

# Terezin

*By Mamie Philp*

From Friday 17<sup>th</sup> February until Monday 20<sup>th</sup> February 2017 I stayed in the town of Terezin in the Czech Republic as part of a study group organised by the Holocaust Educational Trust. The Trust had provided an opportunity for a group of UK Educators to work with colleagues from the Danish Institute for International Studies to further our study of important Holocaust sites and think about how this might inform our teaching of the Holocaust. Terezin was a ghetto, concentration camp and transit camp during the Second World War; the Nazis called it Theresienstadt.

On Monday 11<sup>th</sup> September, I returned to Terezin, a day trip as part of a long weekend in Prague.

## **A snapshot history of Terezin**

Terezin is on the main road between Prague, the capital, and Dresden in Germany. Built in the late eighteenth century as a fortified town to defend the Austrian Empire against its major rival, Prussia, it was meant to house 14,500 soldiers. It was never needed for that purpose. On the other side of the Ohre River there is the Small Fortress which was built as a prison and used as such until relatively recently. The Nazis used it for political prisoners and then some of them were incarcerated there after the War. It is now a museum.



In 1941 the Nazis turned the town of Terezin into a ghetto, concentration camp and transit camp to death camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau. It was selected because it already had walls. Jews from Prague, occupied Bohemia and Moravia, Germany, Austria, Denmark and other parts of Western Europe were sent here. Many were famous artists, writers, scientists, musicians etc and so there was much by way of culture in Terezin; albeit that sounds like a paradox.

At first the military barracks in the town were used as a ghetto for Jewish people and then in 1942 the 7000 non-Jewish Czech people who lived in the town were expelled and the whole town was used to incarcerate Jewish people. It became a place where it was decided who would be transported east; publication of the daily list feared by those interned within its walls.

In February I stayed in the town but did not visit the Small Fortress. In September I stayed in Prague, toured the Small Fortress and retraced my steps in Terezin. Having such a huge impact in February, I wondered if I would feel differently in September.

## Terezin in February

I knew we were going to stay in Terezin itself and that the town had been a ghetto. However, before I left home, I hadn't really considered what I expected Terezin to be like as a town today. At least, not consciously thought about it.

After arriving at the hostel and checking in, we stepped out into the street and I immediately felt that same feeling in the pit of my stomach that I felt the first time I visited Auschwitz-Birkenau. It's difficult to describe; a sombre presence settling, knowing that bad things had happened here. I hadn't expected that. We crossed the park and walked up the road; for the most part, literally the road; no pavements. We saw no-one; the park was empty; the streets were empty – apart from us. And it was Friday afternoon. Later we went out for a walk, an orientation of the town. We saw two boys at a play park juxtaposed amongst ruins. A woman pushed a buggy in front of two buildings, one renovated, the other empty, abandoned. An old man examined the goods outside



the antique shop. Inside it was filled with guns, uniforms, helmets, bric-a-brac and toys. Late Friday afternoon when people might have been returning from work yet there was no hustle or bustle, those four people and a few cars. Already I was thinking that I had never been anywhere like this; a town where people live but with a haunted feel, frozen in time. At some point later, it would occur to me that I had at least expected a living, breathing town with buildings of obvious historic significance, perhaps a square with a weekend market, perhaps a couple of bars with outside seating covered up but there ready for summer.

Later, an early dinner and we walk through the town looking for somewhere to have a nightcap. It's Friday night not long after 7pm and there is no-one about. Apart from the incongruous sight of a young couple getting into a car in evening dress; a swirl of a sparkly gown and high heels. We walk past more renovated buildings and more abandoned buildings, the former beautiful, the latter with so much potential to be beautiful again. Reaching the square; muddy, neglected pathways, crumbling roadways, it is dark, empty, still. We find the small bar, become its only customers. Tomorrow we will arrive too late, 9pm, and it will be closed. How do people make a living in this town? The next night we found another bar frequented by locals; a step back in time to 1970s wood panelling and beer served from a counter in the corner. Here, perhaps, was a snapshot of Terezin's post war communist history.

It still seems incredible to think that we stayed in the ghetto. Across the street from our hostel the building occupied by children where babies were often looked after by toddlers. At the end of the street the back of the barracks which would have been crammed with people and where prisoners played football league games in the courtyard.





The Ghetto Museum with so much space dedicated to the children of the ghetto; thousands of names on the walls, their drawings, pictures and writings giving a vibrant and honest account of their short lives, displayed in the place where these children had been, evidence rescued from its hiding places.

We had seminars and meals in the Magdeburg Barracks where the Jewish Council which ran the ghetto under the supervision of the Nazis had their headquarters. Why was the ghetto run by Jewish people? Well, why would the Nazis bother with the day to day running of the ghetto and camp? Let Jewish people decide which Jewish people got food that day or whose names would appear on the list of deportees to the East. And in the same building the displays of paintings, the literature, the theatre costumes and music of artists and composers, so many talented people who lost their lives yet have left a legacy of their work. Some of that work permitted by the Nazis and some hidden to be found later, testimony of life in the ghetto. A children's theatre group performed Brundibar, a children's opera which had been performed by children in the ghetto. Echoes of the past.

