

14th ConT_EXt meeting 2020

6th to 12th September in Sibřina near Prague

Harald König

The year is 1 after COVID-19. T_EX world is entirely occupied by corona viruses and thwarted. Well, not entirely... One small group of indomitable T_EXies still met completely offline, on-site, and face-to-face (but complying with the Corona regulations nonetheless). And since it was apparently the only T_EX conference that went ahead as planned, it was, with only twelve participants, the biggest T_EX conference worldwide this year!

As in 2018, the meeting took place at the nicely renovated former farm of the Škoda family where they grow many herbs, keep honey bees, and offer all kinds of tasty products like honey, nuts and herbs. It is a wonderfully quiet place that we had all to ourselves, where we could engross undisturbed in T_EXnical and other thoughts.

Arrival & Corona

Due to the Corona travel restrictions, not all the expected participants were able to come. Paris was already a “red zone” before the event, and other countries also had travel restrictions in place that made outward or homeward trips impossible without quarantining.

Jano, our organizer, watched the local events and kept us current with the latest orders in the run-up to the meeting. Up until the day of arrival, it was possible for anyone to cancel their participation for free, or indeed the whole meeting. To cushion the blow for our hosts, at least a bit, we all agreed in advance to make a voluntary and mostly symbolic cancellation fee should it be needed. Fortunately this was not necessary in the end.

The preparations for this very special meeting I found to be exemplary. Jano’s mother had, like many Czech women, already sewn a lot of textile masks, and did her best to look after us. For everyone there was a set of three masks in different sizes and in different patterns. In all strategical places there were spray bottles with “anti COVID” disinfectant, and in the evenings we had a very tasty apricot spirit for internal use in addition to the two kegs of Pilsner and the great IPA from Jano’s friend’s brewery.

With only twelve participants, we had enough space and distance in our lecture room, and thanks to the pleasant Indian summer, enough ventilation, too.



U Škodu



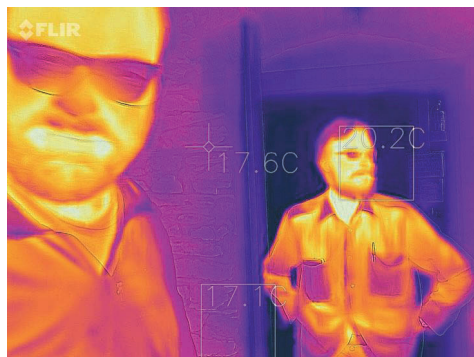
Lecture room



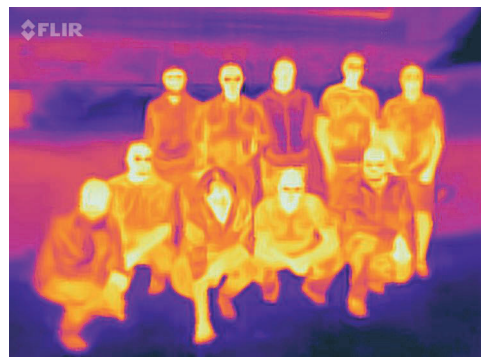
Dutch clogs for Jano



Most days we documented our temperature with an infrared group picture. Everyone was well the whole time we were there. We felt snug as a bug and fit as a fiddle in Sibřina! Due to the low resolution of the IR camera, the pictures had the added benefit of conforming with GDPR. ; -)



Human warmth





The mummers

Nevertheless we needed our masks. Due to rising infection rates, on the Wednesday the whole urban area of Prague was declared a “red zone” with the mandatory wearing of face masks. This was no problem for us, since the urban area border was still 900 meters away! We just couldn’t walk to the northern end of the village without face masks any more.

But just one day later, on the Thursday, COVID-19 closed in on us yet again. Now we were required to wear a face mask also in public areas outside of Prague. Since we always had lunch and dinner in a restaurant over the street, in a separate room, we at least needed our masks on the way to the meals; which was no problem, thanks to Jano’s mom’s care.

T_EXnical Stuff

At every ConT_EXt meeting there are many interesting talks. On one hand there are always many details on the latest developments, or very deep descriptions of concepts and internals, as well as plans for upcoming development, given mostly by Hans and Taco. On the other hand there are very interesting applications and examples “from real life” that fascinate me each time anew.

