

## **Czech Values, Attitudes and Habits**

### Greeting

While Czechs generally do not greet or acknowledge strangers on the street, it is polite and expected to greet people you don't know when you walk into a small store, restaurant, waiting room, or small public space but one would not generally engage in conversation. For example, when entering a shop you would say *Dobrý den* to everybody in general and it is expected that people will respond in kind.

It can be quite normal to sit with strangers at a single table in a restaurant for hours and not exchange a word but it would be impolite not to say *Nashledanou* (Good bye) when you leave. If you want to sit down at a table with strangers, you have to ask for permission by saying *Je tu volno?* (Is it free?)

### Space

The Czech Republic, like most of Europe deals with limited geographic space. Building and housing design is influenced by these constrictions. The vast majority of the population (even in small towns) live in apartment block buildings called *panelaks*. This limited space influences a Czechs' perception of distances, and even a one-hour drive is a significant undertaking. On the other hand, Czechs like to travel both within the country and internationally.

However, the mobility of the Czech population in general is rather limited although that is changing with EU inclusion. Even in times of growing regional unemployment, people are reluctant to move. This is partly caused by the shortage of rent-controlled housing but is also linked to the strong attachment many people have to the place where they grew up. Additionally, family ties are close but often this is primarily a result of space limitations.

Czech personal space is also smaller but its boundary is firmer. This is especially obvious when compared with Americans who require larger personal space but are much more willing to let people into it. This difference influences much that is typical of Czech culture. For example, a person has fewer friends who are closer. Also, people generally do not smile or even initiate contact with strangers. Public displays of affection are common, however, because they are happening within that close personal space with much stronger boundaries. Making noise or accidental physical touching (as on public transportation) that disturbs other people around you is frowned upon. It may also explain the sometimes sharp contrast between dirty or somewhat shabby public spaces and almost religiously clean homes, or other private spaces.

### Time

The Czech concept of time one in which people are expected to be prompt (not early) and it is inappropriate to be more than 5 minutes late especially in business dealings. The Czech daily schedule begins and ends earlier -- public schools generally end at 1:30 pm.

### Status and Education

Czechs are by nature egalitarian and frown on status and its outward representation. Knowledge and ability are more worthy of respect. Importance is attached to education (not everyone qualifies to attend university) as obtaining an academic title is an important societal goal -- titles based on degrees earned are commonly attached to a person's name.

Also very important is the need to distinguish between formal and informal language and situations in choosing the appropriate forms of address. Formal and informal forms of address are used even with

people of the same age. The elderly have certain prerogatives by virtue of their age, for example, younger people are expected to relinquish their seats on public transportation.

### Food, and Drinking and Eating Habits

While there is a movement towards more healthier eating, traditional Czech food tends to be rather heavy -- roast pork, cabbage and dumplings is one of the most (and delicious) popular meals. Soups are very common and are often served before the main course. For more information about traditional Czech dishes and recipes can visit <http://www.rampouch.com/cookingczech.html> or <http://www.recipehound.com/Recipes/czech.html>

Table etiquette is very important and it is considered a sign of bad upbringing not to use knife and fork in the continental manner. Courses of a meal are served in a strict order (soup, main course, salad, dessert) and many combinations of certain foods are not common. For example, chicken would not be served with anything except potatoes or fries. In keeping with the general European standard, consumption of alcohol (in moderation) even among Christians is considered normal. Czechs consume the most beer per capita in the world.

### Hygiene

"*Cistota pul zdraví*" ("Cleanliness is half your health") is a Czech proverb showing that cleanliness is important for Czechs especially the home environment. When entering a home, shoes must be taken off and slippers are to be worn. Changing clothes when coming from outside or different activities can also be quite common. Shoe coverings are also often used especially in nursery schools, hospitals and other places where cleanliness is deemed important. It is absolutely unacceptable to step with shoes, on something used for sitting, or putting feet up with shoes on. .

### General Attitude and Virtues

A sense of humor and an ability to take things less seriously are probably two of the most important qualities for most Czechs. Modesty in attitude is also a very important virtue so as to not appear better than someone else. For example, a proper response to a compliment is not to say thank you but offer a statement of disagreement. Czechs quite often underestimate themselves as it would be considered rude not to do it since Czechs rarely boast.

Czechs very often express that they are not content and so the "How are you?" question is generally more often answered with a more negative response, even if the state of the speaker is reasonably good.

### Family Values

Family ties are generally close but mostly because children still often live close to their parents even sometimes even after they marry because it is difficult to find affordable housing, although this pattern is changing. Another factor is the low mobility, although with the EU and other visa restrictions being lifted that is also quickly changing. However, it is still more of the exception for a Czech family to relocate because of a job opportunity as ties to family and culture remain strong.

### Meeting new people

It is more difficult to make new friends in the Czech culture. The most common way of meeting new people is by introduction by a mutual friend or one meets new people through work and social situations but deep friendships rarely result in a short time. Friendships often stem from childhood and school. Even then a friendship (i.e. not acquaintance) only forms after a considerable period of time -- sometimes years but then it will remain for a lifetime and the commitment to friendship is strong.

## Gender

Feminism has not gained wider popularity among Czech women, perhaps because it received negative publicity as a radical movement. Additionally, the Czech language, because of its structure, is not particularly sexist, and the situation of Czech women differs on the surface from that of American feminists of the 60s since women commonly work in a wide array of professions. Another important point is the reluctance of Czechs after the fall of communism to congregate in organizations.

However, the situation of women is far from ideal. They are still expected to fulfill their role as mothers and caretakers of their families and on those grounds it may be more difficult for them to enter into certain professions. The number of women in politics and top managerial positions is still rather limited -- although again that is gradually changing. On the other hand, women have traditionally worked in all levels of education and in research.

## Racial Issues

Czechs have for many years lived in an environment which is generally culturally and racially homogeneous, which has resulted in attitudes of latent racism. The Roma/Gypsy are the most significant racial and cultural minority and they are the target of most racist attacks -- although those with darker skin in general can also be targets. Statistically 45% of the population would be very suspicious and in many cases would prefer if gypsies did not live in their neighborhood. Czech racism is not necessarily philosophical (i.e. they do not believe that other races or nations are inherently better) but more a lack of contact, a high level of xenophobia (i.e. fear of the unknown) which has developed, sometimes resulting in racist violence.

For further information about understanding Czech culture we would also recommend *Culture Shock: Czech Republic* by Tim Nollen 2008 ed.

We would also recommend the site *My Czech Republic* (click on Bookshop) <http://www.myczechrepublic.com/books/czech-books-us.html> for other books about Czech history and culture as well translated works by various Czech authors.

(Updated July 2009)