



Get a Chance to Know Them Better: Interview with Mónica Márquez B.

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Abstract:

Mónica has been living in Prague for seven years. She met her future Czech husband in Mexico while he was studying there for six months. It was love at first sight, but unfortunately, his time there was very short: “I saw him and I knew he would be my husband...but he hadn’t known it yet. So I had to come to tell him,” she says.

Afterwards, she won a scholarship to study Czech so she decided to move to the Czech Republic. At first, she lived in Brno where she attended summer school to study the language, but then she moved to Prague to begin her Master’s programme. During her studies, she was always trying to avoid Spanish or English speakers because she wanted to improve her Czech in daily life as well. Unfortunately, in 2006, after one or two years after having completed their Master’s, the majority of her friends left and she felt lost.

Meanwhile, she and her future husband heard that in the near future the act regulating marriage was about to be amended; together with the rules concerning the free movement of people, goods, services and capital. In fact, the Schengen Treaty was going to come into force so from 21st December 2007 things would have become more difficult for her. If, previously, she only had to get out of the Czech Republic for a short time every 90 days, with the Schengen system this wouldn’t have been possible anymore. Furthermore, at that time, if a non-Czech person married a Czech citizen, the first got automatically the permanent residence and all the social benefits. The new, stricter act was supposed to become law in January 2008.

The concurrence of those two events convinced the couple to get married as soon as they could. So, in December 2007, when they submitted several documents after having undergone never-ending stream of bureaucratic procedures, they got married.

Interviewer: “So... you were lucky you didn’t have all the problems the new law has brought”

Mónica: “Yes, I was lucky because, at the same moment, I got the permanent residence status, I got the right to take maternity leave, the right to stay here without a visa, etc.”

I: “Do you know anybody who got married under the new law?”

M: “I have a friend who has got married recently... and according to her, the whole thing was very harsh because during the process she had to prove they were actually living together, they asked her lots of questions, they kept visiting her house...for her, it was a little bit tough. And you know, we didn't have to do anything like that.”

I: “This must have been a really bad time for the couple as well. You also didn't have to depend on your husband just because he is Czech!”

M: “Well...at the beginning yes, because I didn't really understand anything so he helped. But then...no.”

I: “Which was the harshest part in the integration process?”

M: “I think the hardest part was to find a job. Speaking English was the only option at that time! So I started with an internship...but then I tried everything. I was working in the Zoo...and I think that was the best thing. While working in the Zoo, I learned Czech better than everywhere else. It was great. I met really great people there, it helped me a lot. So then, with time, I had my own activities, my own circle... I had to, you know...”

I think it was also hard for the relationship with my husband at the beginning, because my husband has his world here... and he forgot that I didn't...no, he didn't forget because he knew it, but it was hard for him that I wanted to be with him all the time. But everything was new for me, so it was my very first reaction to stay with him all the time as I didn't feel secure. It was very difficult. But then, with time, when I started to communicate better in Czech, things changed a lot.

The first two years were really hard for us because we started to notice all the cultural differences, even though I was very lucky because his family is great. My family and his got along together very well at the wedding, and this helped me very much. They are amazing! I know girls that have found very xenophobic families...and this was bad for the relationships...they also felt very lonely. But of course, even though they are cool...I'm scared of having children. Because I think the way we treat children is very different. Families here are very small, and children are used to be surrounded by adults and they care too much...and in the end, the children don't want to stay with anybody else but their parents. In Mexico, we have these big families so they are used to people. Of course, we pay a lot of attention and sometimes we spoil them, but they are used to staying with a lot of children and a lot of other people...and that makes you more flexible, I think.

And also here.....there are certain things...I know, it's so stupid...but...for example... for my family, it is important to take a shower every day in the morning. And here it is not! Little

things like that! In the beginning, also with my husband, it was weird! But it works the other way round, of course! For me, some things for me are totally normal, here are not!

You know things like that...but if I have a child, I want him to take a shower and smell good!" (*giggles*)

I: "You mentioned you had a few problems in getting adapted in the beginning...what was the worst one?"

M: "Well...I have never had very bad problems...but I have always tried to take them also as a positive thing. I have also learnt to have a different point of view...which, for me... it is really positive! So, I think that even the hard things were really good experiences for me, in that sense. But, if I have to say the hardest thing...I think it was the language, in the beginning. It was bad for finding a job.... (...) but the job in itself wasn't a problem, I have always found something to do. The problem was that I felt...a little bit alone.

When I came, I wasn't looking for people who speak English or Spanish, I tried to make friends who speak Czech...but after school...they left. They were all foreigners here...so after one, two years...they left. And for me it was hard, because I felt alone, and I knew I was not going to be able to have friends again, because they would leave. And of course, I have lots of friends around Europe, that's nice...but in here? At the time, I didn't know many local people... and this wasn't good for my relationship, of course."

I: "How do you feel about that moment now?"

