



Windermere Route: Terezin to Prague

MARC DUSCHENES

with photos by HOWARD BARLOW

Jewish people often say they feel called to undertake a journey, as has been recorded from biblical times to the present day. My calling to undertake this particular journey came after my first visit to Prague, where I discovered family roots that I felt strongly connected with, followed by a hospitalisation that could only be described as a life-affirming personal event, having survived a nasty dose of Covid.

In early 2021, alone in a Covid ward, behind the blurred safety of an oxygen mask, I morbidly but optimistically documented my desert island discs and drafted other notes for my family, and compiled a bucket list of journeys and travels I hoped to undertake, once free from being tethered to an oxygen supply. One journey would be to return to Bohemia, specifically Terezin, to undertake a personal physical challenge which would mark my return to health.

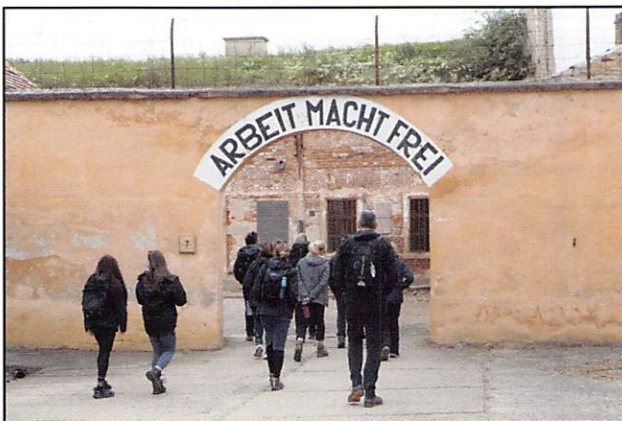
Terezin (Theresienstadt in German) is a fortress town that was used by the Nazis as a ghetto, prison and transport hub, and later intended to be an extermination camp. You may know the Old Town of Prague for its beautiful architecture, including the Jewish Quarter. This was specifically preserved, because the Nazis wanted to create a museum of the race they wiped out. I wanted to trek between the two places.

Initially my concept was to trek from Prague to Terezin, which would be around 90km, possibly using it

somehow to facilitate Holocaust education. I didn't know it to be proven at the time, but I had found the rhythmic training for endurance walking to be de-traumatising. I was drawn to its therapeutic benefits as well as the physical preparation, demonstrating my planned return to fitness.

I chatted about this idea during lockdown with my friend and our former rabbi, Haim Shalom, who was adamant that no Holocaust memorial venue should become the scene of any personal achievement. He suggested that I reverse the route and, in doing so, physically and symbolically turn my back on Terezin, and navigate away. I understood instinctively the psychological benefit of doing this. We also agreed that a trek as a Holocaust education concept could be undertaken without reference to any Zionism, politics or even religion, and that the focus could be neutrally that of the journey itself. It was also time to promote Holocaust education in new ways to the wider world for well-discussed reasons.

To prepare the route before publicising it to friends, I formed a small team in September 2022, to test it quietly. We were planning to cycle the route in both directions, northwards from Prague through the stunning Bohemian countryside, visit Terezin, and head back south again. My family village was somewhere in between. In preparing to lead this on foot one day, I needed to document the journey. Howard Barlow was the obvious companion given the bike-





camera combination, and he didn't need much persuading.

We under-estimated the emotional impact the journey could have in one day. Struck by the quietness of the housed streets of Terezin, the impact of the monumental cemetery, and the fact that Terezin was famously used by the Nazis to *prove* to the Red Cross that Jews and others were being ghettoed humanely (perhaps the original fake news), we knew we had found a route that could be merged with Holocaust education, to find balance and peace, whilst educating and de-traumatising, rather than re-traumatising, as education can sometimes unintentionally be.

I sensed from analysing my children's emotional exposure to different Holocaust education projects, that one size would not fit all. There would be a place



for such an event that was not referenced as a *death-march* or that was overly political or Zionist. Whilst it is a fact that Israel was formed after the Holocaust, it does not mean that Jews in the diaspora and the countries that came to assist refugees, were any less able to participate in remembrance, and this could take any form. I wanted remembrance to resemble movement, rather than a flame or a prayer, and embrace refugee settlement and tackle trauma in a subtle manner.

