

A Writer's Journey to Prague
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Excerpts From A Prague Journal



The following texts are by Max Regan. They are excerpted from *Gratuitous Beauty: 14 days and nights in Prague* an anthology of poems, essays and stories written by the students on the 2009 Journey to Prague and published in August 2010 by Hollowdeck Press.

Excerpts from the anthology

Preface

In 1998 I stood in the middle of the Charles Bridge on a cold, bright May morning, just as the sun was rising. It slid golden and unforgiving across church spires and statues, up the steep walls of the Castle and down the cobblestone streets of the Little Quarter. It wove through the limbs of flowering trees draped over the bridge, soaking the Vltava river in deep orange light. It was in that moment that I realized I had fallen in love with the city of Prague. Even though it was my first visit to the city, I knew there was something magical about it, something rare. I felt strangely at home there. It didn't feel like arriving, it felt like returning. Like some part of me had been waiting my whole life to return.

Prague is a city that honors and reveres writers. At the forefront of every Czech revolution, there have always been writers, poets, playwrights, novelists and journalists leading the way. Every year I bring a group of working writers to the city in for a two week writing journey. Last May, I had the honor of traveling with the five amazing writers whose work you will find in this book. They embarked on this adventure with great faith, bravery, humor and a willingness to see everything they could see. They carried their notebooks and their curiosity everywhere, stepping fully into their own artistry and taking shelter in the beauty and urgency of words.

For those two weeks, Prague itself was our classroom. We wrote in churches, parks, cafes, museums and cemeteries. We allowed the city to slip into our bloodstream and we gave ourselves permission to write about everything we saw, felt, heard, dreamed and imagined.

Prague is a city that spans a river. Its many bridges connect the old and the new, the wealthy and the poor, the past and the present. Prague always reminds me that it is possible to build bridges to the places we have only imagined in our dreams. To cross the many rivers that wind through us and bring our visions to life. To travel and meet each new day with the permission and elegant eye of the writer.

It is our pleasure to offer this book to you. For us, this journey was only the beginning. May your travels someday take you to that beautiful city of light, and in the meantime, may you too raise your voice, fill your eyes and build a bridge towards what you love most.

*Max Regan,
Boulder, Co.
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Arrival

Across the deep blue, over coastlines and dreams, they fly. Waiting in lines at Frankfurt or Heathrow, hauling luggage on and off the racks. They all land safely and I breathe in gratitude. On the drive into the city they look at everything, taking it all in. We land on the winding quiet street of Karoliny Svetle. Between the coffee shop and the swanky hotel, right next door to the vegetarian restaurant, is our ancient building. Stairs. So many sun-washed stairs. It helps to sing as we climb. Behind the blue door is our bright flat. The view from the bathtub is the best one in the house, stretching across the river and under the domes of the church. Nancy and Susan and Marcia are staying here, Val and Pat are next door. When everyone is rested, we walk together across the Legions bridge to dinner at the Savoy. Under the tall windows we are served by white-aproned waiters. We eat and laugh and eat some more, and then we take our slow walk home in the cool dark of the Prague night. We wander through Kampa park and over the bridge, weaving between the shadows of saints. We fall asleep under a ceiling of carved angels. All those words, waiting out there in the velvet dark. Tomorrow we begin.

Prague Castle

We visit scores of churches, cathedrals, crypts and chapels, but this is the one to which our hearts belong. In the center of the grounds of Prague Castle sits St. Vitus Cathedral. This huge, 14th century cathedral was built by Petr Parler, one of the greatest Gothic builders in central Europe. It took 500 years to complete, only coming fully to life in 1929. This is the place where we allow light to fill our senses. We stand in the still air, underneath the soaring vaults and write love letters to the stained glass windows, including the stunning Art Nouveau window designed by Alfons Mucha. This is a place of devotion, of suffering and alchemy.

In the castle we see the workshops along the Golden Lane where alchemists tried to turn base metals into gold. We stand in the king's hall and look up at the intricate strength of the stone ribs woven across the ceiling. We question everything. What is a body? What is a building? We descend the wide, stone stairs, thinking about voices, magic, all the different kinds of prayer and all the things that time can and cannot change.

Old Town

We live in the heart of Old Town, Staré Město, just a few blocks from the bridge. From the broad plaza of Old Town Square we wander into stores and jazz clubs. We watch the horse-drawn carriages and the pickpockets. We navigate winding alleys full of art galleries and the bewildering aisles of Tesco. We walk through market stalls and buy fresh fruit. We find a shop that sells Belgian chocolate. Just behind Tyn church, we visit the bookshops and bric-a-brac shops in the quiet courtyard of Tynska. This is where we explore and get lost and are homesick. This is where we care for one another.

When most people see photos of Prague, they usually see a stone bridge, lined with 30 Baroque statues of saints. This bridge, the Charles Bridge, was commissioned in 1357 by Charles IV to replace the Judith Bridge, which had been destroyed by flooding in 1342. The bridge connects the Gothic towers of Old Town to those of Mala Strana, the Little Quarter. It spans the blue Vltava river,



that rises up every hundred years and tries to sweep the city away. It connects old with new, the past with the future. For more than 400 years, this bridge was the only way across the river. Armies fought over it, the peace treaty ending the Thirty Years War was signed in the middle of the bridge. It has seen coronation processions, fire-eaters, beggars and lovers stealing kisses.

In the middle of the bridge is a small Lorraine cross embedded into the wall. This is the place where we stop and, in one of Prague's oldest traditions, we make our wishes. Each of us, silent, dreaming of what we most desire. This is the spot where martyrs were thrown into the river. Where old women now throw flowers. Where you can see the whole skyline of the city, the castle rising from the hill. On this bridge, above those 16 arches, those dark spans, we watch storms come and we write about crossings. What it means to arrive. To leave. To transform. We write about promises we've kept and those we've broken. About bridges created, burned, flooded. Where we have come from. Where we are going. Who we have been. Who we are becoming.

