
I feel at home in Czechia more than in Israel, says Dr. Yosef Mahagna, a graduate of the preparatory course of ÚJOP and Czech universities

Dr. Yosef Mahagna lives in the northern Israeli city of Umm Al Fahm, where he has worked as a **school psychologist** and a training centre coordinator at the city hall, has trained students and kindergarten teachers in developmental and educational psychology, and has run his own private clinic for 29 years. He also manages a centre for friendly relations with the Czech Republic, which he founded five years ago. After all, Yosef Mahagna has very **strong ties with the Czech Republic, where he studied**. He divides his free time between his family, his two daughters and two sons, and **promoting the Czech Republic**. We conducted the interview in Czech, the language the fifty-five-year-old doctor learned at the age of twenty at the ÚJOP preparatory programme in Poděbrady.

What brought you to the Czech Republic 35 years ago?

It had been growing in me since I was a kid. Even then, I dreamed of studying abroad, ideally in Europe, although there are plenty of universities in Israel. Czechoslovakia appeared to be one of the options. My father knew a lot about the situation at that time and advised me to go there to study because it was a developed country in the heart of Europe, a rich country among the Eastern European countries. So, I started looking at the map and reading about Czechoslovakia myself, and eventually got convinced that Czechoslovakia was indeed the best choice. I had my mind made up, I wanted to go and study there.



Were you also clear about what you were going to study?

Yes, I was interested in psychology since high school and wanted to study it, it was a very attractive field. Of course, I was also worried that it might be too difficult to study psychology abroad and in a foreign language. I initially found the Czech language itself very difficult. However, I took it as a kind of challenge, I had my mind made up and I set off for Prague. There I really found out that Czech is not an easy language and I started, as they say, to knuckle down.

Even the dorm receptionist helped me work on my Czech

So, your path led you to the preparatory course of the Institute for Language and Preparatory Studies in Poděbrady...

Exactly. After a week in Prague I went to Poděbrady. That was in 1990. There I took a course to prepare for my field which was psychology, and that's where my abundant Czech experiences began. I spent nine intensive months there, from the time when I didn't know any Czech to the time I was admitted to university. Every day in Poděbrady was rich and full of amazing experiences. It would take me a lot of time to recount everything. Poděbrady is a nice spa town that I liked a lot and I like it now. Last year I went there and it was like rediscovering a treasure. It is a town that is full of joy. I feel at home there, maybe even more than at home. There are very good people living there, very sociable and with good hearts. I got to know them in the dorm, but also on the street or in the shops. Even though they knew that I didn't speak Czech well, they wanted to talk to me and acted friendly, they wanted to know where I was from, what I was doing there... In the 1990s, in Czechoslovakia, such openness towards foreigners was not commonplace. The environment of the Poděbrady castle stimulated my study efforts. For instance, I can't forget the lady receptionist at the dorm who always wanted to talk to us so that we would have to communicate in Czech. This way we learned a few new words every day. I spent the best years of my youth in Poděbrady. Studying there gave me a strong foundation in Czech, thanks to which I was subsequently able to start studying at university in Czech. I was selected to study psychology at Masaryk University in Brno. There I continued to improve my Czech language skills.



Do you still speak Czech today? On what occasions?

I have a very romantic relationship with the Czech language. Even though I graduated a long time ago, I still try to keep it fresh in my mind. When I returned home in 1995, I brought back some Czech books related to my field and read them. Since 2008, when I started to have internet at work, I have regularly listened to Czech news and also watched Czech TV. I have been reading your newspapers every day for more than twenty years. Thanks to all this my Czech is still quite good despite my age and I understand everything. The problem is, I don't have anyone to talk to here. There are no Czechs living in our town, so it sometimes happens that I don't speak Czech for a year. Then the words get sometimes stuck in my head and it is hard to get them out. In order to speak Czech, I got in touch with the local Czech embassy and made some good friends this way. Of course, I also travel to the Czech Republic, if only to speak Czech. At the embassy, they now have a new course called "Hezky český" twice a month designed primarily for Czech expatriates, but I joined in as well.

Czechia is better than medicine

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How often and on what occasions do you visit Czechia?

I have a really warm relationship with Czechia, I can't live without it even for a year. Let me tell you something unbelievable. I have diabetes and I have to take medication when I am at home. But when I am in the Czech Republic, I

don't take the medication and I don't feel any problems, even my blood sugar is normal. So, I go to the Czech Republic as often as I can, usually at least once or twice a year. In Israel, I have my family, my job and many things to do, but I am deeply connected to Czechia and every trip there helps me mentally, physically and socially. I have also made my children understand that it is my second home and will remain so in my heart until I die.

How do you promote the Czech Republic in Israel and how successful are you in it?

My centre for friendly relations here in Umm Al Fahm helps people who want to go to the Czech Republic to study, whether at Charles University or elsewhere. They contact me with questions about studying, the study system, the living standards... I also help people who just want to visit the Czech Republic. It is a very popular place for Israeli tourists. That's why they want to know what the country looks like, what is worth seeing and so on before deciding on the trip. Occasionally, I am contacted by people who want to trade with the Czech Republic to find out what might be worth exporting or importing. The centre is non-profit, I work there in my free time. When I have time in the afternoons after work, I work for the centre, answering people on Facebook or on the phone. You will find nothing but the Czech Republic on my Facebook page! Pictures, links to articles or universities... When someone meets me here on the street, the first thing they ask me is how Czechia is doing, what's new there... When the incident at the Philosophical Faculty happened, locals called me and asked what was going on. It makes me feel like I am a Czech living in Israel. I am happy to be such an ambassador. If I have a bad day, I am in tension or I don't feel well, my wife tells me right away, you have to go to the Czech Republic for at least a week. And it is true. When I go, I come back with a lot of energy and in a good mood. Czech universities are internationally recognised and prestigious

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If some students come to your centre and want to know why they should study in the Czech Republic, what do you tell them?

I will definitely support them to go, because they will certainly like the Czech Republic. It is a rich country in terms of nature, level of education and people. Czechs are very kind, although not so open at first sight. But friendships with them are strong. You can find everything you need in Czechia. I myself not only completed my master's degree in the Czech Republic, but also earned my PhD at the Faculty of Social Studies of Masaryk University in 2015. And my degree is incredibly respected in Israel. It has such prestige that anyone who hears that I am a graduate of a Czech university takes their hat off to me. Universities in the Czech Republic are internationally recognised, among the best in Central Europe and in the world. They are of such a high standard that their graduates simply must be competent. Israelis who have studied in the Czech Republic are among the elite here, whether they are doctors, psychologists or lawyers. Therefore, I say that whoever gets there is very lucky. Studying in Czechia is not easy, but it is worth it. Exactly for that reason.

And why would you recommend them to prepare for their university studies in Czechia at ÚJOP? We now have preparatory programmes not only in Czech but also in English.

Primarily, it is an institution that welcomes students with open arms. When I first came to Czechia, the people at ÚJOP welcomed me in such a way that I felt like I was at home, among friends. They did everything for us, they took care of everything on our behalf. We didn't have to worry about anything. The students themselves really just have to come and study. ÚJOP will also arrange your residence permit, university applications, dormitory applications... Even the study itself and the relationships with the teachers were great. At ÚJOP there are helpful and friendly people who give their 100%.