Hearing the testimony of two Holocaust survivors, Dagmar and Doris, in the place where they had gone through so much was indescribably emotional. Doris at one point called the ghetto home! Having been forced to go outside the walls and stand all day for a roll call, she was pleased to be allowed to get back 'home' at the end of it. Better that than appear on the deportation list. And Dagmar who passed through, one of the children deported to Auschwitz and then Bergen-Belsen. Listening to Doris say that Dagmar's experience was worse than hers, witnessing their friendship bonds.

Terezin is a place which tears at the heart and challenges the mind. A town with a proud military history selected by the Nazis to be a ghetto, a concentration camp, a transit camp; part of the so-called 'Final Solution'. From ghetto and concentration camp it became a military garrison once again, until 1996. The end of the Cold War meant the town was no longer needed for the military. A town of primarily eighteenth-century houses and barracks built for 7000 which crammed in more than 50,000 Jewish people at one time during the Second World War is now home to less than half the number it could accommodate, just under 3000 of a population. Among the restored houses, therefore, the many abandoned buildings, broken windows and streets reflecting neglect.



This is a place which encapsulates so much more that needs to be learnt about the Holocaust. The complexity of a place where the art of children and adults was produced, some of it sanctioned, some of it not. Why was painting, writing, music, performance allowed to flourish in the ghetto?



Propaganda – the ‘model ghetto’; and the artists were going to be killed anyway. Then the hidden art, the images and words which were not allowed, punishable by imprisonment, torture, death. Yet some has survived and give us some of the truth of life in the ghetto. Voices and faces of people who now live on through their work.

The evidence of the Holocaust in the morgue, the secret synagogue and the crematorium. People trying to retain their Jewish faith and customs in the face of barbarity; the stark reality of the desire to wipe out human beings. The empty streets, crumbling buildings, the absence of bars, shops, a market: echoes of an empty community. In this place a military community replaced by a Jewish community created by the Nazis for destruction. Perhaps symbolic of Jewish communities which no longer exist across Europe. Should Terezin be defined in this way? A period of four years of the town’s history, the Holocaust seems to have created a ghost town. There must be a future for Terezin. But what can it be?

Tourists come from Prague to the Small Fortress next door, the Gestapo headquarters and prison. More of them should also cross the river and come to the town; former ghetto and concentration camp. Bring more life back to this town, try to repair its scars and commemorate those who lived and died here during the Holocaust. Is it possible to rebuild a community here? Should it happen?

When I left Terezin my instinct was that I wanted to go back. It had seemed so surreal that I needed to see if the town was actually how I had remembered it and maybe I would be able to suggest answers to my own questions about its future.

On the way back to the airport we visited Lidice, a site of revenge. A village razed to the ground, men and boys shot, women and children taken to camps to avenge the assassination of Heydrich, master planner of the ‘Final Solution’. Here the stone statues of the memorial to the children killed in the Second World War gaze out over a changed landscape. A landscape deliberately changed by the Nazis to create a space of German soil to relocate German people in the East, to increase the living space for the master race. Then changed again after the war. A museum which immerses visitors in the story of this village and the testimony of its survivors. Standing in this space, looking out across the fields with the children; it is beyond belief that atrocities still happen time and time again.



If you can, if you get the opportunity, spend time in Terezin and visit Lidice.

## Returning to Terezin in September

This time I visited the Small Fortress first and it is a museum, interesting and informative. But it is not a place where people live and this is the difference for me; people live in Terezin. They are building lives among the history that surrounds them.



The most obvious difference returning to the town in September was that in February it was grey and cold, cleared piles of snow lay here and there and slush made it muddy underfoot. In September, the sun was shining and the grass was bright green in the main square. The café that had been closed by 9pm on the Saturday night was open at lunchtime and two small tables with umbrellas were set out on the

pavement. The café that had not been open at all advertised as open for business, a couple of people standing outside the open door. But the bed and breakfast place remained closed yet well cared for. Who would want to stay on the road to the crematorium?

Other things were the same as February. For a sunny day in September at lunchtime, there were few people around. Pavements needed built and repaired. Not many cars but more than before. We wandered through the streets where renovated buildings still stood alongside abandoned ones. The sunshine made it all the easier to see what the buildings could be, with care and attention.

This time the evidence of post war, Cold War Terezin presented itself as the tannoy system leapt into life about 1245pm. No idea what was being said nor why. Were these instructions? Was it for the benefit of the few tourists there? We were walking by the abandoned barracks – were these messages for us? It felt like it. This gave an eerie feeling to the place once more.

Returning to the questions I posed in February: is it possible to rebuild a community here? Should it happen? My answer to both questions would be yes as long as it is done with sensitivity and respect for the past. With appropriate investment it may be possible to renovate these beautiful buildings and provide homes for people less than one hour from Prague. Why not make Terezin a vibrant community? It is vital to keep the museums and the secret synagogue and the crematorium, all the testimony of what happened here. In the renovation and building works excavate the art works and evidence yet to be uncovered. Keep what must be kept. Preserve what must be preserved. Yet, perhaps provide more accommodation for people to stay and find out about what happened here as well as more space for people to live here.

I have noted two things in common from survivors of the Holocaust I have been privileged to meet. First, to tell their story; it is imperative that people know what happened. Second, to not be defined by their experience; they have led fulfilling lives and are some of the most positive people I have met.

Let Terezin be a testament to that; rebuild a community to show that what happened here does not define it.