

Rabbi Eizik's Voyage Revisited

by Bernie Tolpin

The introductory message of last year's Orot journal was a reflection on Martin Buber's story of Rabbi Eizik of Cracow who had a dream that there was a treasure to be found under the bridge leading to the King's castle in Prague. So Rabbi Eizik undertook the journey, only to find the bridge guarded by the king's soldiers. When he finally revealed his dream to the Captain of the guard, the captain, in turn, confided that he had had a similar dream, in which there was a treasure hidden under the stove of a certain Jew in Cracow named Eizik. So the rabbi returned home and found the treasure that was hidden under his own stove.

Last May I undertook to follow in Rabbi Eizik's footsteps, (courtesy of the American Jewish Congress travel program), in a trip that actually started in Warsaw, to Cracow via Lublin, Budapest, and finally to Prague. I had the fantasy that Martin Buber actually knew of a treasure to be found under the (King) Charles Bridge, and that somehow, after all these years, I would find it.

The trip was led by AJC's legendary tour leader and resident scholar, Jacob Shoshan. His knowledge of history, culture, language, comparative religion, and human achievement was encyclopedic, his desire to impart the benefits of his learning unending, his skills as a tour leader magnificent. Our fellow travelers were compatible and involved in as many varieties of Jewish and American cultural experiences as one can imagine. And with deluxe hotels, vast buffet breakfasts, streetcorner violinists of Lincoln Center quality, boat rides along the blue Danube, and Hungarian poppy seed strudel straight from Jacob's favorite bakery in Budapest, I am certain the amenities of this trip far exceeded those experienced by Rabbi Eizik.

By the time we got to walk over the Charles Bridge on the last day of the trip, I was convinced that the treasure that Rabbi Eizik had dreamed about was indeed the whole City of Prague. From this spot on the bridge, both sides of the city were visible, as was the river traffic underneath, a Jazz band was playing Dixieland, and people of many nations were mingling in relative harmony amidst the cobbled-stoned streets and buildings with exteriors adorned with carvings, statues, and artwork suitable for exhibition in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. By any travel guide standard, this trip was extraordinary, and this city was a treasure.

But this was a Jewish Heritage tour, and intermingled with the urban jewels of the former Polish and Austro-Hungarian Empires, was the voyage through the 700 years of Jewish history in this part of Europe, the triumphs and the suffering; their relationships with the larger communities of which they, (we), were a part; of Jewish participation and even leadership roles in letters, art, music, theater, politics, and commerce; the development of Hassidism and the great rabbis associated with it, and the ultimate horror of the Holocaust.

In the course of this 14-day tour, our group lit Yahrzeit candles and recited Kaddish at five concentration camps, five cemeteries, with graves both marked and unmarked, the Wall of the former Warsaw Ghetto, and four monuments commemorating the sacrifices and heroism of countless individuals.

We visited death camps, work camps, and concentration camps. We walked the streets of the former Warsaw Ghetto. We went from the Warsaw Ghetto to Majadanek to Auschwitz, to Birkenow (Auschwitz II), to Plascow, to Theresienstaadt. It is so painfully difficult to recount the images that evoked such anguish, sorrow, tears, and memories of lost relatives.

Visitors are walked through completely intact prisoner shower rooms, leading into identically appearing rooms where the "shower heads" would then emit the infamous Zyklon B, (Majadanek); a prisoner latrine consisting of an eighty yard long, two foot high cement block with six inch holes in the surface squeezed tightly together, where 120 prisoners would be marched in at one time and given 30 seconds to "do their business".(Birkenow); the storage rooms, now museums, which held, in turn, hundreds of thousands of eyeglasses, shoes, prosthetic

limbs, carpets and coat linings made of human hair; the Ash pits of Birkenow, each pit containing the remains of 40,000 Jews; and, of course, the crematoriums themselves. (For me personally, there was the realization that my wife, Leah, of blessed memory, and her family, came within a hair's breath of being sent to Auschwitz had they been caught by the Nazis during their exodus from Antwerp.)

