

Sunday 3 October; Day one
Arrival Prague

At 16.00 I arrived at the airport of Prague, Michal my contact person was already waiting for me. There was a little misunderstanding about an Irish college. We waited for a while for her but finally we found out that this Irish college was not able to fly because of an illness. Michal brought me to the students flat of the Police academy in Prague where I spend my first night. The head office of the RFA is also placed on the same ground as the police academy. I've got a huge apartment for myself, a lot of space but a little sober...

Monday 4 October; Day two
Head quarter RFA, Prague

At 9 I arrived at the head quarter of the RFA. Michal gave me general information about the system. I found out that at this moment there were not a lot of unaccompanied minors (UMA's) in the Czech Republic. The UMA's are since July 2004 under the responsibility of the ministry of education. Before the Ministry of interior has been responsible. Under the old law there are only 14 or 15 UMA's living in residential centers. I was disappointed when Michal told me about that. This is the group I work with in Holland, and I was so curious to look at the circumstances from this vulnerable group.

Around eleven o'clock Michal organized a meeting with Irena, a social worker. I was very pleased with this meeting; Irena seems to be a very enthusiastic young woman. She gave me a lot of information about the UMA's, and at the same time she was also very curious about how everything is arranged in Holland. We talked about my job with this vulnerable group and about the system in Holland. Irena studied several months in Groningen (Holland) so of course we had a lot to talk about!

They changed the system for the UMA's because of the vulnerability of this special group; they want to give them more special care. In Prague there is a children's home, where the UMA's under new law are living. Before it was a home for orphans. At this moment there are 15 UMA's living, most of them from Russia. They have the possibility to stay there till they reach the age of 26. When I asked Irena why there are only 15 UMA's, she explained that a lot of them flight again after arrival in the children's home. At that moment I thought about our campus in Holland, where also a lot of youngsters disappeared. For Irena it was difficult to give a clear answer what should be the reason why they left. Of course I understand, the UMA's are only accommodated there since 2 months.

Before I left to The Czech Republic they informed me about the shyness of the Czech people, so I tried to prepare myself a little. But till now I did not recognize any shyness.

Unfortunately the conversation with Irena finished suddenly. The taxi driver was waiting for me and Michal to bring us to Kostelec, one of the residential centers in the East of the Czech Republic.

First I was surprised to see that the place where we should spend the night was on the center itself, but the place was really excellent!

Tuesday 5 October; day 3
Kostelec Nad Orlici

Kostelec is a residential center, opened for asylum seekers on 1st January 2001 because of big influx of asylum seekers. Before it was a military base, and the whole area consists seven buildings. The center's total capacity is 300 beds.

One of the buildings has been designated a protected zone for unaccompanied minors (50 beds). But because of the new law for UMA's (influx) now also used for single mothers and single woman. This was really something new for me, and I was *very* enthusiastic about this idea to create protected zones!! Our rooms were also placed above the floor where the protected zones are situated, and I really felt the environment was quiet and safe! I can imagine that woman for example feel much more safe in such a protected zone!! When entering the building everybody has to go through the reception area, where a non-stop service is present 24 hours a day!! What a perfect solution for vulnerable groups! People who are living in this protected zone are not allowed to have visitors. In the beginning that sounds strange for me, I asked myself how to have contacts without the possibility to invite friends in your own space. After a few days I could agree with this rule, the priority is to be safe. Especially when you are a vulnerable individual!

In the morning Michal arranged a meeting with the director of Kostelec. The director couldn't speak English, so Michal was so kind to translate our conversation! The director gave me information about a lot of things.

I was surprised to hear that there are no consequences when an asylum seeker uses violence on the center. There are no possibilities to give any kind of punishment. Asylum seekers receive only 11 Euro a month, of course you can't take away a part from such a small amount. There is just one way; a transfer. I explained the director how we deal with violent people in Holland. Probably she was a little shocked to hear that we throw people on street for several weeks (without money) as a punishment. What a big contrast! I do *not* agree how we deal with these people in Holland; at the other side I think it's important to find some kind of way to ask people to behave themselves!

One of the 3 social workers, 'Ludek' took us on a tour. This young man could not speak the English language, again Michal translated. During the tour I had a conversation with several workers;

1 *Teacher elementary school*. Small but very nice little class for young children. At this moment 12 children are following lessons. Not a lot of the children are traumatized; only children from Tjetsjenie do have mental problems.

