

History Comes Alive in Terezin, Czech Republic

by Camille Pepe Sperrazza

Years ago, in my fourth grade geography class, I read about a place called Reykjavik, Iceland, "land of the midnight sun."

I had no idea how to pronounce this city, and had no interest in learning about it. I was positive I would never go to Iceland, which might as well have been on Mars, as far as I was concerned.

Back then, I never imagined that a young girl from Brooklyn would, or even could, grow up to become a globe trotter, with a passion to explore every inch of this earth.

I eventually did journey to Iceland, and about 50 other countries all over the globe, always seeking to learn and to understand. This summer provided another learning experience. I went to Austria, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, three destinations that were communist-ruled only 21 years ago; therefore, off-limits to travelers.

My visit deepened the seeds of knowledge that had been planted during another class, this time a college history one. The professor, an expert on the Holocaust, told tales of survival, passed down from his family, about life in a Jewish ghetto. He mentioned that not one Jewish person from Denmark was killed in the Holocaust. This was because the king of Denmark demanded to know their whereabouts, and "looked out for them," in whatever way one could imagine that people could be "looked out for" under such awful circumstances.

So here I was this summer, in Terezin, Czech Republic, which was once a Jewish ghetto/concentration camp, touring the facility with a survivor of this camp. When she said that this was the concentration camp where the Danish Jews were held, every one of them kept alive because the king of Denmark "paid for their safety," it was a history class come to life.

She was 20 years old when she was taken here, and listening to her first-hand account, I gained more insight than could ever be captured in text books. I had seen photos of "Jewish ghettos" and read books, but standing inside this fortress brought an understanding that can only come from experience. This was a scenic place, with houses, trees, and lots of green grass. Its beauty was the perfect cover for evil, making it more dangerous than Auschwitz, said one of our guides.

We toured the barracks which were once bursting with hungry people, forced to sleep on dirty floors, without bedding. When not one other person could be squeezed inside, the Germans evicted residents from the surrounding homes, explaining that Terezin was now a "Jewish settlement." The captives were moved right into these homes. Eventually, the entire town turned into a concentration camp. It was all so gradual, it's bone-chilling to imagine.

When the war ended, many survivors committed suicide, unable to live with the horrors they had witnessed. Other survivors had nowhere to go. Their homes, their possessions, their families, were all gone. Our guide had an uncle in England who was able to "claim her," and she went there, where she was told to "forget" what she had experienced, and to "put the past behind." For years, she never spoke about Terezin.

It's intriguing that she did not consider herself to be Jewish. She considered herself Czechoslovakian. But when the Germans started digging through paperwork and forms, they determined she was Jewish. Even now, she told us, she is not religious.



Interested in traveling here or learning more? [Contact](#) me today.

This article was accurate when it was written, but everything in life changes. Enjoy the journey!

Copyright: Camille Pepe Sperrazza