So Rabbi Eizik did not have the ease of travel of buses, planes, and (maybe) trains, and 5-star hotels. He also did not have the anguish of bearing witness to the destruction of his own people and the world as he had known it. Rabbi Eizik had it easy.

But even amidst the sorrow, there was hope. Hundreds, if not thousands, of visitors, from many nations, young and old, thronged through Auschwitz on the day we were there. For some European nations, it is mandatory that high school students visit at least one concentration camp before they graduate.

Synagogues dating back to the fifteenth century have been restored, and even though most now serve only as museums, there is a return of a semblance of Jewish life. Many of the young Jews are of mixed parentage, or include young adults whose grandparents, or even parents, told them only on their deathbeds that they were Jewish, and their children now wish to get in touch with their roots. On the first Shabbat, we attended services at the Remu'h synagogue in Cracow, (actually Kasimierz, the Jewish section) where the minyan consisted of local Jews, ourselves, and two groups from Israel that we would continue to cross paths with on this trip, one from Yerushalaim, one from Ashdod. On the second Shabbat, after a Friday night dinner in the King Solomon Kosher restaurant in Prague, we attended Shabbos morning services at the historic Alt-Neue Shul. Rabbi Eizik could very well have davened at either of these two synagogues.

It is entirely possible that Rabbi Eizik's dream was predictive of the distant future, where from the opposite end of the bridge from the king's castle, one can now catch a tram, and with connections, end up at the Prague airport from which point it is only a three and a half hour flight to Yerushalaim. This is actually the route taken by our youngsters who go on the "March of the Living". They walk the two miles from Auschwitz to Birkenow, visit other camps, and then fly to Yerushalaim. I regret that I did not conclude my trip in this manner. I would have been there for Shavuot, an absolute treasure unto itself.

In my view, however, the treasure that was to be found under the bridge was the accumulated, life changing, knowledge and understanding that Rabbi Eizik most assuredly would have acquired in his voyage from Cracow to Prague. As described by Martin Buber, Rabbi Eizik was a pauper; in his travels he undoubtedly would have enjoyed the hospitality of Jews from all walks of life. And who were these Jews? Just by reading the headstones in the Jewish cemeteries along the way we get a measure of the greatness of these communities. They included Esther Rachel Kaminska, the mother of Yiddish theater, the Yiddish writers Yud Lamed Peretz and Shmuel Anski, Astronomer David Gans, and countless rabbi's of international reknown, including Yehuda Loew ben Bezalel, Shalom Shachna, Moses Isserles (the ReMu), and Solomon Luria. They, and Rabbi Eizik, would have studied together, he would have learned from them, exchanged ideas, and examined life in all the forms of Jewish expression that existed in his time. And this was a time that there was a thriving Jewish community in Cracow with eight synagogues, that anywhere from 30% to 80% of Budapest's industrial capacity was Jewish owned, that the contribution of Jews to the arts, literature, politics, and commerce of Prague was gargantuan, and the great Talmudic and Hassidic rabbi's were making their imprint on religious thought, observance, and practice. How I envy him.

So what, then, was the treasure that Rabbi Eizik found under his stove when he got home? If the treasure in Prague was everything that was learned along the way there, was the treasure at home simply that increase in knowledge, insight, and awareness that was gained on the return trip?

It is interesting to note that the treasure under the stove was actually the dream of the Captain of the King's guard, a non-Jew. Could it be that the Captain himself was the treasure that Eizik dreamed of, since he is the one who guided Eizik to the ultimate treasure?