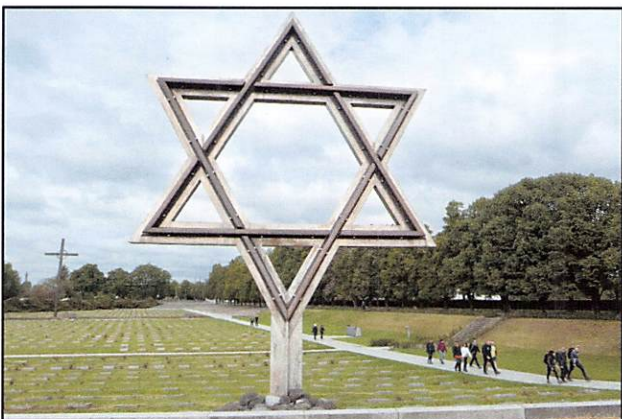
A new organisation was born, which I called ReGenesis, professionally to guide participants through Bohemia. Its motto would be *Looking Back, Moving Forwards*. The route and our September achievement was discussed with Manchester's leading community group, The Fed, coinciding with the release of the *MyVoice* books documenting the lives of survivors who settled in the North West. One survivor, Ike Alterman, even at 90, was regularly discussing at public events his peaceful and forgiving version of living with the atrocities. Ike had been held in Terezin and brought to the UK by the RAF as one of the BBC-documented Windermere Children, to convalesce. His granddaughter Danni has signed up to my team.

The Fed and Regenesiis agreed to take a step into the unknown and run a first public event in May 2023. That didn't give me long to train to lead and organise such a trek. Over a dozen other participants trustingly joined. The plan was to hand-deliver Ike's book to the Ghetto Museum in Terezin, before symbolically turning our backs on Terezin, after laying stones from the UK, and walking as free people, an epic double marathon distance to Prague, where we would visit the synagogues connected with my family.

Starting with a tour of Terezin, we said *Kaddish* under the Star of David Monument, and laid stones at the other monuments in equal measure.

The team would need to dig deep to achieve the distance, and we were wished well by Ike himself in a video call to his granddaughter. Within a few hours of leaving Terezin on foot, tracing steps along the iconic train tracks into the forest, our conversation noticeably changed. We had very quickly bonded at an unprecedented level.

continued overleaf





Although this can often happen on a trek and be the difference between hiking and trekking, our emotions were heightened by the impact of the start point and the connectivity within the mission.

I had prepared logistically for the group to split into two due to people's mixed abilities, but incredibly it remained bonded throughout, as we descended along the river into Prague on day three, making friends for life with each other as we shared stories of resilience and hope.

We arrived in the Old Town square and Howard recreated an iconic photograph in which the Windermere Children featured, before all enjoyed kosher Trednik, experiencing all sorts of emotions. Some of these were predictable but others washed over us with euphoria and sorrow: looking back, moving forwards. All of us were proud of the £32,000 raised for MyVoice but of greater importance was the creation of a new story of refugee survival, fit for the modern era.

I can't quite describe how symbolic this journey was, then or now, so I am not going to attempt to. Howard joined us on the second trek and his photographs tell you the story, and more can be found in the gallery at www.regenesis.org.uk.

Suffice to say that whilst our journey was personal to each of us, and the fundraising for The Fed a huge success, the loss of innocent life in the Holocaust must never be forgotten. By the end we felt the zest of life in contrast to the starting prayer of *Kaddish*. My intention of *Zachor* (remembering and doing simultaneously) to be de-traumatising, has evolved so far between our walk in May and the present situation, that my desire to repeat the experience with others, safely and peacefully, has not been deterred by current events, but strengthened.

Kafka, the Czech philosopher whose words Haim brought to my attention, tells the parable of journeying with no destination, just *away from here*. Perhaps I will see you on a walking or trekking event one day?

A joint event for the members Manchester's Reform synagogues is planned by ReGenesis for next year. Whilst I know it is too early in the current situation to commit to travel, and we will sadly need to prioritise security, it is never too early to form like-minded groups and undertake training and planning to move forwards.

Whilst it seems impossible to imagine how we can move forwards beyond the current seemingly impossible position in Israel and rekindled antisemitism, I wanted to share that we always find a way, and have become expert as a people, in *Zachor*, and we unanimously wish to journey *away from here*.

