

In Their Own Words

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BASIC OUTLINE: This is a simple, flexible exercise, involving five short archive recordings in English, with the voices of people whose experiences shed light on Czech/Czechoslovak history.

DESCRIPTION OF EXERCISE: There are two PowerPoint slides devoted to each individual whose voice is featured. The first slide offers a photograph of the person and a short biographical paragraph. In the second slide we have the text and audio of the extract. None of the extracts are longer than two minutes. Some of those whose voices we hear are well-known public figures, others are less well-known.

Barbara Day (a British author and academic) – remembering the day when Soviet tanks rolled into Prague in August 1968.

Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk – talking in 1932 about his dream of a united Europe.

Jaroslav Rudiš (novelist) – telling a humorous story from his visit to a Prague pub.

Františka Plamínková (politician and feminist, shot by the Germans in 1942) – talking in 1937 about the growing role of women in Czechoslovakia.

Barack Obama – talking about freedom in a speech given on Prague's Hradčanské náměstí in 2009.

The extracts can be used in combination or individually. The focus can be on the language or on the themes that are being discussed. It is entirely up to the teacher to decide how to use the extracts. They can also be coordinated with the teaching of history or civic education.

OUTCOME: This project is very modest in scale. It can be used to fill ten minutes at the beginning or end of a class, or as a way of introducing a particular subject or historical figure, and as a way of practising listening comprehension. It also provides an authentic audio testimony, helping to bring recent history to life and remind students that the issues discussed remain relevant. The examples offer various registers of English, from the formal to the very informal, and in this way offer an excellent way of gaining practice in the understanding of spoken English.

GENERAL STARTING POINT: Pupils hear authentic recordings of the voices of people who have played a role in Czech and Czechoslovak history or have witnessed particular events. In this way pupils can engage both with the language and the content of what is being said. These are examples of English being spoken in a real historical context. As they decipher the content, pupils can reflect on its significance and context.

AGE GROUP: 15-19, intermediate to advanced English.

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE: To encourage pupils to think of the English language as something that functions in time and place. To expand their vocabulary and awareness of different registers of English. To encourage them to reflect on echoes from the past in the present day. To encourage them to reflect on the value of authentic witness testimony.

SKILLS ACQUIRED: Developing listening skills on various themes in various contexts and registers.

LENGTH OF ACTIVITY: This is very flexible, from 10 to 45 minutes.

ORGANISATION OF THE EXERCISE: It requires no preparation, as each pair of slides is self-contained. It is up to the teacher how many of the slides to use and how to develop a discussion around the content or language of the individual slides. If used as a listening comprehension exercise, the sound can be played before the text is shown to the students.

SOURCES: A multimedia PowerPoint presentation, including text, photographs and audio.

EQUIPMENT NEEDED: The activity requires a computer (with PowerPoint), projector and screen and reasonable quality sound reproduction, so that the whole class can hear the sound clearly.

CLASSROOM REQUIREMENTS: A normal classroom with access to a PC, projector and audio speakers.

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE REQUIRED: Familiarity with PowerPoint.

RECOMMENDED USE IN TEACHING: The exercise introduces an interdisciplinary element to English-teaching, with a particular focus on history and civic education. It can be used as a springboard for further discussion. Students need to have at least an intermediate knowledge of English.