These are preparatory classes. Children go to this little school for approximately 3 to 6 months. After this period children are going to the elementary school in the village.
2 *Nurse, medical service*. Nurse is working 4 days a week, together with her colleague. There is one doctor and one psychologist, both are working fulltime. The contact between medical staff and the social worker is very good (the whole medical staff is also working for RFA), almost every day they meet. In Holland we can learn something from that!!!

3 *Pedagogue, Art class*. This art class was amazing to me! One pedagogue and one art teacher were working fulltime, in a wonderful space full of art from children. I felt some jealousy, because this is something we miss in Holland. The pedagogue told me that today one workshop finished. One teacher and five of his students from the art university from Brno (the second biggest city from Czech Republic), came for 5 days to make wall paintings with children from the center and children from the village. Tonight there will be a party with music and the exposition of the wall paintings. We will join this party tonight.

Around 5 o'clock we finished work, at night we were asked to join the exposition in the village. The night was really nice with a lot of fun (and very late!!!). 6 Female asylum seekers prepared special homemade snacks, there were three live bands. On one big screen behind the bands we saw the wall paintings, which were made by the children during the workshop. I found out that the center had a contract with the university; more often the teacher gave a workshop. I had a nice conversation with Anna, one of the students from the University.

Wednesday 6 October, day 4

Kostalec, afternoon leaving to Vysni Lhoty

Michal arranged a meeting with Hanna, the Chief of the social workers. I already met her at the party yesterday night.

She showed me how they organized the files of asylum seekers. I understood that the social workers put a lot of energy into this files. The files look very complete (maybe a little over-complete). The rapport I saw from the reception center was excellent, and all the moments social workers had contact with asylum seekers were also written down in the file. Michal told me later that social workers for 90 % are busy with administration, and just 10 % with "social" things. For me it was strange to see that all the contacts with asylum seekers are not written in a daily rapport, what to do when a social worker is ill for a few days? How is it possible to know all the "ins and outs" when a social worker was not around??

Around 12 we left by taxi to Vysni Lhoty, the reception center. We drove for 4 hours in an overheated car (Pfffffft!)

Thursday 7 October, day 5

Vysni Lhoty; reception center

Yesterday evening the Irish colleges arrived; David and Maria. Also Alec arrived, our second contact person.

Today we started with a nice breakfast. Afterwards the vice manager gave us a tour around the center. We visited the foreign police, the kindergarten, the library, and the waiting room for newcomers, the art class, and medical service! We had several conversations with different workers. In the other rapport I will give more details about what I've seen.

Again protected zones in this center, women and families are living in different zones (excellent). Walking in the "red zone" was a strange experience. Only single man, with a lot of porn photos behind the windows.

I asked myself how this could be allowed. I can handle a lot, but this crosses all borders! These men were aggressive, and it felt unsafe to walk in this area!

We were also sleeping in one of the protected zones, I felt very safe.... Nothing wrong with that!

Again I noticed that this center put a lot of energy in activities for asylum seekers! The art class was open and a few young men were making music. One man was drawing a poster to prevent people having unsafe sex. One part of the art class was a pottery, also with a fulltime worker! Again feelings from jealousy were coming up..... In all the spaces for activities were fulltime workers working. Terrific!

Friday 8 October, day 6

Vhysni Lhoty and leaving to Prague afternoon.

In the morning I visited the cloth shop, the woman thought that Michal and I were a couple from Ukraine. First she wouldn't let us in, afterwards we had a lot of fun when Michal explained that we were colleges!

In the afternoon we left to Prague, we drove 4 and a half hour.

Sightseeing Prague, day 7 and 8 (police academy)

Monday 11 October, day 9

Driving to Zastavka u Brno and Zbysov; residential centers.

At eight the driver picked us up to bring us to Residential center Zastavka u Brno.

Martin Leikep informed us about the procedure and about the organization. In the first week they already informed me about these subjects, but the Irish colleges were still in Ireland at that moment.

Martin told us about all the employees, which are following courses at this moment. Because of the influx of asylum seekers there is not a lot of work to do, a good moment to educate the people! I found out that employees are also affright to lose their jobs, same as in Holland. RFA is educating their people nowadays. When the state wants to fire employees because of influx, the RFA can prove that they put a lot of money and energy in educating people! That can be a reason that the state will not fire these people, because what will happen if they have to hire new uneducated people when necessary?

After lunch in the center (more about this later), we left to Residential Zbysov (10 km further). One part of this center is a guesthouse. Again a really nice place!