M: "I think it was totally normal...all the foreigners who come to a place, not just for a couple of years, have to build their life there, from the very beginning. Maybe you will be lucky, but maybe you won't. You know, it's different when you are a student... you have your classmates, you don't have to worry about jobs or anything...or at least, job is not the main thing! You have your own world. When you are going to a place, and you don't know how long you're staying there, that's different. Great, but different."

I: "Have stereotypes never been a problem in meeting new people, in your experience?"

M: "I was really sensitive about this...now I'm not anymore. I had the impression that the Czechs were really closed, but now, I don't. I don't know if they have changed, or if I see things differently! I remember, in the beginning, I was always mad because they told me I was an Indian because I come from Mexico. You know...they call *Indians* people who come from Latin America as well. I was the '*Indian from Mexico*', and I didn't like it at all. I was mad! Even my husband said "Oh, c'mon! Don't make such a big drama!"... But I didn't like to be stereotyped from the very beginning.

And... (*laughs*) I was surprised when people asked me which language we speak in Mexico! I was surprised how many people didn't know anything about Latin America...I didn't expect it, I wasn't mad or anything...I just didn't expect it!

And you know, I have realized that we all have stereotypes, in a bigger or a smaller measure. It is very hard not to have them!"

I: "Has not-being Czech ever been a problem, for example, in finding a job?"

M: "I think not being Czech was a problem because of the language. Being Mexican is not like being Vietnamese or Ukrainian...or Roma; actually, Roma are Czechs! You know, this was something new for me as well – here, they understand 'citizenship' in a completely different way! You can be born here, your parents can be born here...but you are not Czech. And for me, this is something really crazy."

I: "Are you willing to apply for the Czech citizenship?"

M: "Before, I didn't want to. I felt that I was a Czech citizen even without a piece of paper. But now... I have seen that people are doing crazy things so I think I will apply. And I am not sure how to deal with the fact that, according to the Czech law, I can't have a dual citizenship (*according to the new Czech citizenship law a dual citizenship will be possible*); but I can, according to the Mexican one. (...) I can't just quit my Mexican nationality, I'll be Mexican forever! Nationality is just a legal status only, at least for me! And you know, there is a lot of paper work to do and I have to pay lots of money for that...I'm not sure I want to do it. Probably, but I'm still not sure."

I: "What do you think about the changes the government is carrying out about citizenship and family reunion?"

M: "I am mad! Unfortunately, it is horrible, but it is not an exception in the world."

I: "Have you heard that the EU opened the consultations about the EU Directive on Family Reunification, and that the Czech government asked for stricter requirements and also for DNA testing on kids, in some cases?"

M: "Oh, yes! This is crazy! And you know what I think? I think that all these stupid rules discriminate Czech people, as well! Imagine, if they decide I can't get access to the public health care system for some reason, this would be a problem for me, yes, but also for my husband! And what if we have a baby? The baby can't have the same rights as a Czech person just because of me?! They discriminate their own citizens! I don't think they realize this.

I remember...before we got married, they had asked us for lots of papers...and once, we went to the police, and they asked my husband: "Why are you getting married with some Mexican?"

We have such beautiful girls in here”. I was totally shocked. I mean, at that time I couldn’t understand, but my husband did, and he told me afterwards. I felt very bad.”

I: “Have you ever had other similar problems?”

M: “Probably, it has happened a couple of times, but I have really tried to erase them from my mind!” (*giggles*)

I: “How do you feel about the future?”

M: “I really don’t know! I’m trying to cooperate with organizations that work with these kinds of issues because I think it’s really important to us, as foreigners, to know them and to do something”.

I: “What would you change about this system? If you were a politician, for example?”

M: “Wow! (*laughs*) I don’t know! About foreigners? I would change or make the whole nationality thing disappear... I would give them...actually, us, the same rights as the Czech citizens, because we are also Czech citizens, but also because we are also human beings...of course, we would have the same obligations as well. But you know.... it’s something really crazy because we do have the same obligations, but not the same rights. I help paying the pensions of some Czech people I won’t ever have the chance to meet!

I am really curious to see if the European Union allows the Czech Republic to change the law...”

(...)

I: “Bureaucratic barriers are not helpful to the integration, for sure. They don’t allow people to be open with foreigners, if foreigners can’t be totally integrated and have normal lives... it is like a vicious circle!”

M: “True. But fortunately there are always more people who are getting married with foreigners...”

I: “But this is kind of a problem too! It seems that there are two levels: the political level, very narrow minded, which is threatening integration and equal rights, and the “real one”, the one you mentioned, where people want to be integrated!”

M: “But I think that, soon or later, they will have to change it...people won’t stop having relationships between each other, they won’t stop going in and out...I am curious to see what happens!”

I: “It is very important that people do something, and participate actively...”

M: “Yes, it is very important for people to do something, even if it is really hard...or at least to talk about it. (...) You know, integration is a fact of *reflection*...you don’t have to be necessarily passionate with the Country you live in, but you have to be conscious of yourself!”

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