Unfortunately there are either no or just a few rudimentary slides for many talks on the meeting website. I’m sure there will be more to read in the printed proceedings, which alone might be a good reason to become a member of ConT_EXt group. Both can’t in any way replace the experience of listening to and discussing with the developers live at a conference itself. I’ll just mention a small and subjective sample of talks that were especially interesting or impressive to me:

Hans and Taco

each have every time many and very interesting talks that demonstrate the general concepts and structures. Mostly they have very small and simple examples, but some (esp. new and upcoming ones) are illuminated and detailed in depth.

A very good introduction for me was Hans' talk about the development of ConT_EXt that is now slowly proceeding into a third generation. The first generation "MkII" (pronounced Mark Two) occurred a long time before my first small applications of ConT_EXt. Actually, I only ever learned "MkIV" (Mark Four) actively and that was more than ten years ago already. (I started my first book with ConT_EXt in 2009/10 as an exercise, and at that time everything was already MkIV.)

And now Hans is not only thinking about the next generational change, he is apparently already in the middle of the upcoming version "LMTX" (LuaMetaT_EX). The new name says it all. It shows an even deeper integration of Lua, as well as an even better integration of MetaPost, and even more support for and use of XML.

This short trip from the early history of ConT_EXt up to the plans for the upcoming version, I found to be very helpful as an overview for orientation. I'm already looking forward to examples of how this all can be put to use in combination even better!

In further contributions, Hans showed how to embed svg graphics directly into ConT_EXt (since they are just XML anyway) and how you can use ECMAScript (aka JavaScript) instead of Lua, if you like that better.

Taco, who could unfortunately attend only "remotely" this time, held a great talk about MetaPost macros and showed what you can do with them. With many examples, he explained where you can run into traps, or how unexpected behaviors and errors can occur, and how these can be explained. This was a rich source of information for serious practitioners as well as for those just toying around and being amazed.

Especially interesting for me, as being from the pre-web/online generation, was the new source browser at <https://source.contextgarden.net/> that is written in Lua as an `mtxrun` script. It specializes in the combination of T_EX and Lua code and feels quite slippy. Really amazing, just take a look!

Descriptive Geometry

was impressingly implemented in MetaPost by Jan Šustek to be able to comfortably enter graphics and diagrams for a geometry textbook. I fondly remembered my school times when we learned to do geometrical constructions solely with a divider and ruler. These memories immediately awakened and I could comprehend the MetaPost encoding 1:1 – that was epic!

What is new in Unicode 13

said Arthur Rosendahl (née Reutenauer). There were many interesting details about emojis, their composition through tag sequences, and how the decision-making works for the inclusion of new symbols into Unicode. Apart from emojis, the much

contextgroup > context meeting 2020

bigger share of new glyphs serves to support additional languages and scripts, may they be uncommon, historical or extinct. This was an exciting excursion into the unknown and never heard-of languages, and Unicode will continue to evolve.

Besides Unicode, Arthur amazed us once again: with the paper work for his planned wedding, which could take place in May despite Corona, even if under extreme restrictions. Long ago, Arthur and his fiancé Therese planned and crafted many works of paper and printed art at home. These included invitation cards in little envelopes, RSVP cards with great hand-punched ornaments, beautiful typography (e. g. with Zapfino), interesting problems of color communication, a wonderful idea for the menu (as shown in the previous issue of this journal), and a song sheet for the service typeset in Lilypond. His ‘making of’ insights were really amazing!

Module for drawing statistical charts¹

by Tamara Kocurová and Adriana Kašparová, students of Tomáš Hála’s at Mendel university in Brno, was another beautiful presentation about their new MetaPost module for ConT_EXt, including extensive and good documentation. You can use this module to easily display statistical data in a plethora of possible diagrams (`\areachart`, `\barchart`, `\bubblechart`, `\columnchart`, `\linechart`, `\piechart`, `\radarchart`, `\scatterchart`, `\stockchart`). Parametrization, choice of colors and many more features are well thought-out. You can keep the data within the T_EX file or read it from a CSV table. Both of them were at a T_EX conference for the first time – and I believe not for the last time!

Excursion

Excursions into the vicinity are a traditional part of ConT_EXt meetings. They distance us from our screens, give our brains some much needed oxygen and get us learning about the local region.