Zbysov; residential center

Before this center was specialized in UMA's, now for single woman and handicapped people. Jana, one of the social workers gave us information and a tour.

Again Michal and Alec were needed to translate. I found out that people do not speak the English language. Most of them speak the Russian language. When an asylum seeker speaks another language (French or English), they use a personal talk. I was surprised to hear that employees did not have the possibility to use a translator by telephone. I think it's a good thing to consider buying a special phone on each center. It's easy to find a translator very quickly, and on long terms it is much cheaper! Somebody told me that it takes **two or three days** to make an appointment with a personal translator!!!! In my conversation with the social worker in Kostolec I was very surprised to hear that it never happened that a translator was needed immediately! I asked if there are never situations with violence or crises. He told me that it never happens, and that they never had any problems with languages (??).

The center was very sober!

Strange to see that there is such a big contrast between different centers. In this center there wasn't anything to do for the asylum seekers. There was one art shop, but very very tiny!!!! Also the rooms for asylum seekers were small, and sober. Long corridors, people have to share toilets and 1 kitchen for every floor. Later more about this.

Tuesday 12 October, day 10

Zastavka U Brno

At 9 the driver picked us up, we left to Zastavka U Brno.

We had an introduction of services from this center by Jana Capalova, chief of social workers. Later one lawyer came in, we had the possibility to ask some details in the procedures. Again information about the RFA.

In the afternoon (after lunch) we met a lot of workers from different disciplines.

1 Nonstop service

2 Social service (really interesting conversation with Lidije; social worker and psychotherapist, later more)

3 Health center (later more about this conversation with the doctor!)

4 Accommodation center

5 Art class

This center I felt more positive about than the center we visit yesterday. There were more possibilities for asylum seekers (activities; library, sewing room, art class), and it seems to be a better place to live.

At the end of the day the driver brought us back to the guesthouse.

Wednesday 13 October, day 11

Integration center Zastavka U Brno

At 9 the driver picked us up, to visit the integration center in Zastavka U Brno. Zdena, a lovely Czech woman was our guide for today.

This was *the* moment for me; I was looking forward to this for a long time. But, unfortunately it was not what I expected.

The integration center was situated behind the residential center. One social worker (Maria) informed us about all the ins and outs. Maria is working here fulltime as a social worker. She is putting heart and soul in her job, that is a positive thing! At this moment there are 30 people living in the integration center. The program was very small; I could not believe that the only program was Czech language lessons. People have the possibility to go to school for this lessons, but only half a year 4 hours a week. Later more about this!

After lunch we left by taxi to Sec, one of the other residential centers from Czech Republic.

Thursday 14 October, day 12

Residential center Sec; integration center

This building was an internal school for children of the (rich) communists in the past. We sleep also in one part of the place, now it's some kind of hotel. This place was very sober (and

cold!!).

The vice manager (Jacob) of this center invited us in his office. He told us he was very busy with finding out the times the sun goes down, Ramadan is starting tomorrow. I was surprised a manager was working on that; in Holland we are doing kind of things. He was searching on the Internet for information about the Ramadan, but couldn't find it. Afterwards I climb behind the computer to help him to find the information.

He was busy with arranging everything for the kitchen, so he didn't have a lot of time. I found out he was a very hard workingman; he just started the job one month before.

Again employees did not speak the English language, so Jacob translates our conversation with the social worker. He also took us on a tour on the center. Again we visit a really nice art class, and had a conversation with the fulltime worker of art class. This young woman I met before during the workshop in Kostolec.

A woman from the Ukraine tried to get in contact with us during the tour; with her we had a long conversation. She complained a lot about the food in the center, and I agreed with her. After a while the director came in, and she complained to him as well. It was very nice to see that the director was open in his conversation and he took the time to listen to this single mother (later more). It was very nice to have a conversation with somebody who speaks the English language, and to have another view from an asylum seeker.

At the end of the day we had an evaluation with Michal, Alec and the two Irish colleges. We all agreed that the exchange was very useful and interesting, and we discussed about the system and about other things I'll write about later.

Because it was the last night together, we had some kind of farewell party in a pub in the little village. Like I already wrote, it was a very interesting times but also a pleasant time. Of course I was happy to go back to my beloved ones in Holland, but at the same time a little sad to say goodbye to these nice people!!!

Friday 15 October, day 13

Back to the airfield

At 11 the driver picked us up, to bring us to the airfield in Prague!