Vyšehrad

Legend says that this high rocky ledge that sits above the river was the first seat of Czech royalty. Now that the castles and towers have gone, it is just a quiet park, a peaceful place with a church and a cemetery. A place of long views across the river where we can stand on the old stone walls and see the city in the distance. This is where princess Libuse stood, all those centuries ago, and prophesied the city of Prague that would someday emerge.

Past the small iron gate, the cemetery here is unlike any other. This is the Artists' Cemetery, where all of the most loved Czech artists, writers, sculptors and musicians are buried. Dvořák's grave is always covered with flowers. Mucha's is hard to find. This is where we think about what it means to be an artist. Where we think about craft and honor and staying true to what we most love. We think about perspective and ancestry and how we see ourselves and one another. We remember that we are not only making our art, we are also making our lives. We drink in the sculptures that are here. The winged angel covering her eyes in grief. The ancient, marble carving of a husband and wife, holding hands, descending the stairway into the underworld together. We think about what remains. How we leave. How we stay. We listen to the bells from the church and wonder at words, music. How through these things, even the dead speak to us still.

The Jewish Quarter

We commit our eyes and hearts to two days of looking at darkness. We visit the Jewish Quarter of the city. The Old Jewish Cemetery walled and quiet, 12 layers deep, with thousands of leaning gravestones, many of them so old that the stones are now growing into the trunks of trees. In the Pinkas Synagogue we find white walls where the full names of all 77,297 Jewish victims from Bohemia and Moravia who perished in the Holocaust have been inscribed. A red horizontal line shows the height of the river that poured in during the 100-year flood of 2002. The water washed the names away, but the people put them back, one careful letter at a time.

Outside the city we travel to Kutna Hora where we step beneath the flying buttresses into the Baroque splendor of the Cathedral of St. Barbara. This is the miner's church, built by gold and silver, the stolen spoils of the mountain itself. In a tiny churchyard in Sedlec we visit the Bone Chapel, an ossuary where the bones of 70,000 souls have been sculpted, stacked, braided into chandeliers, cups, bells and coats of arms. We think about bones, remains, what we make of what is left behind.

We take a day trip to Terezín, 50km north of Prague, a 200 year old fortress town built by the Hapsburgs that was transformed by the Nazis into a Jewish Ghetto. This is where 140,000 deportees were imprisoned before being sent to death camps in the east. Families, children, the old, the ill, war resistors, political prisoners, freedom fighters, Jews, gays, gypsies, artists, teachers. This is where they fooled the International Red Cross into thinking that Hitler simply wanted to build a separate town for the Jews. Meanwhile, 87,000 men, women and children were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The trains ran day and night. We go to the ghetto museum and then on to the small fortress on the edge of town, where the Gestapo had their concentration and prison camp. 2,500 people died here.

This is where we must bear the weight of witness. This is where we, as artists, decide not to look away. We descend a dark tunnel under the walls, thinking about what goes unspoken. Thinking about the cowardice of bigotry and the carnage of racism. We visit the place of remembrance on the river where the Nazis drowned the ashes of their victims, attempting to hide the evidence of bodies, the lives that were lost. We sit on the steps leading down into the quiet of the water, writing, writing. Survival. Resistance. Bravery. Anger. Courage. What the children of this place wrote. Their penciled lines and painted arcs, the thousands of drawings they left behind in a suitcase. How they fed one another. How their names are here, their stories, their history, their voices.

Mala Strana

Across the bridge lies Mala Strana, the Little Quarter, a maze of narrow alleys and brightly colored shops. Pitched roofs and the Castle on the hill. We walk across the green lawns of Kampa to the art museum that perches on one edge of the river. From this place we think about memory, about our own histories and all that has brought us to where we are now. Outside in the park we find a young Englishwoman who has climbed into a hollow tree for her mother to take her picture. Her knee is caught and after it stops being funny, we realize she is truly stuck. We call Joli who sends police and firemen and city workers who argue in rapid fire Czech, and then pry open the tree to release her as the crowd cheers. We feed her dinner and she tells us she is a writer too. Of course.

We cross the gardens and walk through the rain across the top of Petrin hill, where we can see the whole city spread out below us. As we walk, we listen to the monks behind the walls of Strahov Monastery singing on their way to their evening service. In the library we pass beyond the velvet rope and get a private tour by the curator. We see ancient terrestrial globes on which many continents were still a mystery. We touch books that are older than the discovery of America. We breathe in the dust of history, philosophy, religion, mathematics, cartography. We stand on a rickety balcony under a vast fresco, the Birth of Knowledge. Stepping out into the rain we wander into a violin shop where an old man plays for us and we read him poetry.

The footpaths of Petrin lead us to the top of Nerudova street where we stumble into Maly Buddha, a vaulted chamber under the castle walls. It is full of spices and candles and laughter. This is our favorite place for dinner.

Departure

They say that Prague is lovely, but she has claws. She holds you, and will pull you back again and again, she won't let you go. On our last few days in the city we write and read to one another and play. We get on a boat to see the city from the water. We visit the Trade Fair Palace, the towering modern art museum they call Veletržní Palác. We write our way into paintings and behind the hands of sculptors. We think about why we came here, what we are leaving here, what we are carrying home. All of our words, tucked into notebooks, into pockets, traded, given, lost, found. We talk about the things we will miss and the things we won't. And now the taxi is here, the luggage bumping from hand to hand down the stairs, our voices again, singing.