In times of Corona the planning of such excursions is especially difficult. We could not or did not want to visit some destinations. (Prague was already a “no go zone” by the Wednesday.) But Jano’s planning was top-notch and provided not only for fantastic weather but also two near-deserted attractions:

Karlštejn Castle

is a solid hour by car from Sibřina in the west of Prague and was founded by Karl IV. in 1348. Usually, it is a tourist draw for all visitors of Prague (esp. from Asia), comparable to that of Neuschwanstein castle in Bavaria.

The wide road that ascends from the parking lot by the Berouna river to the castle located high on a crag, passes through the town of the same name, Karlštejn. It is lined with many restaurants, souvenir shops, museums, galleries and even a microbrewery but most were closed and there were extremely few guests in the restaurants and cafés. The wide road was spookily deserted, while I imagined the usual masses of tourists hustling up to the castle – Corona times!



Karlštejn castle



Horse carriage without tourists

In the inner ward of the castle, we found ourselves almost alone and had a wonderful and very informative guided tour through the castle complex and European history, only for our small group.



Micro brewery



Guided tourists

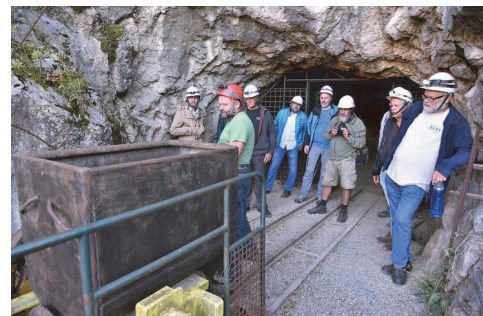
After a small refreshment of a locally made ice-cream in the summer heat, we continued to our second destination to cool-off some more:

Limestone Quarry Mořina

is mined both on the surface and underground. Our destination was the underground mining tunnels, so Jano suggested that we bring warm clothes and torches, and he provided additional headlights and batteries.



Tour guide's introduction of the mine

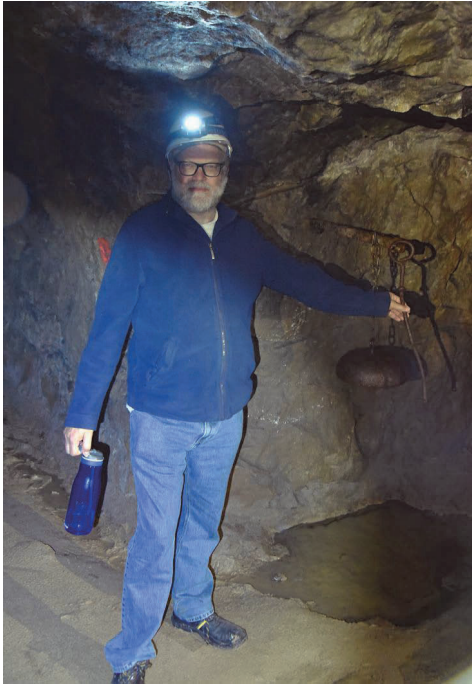


Demonstration of a tipper

contextgroup > context meeting 2020

In the tunnel, we learned that our guide was excited for our group and wanted to meet Hans! Why? Because there's a special story about one Hans Hagen who is said to have died in these tunnels during the Second World War. He still haunts the hallways and is known to "disappear" the odd visitor who strays behind. But 'our' Hans behaved well, and all of us returned healthy and refreshed from the mine.

For the whole story in English, you need to hear it from the guide on location in the tunnels. I could only find it in Czech online.²



Legendary original...



... and original legend

Outlook

The next ConT_EXt meetings are in Bassenge-Boirs, Belgium between 20-25th September 2021, and Dreifelden, Germany between 12-18th September 2022. Hopefully, these will be fully attended in the best of health and without any Corona restrictions because there is no real replacement for offline conferences. The online substitutes nowadays lack many impressions and experiences.

Report for DANTE, first published in 'Die T_EXnische Komödie' 4/2020, translated by Hraban. All photos by Harald.

¹ <https://akela.mendelu.cz/~thala/statcharts/>

² <https://www.lomy-amerika.cz/category/hans-hagen/>