a country a third of the way around the world? I found that a lot of advance scouting helped, as did having three members of my family (my wife, Katerina, and my two daughters) speak the language. Everyone in my immediate family speaks Czech except me, which is one reason I decided to move to the Czech Republic.

Actually, I thought the trip would be a great experience for the entire family. While my older daughter is fluent in Czech and converses comfortably, at that time, my younger daughter understood Czech but preferred to reply in English. I knew six months in a Czech school would make her truly bilingual. This visit also would be a chance for all of us to better understand our family's heritage, as my wife's family still lives in the Czech Republic.

When I received word that I had been named a Fulbright Scholar to teach in the Czech Republic, the logistics hit me like a brick. Fortunately, our neighbors, friends and relatives pitched in and helped take care of things when we were gone. On the

Czech side, we had Katerina's family to help us find an apartment to rent and a car to buy. And while we had a few hiccups along the way, overall I don't think we could have imagined such an easy transition.

Sharing Experiences

We returned home in July 2005 after spending seven months in the Czech Republic. The experience was better than we had anticipated. I did not learn to speak Czech, but I connected with the people and students in other ways beyond my wildest dreams. Now I am trying to take advantage of what I learned and share my experience. First, I proposed a change to the Argyros School of Business and Economics graduation requirements. The faculty agreed with my proposal, and now all students must have an international experience to graduate. Ideally, it would be a semester studying abroad or taking an international travel course, but for practical reasons we will also allow students to take an international-themed business course to meet the requirement.

I am also trying to set up exchanges between the faculty members at Chapman and at Tomas Bata University (TBU), where I taught in Zlin. This past May, one of my colleagues from TBU came to Chapman to work on a research project we started when I was there. We have received a European Union (EU) grant to develop a framework for measuring the performance of industry clusters. And Dr. Jack Broughton, associate professor of finance at Chapman, and I will be traveling to Zlin this October to work on the project. Hopefully, this is just the beginning of a long-term collaboration between TBU and Chapman faculty.

We are also planning two additional visits from my colleagues in Prague. Dr.

Alan Krautstengl, president of the Anglo-American College, will be teaching an interterm course for Chapman next year, and Dr. Karel Havlíček, director for marketing and sales strategy for the Sindat Group and a lecturer at the Institute of Finance and Administration, will be visiting next semester as a guest lecturer in several of our graduate and undergraduate courses.

As a result of my Fulbright experience, 22 Chapman students traveled this summer with Dr. Broughton and me for a three-week course to study international finance in Zlin and Prague. The students spent one week in class with TBU students, visited numerous Czech companies and the Prague Stock Exchange, and participated in social outings with their Czech counterparts.

Because I was alone in Zlin for three days each week when I was teaching there, I relied on the TBU students to keep me busy. We played basketball together on Monday nights; every Tuesday I met with a group of my students for dinner; and in my free time we socialized, went bowling, attended concerts, and went go-cart racing. I ended up connecting with the Czech students more than I ever have with my students in the United States, and that convinced me to make some changes when I got back. Now, I play basketball with Chapman students a few times a week, and I will be teaching a Freshman Foundations Course in the fall. I hope teaching the course will allow me to spend more time outside of class getting to know my students. In addition, an optional part of the course will be a 10-day trip to Prague in January 2007.

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