Or, could it even be that our Captain of the King's Guard exists as a metaphor for all the non-Jews who ever helped a Jew or Jews find a treasure of sorts. This question occupied our introspective energies wherever we went, and especially in the camps. What was the role of our non-Jewish neighbors when we were being rounded up during the Holocaust? We well know of the documented instances of unspeakable brutality on the part of our Gentile neighbors; in Poland, the Ukraine, Lithuania, Hungary, and elsewhere. But there were also so many cases of individual and community wide bravery on the part of Christians trying to save Jews, in the face of the most unspeakable danger to themselves and their families. Everywhere we turned there were monuments to those who helped save Jews; Raoull Wallenburg, Oskar Schindler, Father Colbert, the priest who took the place of a Jewish prisoner at Auschwitz to face a Nazi firing squad, the organizers of the Kindertransport from many countries that saved 10,000 children, Englishman Nicholas Winton, Quaker leaders Bertha Bracey and Jean Hoare, and Truus Wijsmuller-Mayer, a Dutch woman who faced down Eichmann in Vienna and brought out 600 children on one train. The Polish underground group Zagota tried to save Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto. After the Orthodox prelate of Bulgaria, Father Simian, ordered his priests to save Jews, the Nazi freight trains went back to Germany empty. Fifty-five thousand Jews were saved. My cousin Rose was hidden by her Polish teacher, Christina, in a town 15 kilometers from Cracow for the four years of the war.

It was one thing to know about these acts of heroism from books or movies, but being there and feeling the pervasive thoroughness of the Nazi infiltration of all aspects of daily life made one marvel at the heroism of anyone extending themselves to neighbors in peril. It made us wonder how each one of us would act under similar circumstances.

There was no treasure under my stove when I returned home. So help me, I looked. I believe the actual treasure, as it was for Rabbi Eizik, is the privilege of being able to sit by my "stove" in the quiet comfort and personal freedom of my own home, and think about the relationship of this recent voyage through Jewish history to my own voyage through life, of my relationship to my religion, to my fellow Jews and to the larger community. And even though I did not have the opportunity to meet some of these greats of Jewish history in person, as did Eizik, the treasures that they left behind are available for me, and for all of us, to find.

As of this writing, of the countless memorable experiences of the trip, there are a few that seem to repeatedly resonate. During a visit to the Galicia Jewish Museum in Cracow, with the most incredible collection of art works depicting Jewish Life in this area, I found in their bookstore a copy of the YIVO publication Poyln, which contained, on its opening page, a photograph of the town of Ostrog (now in the Ukraine) with a picture of my father's childhood home in the foreground. So there I was, in Poland, reading a book about Poland, viewing a picture of my family ancestral home in Poland. Second, while visiting the site of the Plaskow Concentration camp, the camp portrayed in the movie *Schindler's List*, I met a woman kibbutznik from the environs of Acco, who, when I introduced myself as having been a volunteer dentist on Kibbutz Nachshonim, near Petach Tikvah, asked me for a consultation about her teeth. I was absolutely flushed with joy to be able to be helpful to a fellow Jew on the site where so many of our people were brutally abused and murdered.

But the most vivid recollection of all, especially as we gather as a community to pray on the eve of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, is of our visit to Terezinstadt, the camp in which the Nazis, in their brutal, sadistic, cynicism, gathered the most brilliant, most intellectual, most artistic Jews of Europe to showcase for the world what a glorious life they were creating for them. It is here that are displayed the amazing works of ultimate creativity, artwork (familiar to us from the book *I Never Saw A Butterfly*), literature, musical compositions, and films of orchestras and choruses to rival the best of Europe. To no avail. In the end, they were all sent to Birkenau for immediate execution. What an agonizing day this was. At the end of the day, however, we were brought to a former Nazi officers housing unit, which, after the war, was turned over to Poles that had been displaced by the Nazis to create the camp. When the last family moved out, in 1993, 48 years after the camp was evacuated, a basement, windowless, 14ft by 14ft storeroom was found, which was maintained by the Jewish inmates of Terezinstadt. In it, they created a secret synagogue. Etched into the walls, in meticulous lettering, as if done by a scribe, were the following passages, from *Tahanun*, and from the *Shemonei Esrei*.

"Remove your anger and have mercy and compassion."

"Our brothers of the House of Israel who are in trouble and captivity, who stand whether on sea or on land, may God be merciful to them and deliver them from distress to freedom, from darkness to light, from subjection to redemption. Quickly, speedily, and in our time. V'nomar omain."

"And yet, we have not forgotten your name. Please do not forget us."

"God, slow to anger and full of mercy, treat us according to your abundant mercy, and save us for your name's sake."

"May our eyes behold your return to Zion in compassion."