

“Prague meets Hamburg in Brussels” – 11.11.2015

Dear Lucie Cadilova,
dear Jiri Burianek,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to the Hanse-Office - Vítejte na Hanse-Office -
Willkommen im Hanse-Office.

I am delighted that so many followed our joint invitation to celebrate 25 years of partnership between two beautiful sisters, Prague and Hamburg.

This twinning began on 19th April 1990, when Prague and Hamburg “connected by the Elbe and the Vltava (Moldau)” decided to “build upon their traditionally good relations, maintain, and extend them on a broad basis”.

It has been thriving ever since, but most people do not know that Hamburg and Prague have a special connection that is much older than the successful town twinning.

After the First World War, the treaty of Versailles stipulated that the newly founded Czechoslovak Republic had to have an access to the sea. After a decade of negotiations, Prague and Hamburg signed a lend-lease agreement to let a part of the port of Hamburg to land-locked Czechoslovakia. Both cities profited from the deal: Prague had a direct access to the oceans of the world and Hamburg’s port accordingly became busier.

The separation of Europe by the Iron Curtain did not change anything about the agreement. The Czechoslovak part of the port even had its “golden era” in these times of the Cold War.

After the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia on 1st January 1993, the now Czech part of Hamburg’s harbour discontinued its activities as trucks and trains replaced river barges.

Fortunately, the Czech Republic has big plans to reanimate its bit of the port to make best use of Hamburg’s excellent location

since the term of the lend-lease agreement lasts until 2028 and could even be extended until 2078.

You might be surprised that Hamburg was considered the nearest sea port for Czechoslovakia, but you will be even more astonished to hear that the best waterway connection between Prague and Bratislava, which are just 330 kilometres apart as the crow flies, is via Hamburg! The German speaking author and reporter, Egon Erwin Kisch, born in Prague in 1885, described in his satire "A journey around Europe in 365 days" how it took a whole year to transfer a steamboat from Prague to Bratislava. As there was no navigable connection between the two cities, the steamboat had to follow the Vltava and Elbe to go to Hamburg, then to cross the North Sea in order to reach inland waterways again in Emden, to follow the Rhine to the Danube, finally to reach Bratislava.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There is, however, much more than waterways and the harbour that is connecting Hamburg with Prague. We are closely linked by economic, cultural, and personal contacts. Nowadays, Prague and Hamburg are neighbours in the European village, which is why it is so appropriate that we meet half way here in Brussels today, where the representations of both cities are situated next to each other at Avenue Palmerston for 13 years now.

We enjoy excellent neighbourly relations and I would like to use this opportunity to thank the Prague House for being such a good friend next door, and, of course, for the great cooperation preparing this event! Usually, it is we who enjoy the sound of the wonderful concerts you are frequently staging, even in your garden, but tonight – for a change - we do it the other way round.

But before we start with the musical part of the evening, I would also like to thank the Holsten Brewery for their generosity to send us their genuine Hamburg beer all the way from the Elbe.

We are also very grateful to the Short Film Agency Hamburg for their support choosing and lending us short movies relating to both cities that you, hopefully, enjoyed at the Prague House.

With our twin performances this evening, we are part of a whole year of activities, events, and festivities in Hamburg and Prague to celebrate the 25th anniversary of our partnership. After the screening of the fine selection of short films, we now invite you to

listen to music by German and Czech composers, newly interpreted by this talented Jazz-Combo from Brussels. Very appropriately, they will play the European Anthem "Ode to Joy" by Beethoven and then something by a composer from Prague - the "Slow movement" from Dvorak's "New world symphony". After these two pieces of music, they will carry on playing jazzy music mainly from Germany and the Czech Republic whilst we invite you have a bite, to chat and to compare German and Czech beer.

Please welcome Pauline Leblond at the trumpet, Cédric Raymond at the bass and Lorenzo Dimaio at the guitar!