



Excerpts From A Prague Journal

The following texts are by Max Regan. They are excerpted from *Materials Sensitive to Light*, a collection of poems and creative texts written by the students on the 2005 Journey to Prague and published in June 2005 by [Slickrock Press](#).

Preface

Six years ago, I stood in the middle of the Charles Bridge on a cold May morning, just as the sun was starting to rise. It was at that moment that I realized that I had fallen in love with the city of Prague. On that first visit to the city, I realized that there was something magical about it, something rare. I felt strangely at home there, like I had been there before and a part of me had been waiting my whole life to return.

Every year I take writers to the city in May 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 were willing to turn fully towards themselves as writers and fully towards their work.

For those two weeks, the city 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 experienced, both internally and externally. The image on the cover of this book is that of Charles IV, King of Bohemia, offering the deed to the land on which Charles Bridge (and eventually the heart of Charles University) would be built. It is a gesture of faith in the power of knowledge. An offering to the future of words and ideas. In this gesture, I find proof that it is possible to build bridges to reach the places we only imagine in dreams. To cross the river and make what we believe, 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 meanwhile, may you too build a bridge towards what you love most.

Max Regan
Boulder, Colorado
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Bridge

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 the Little Quarter. It spans the blue Vltava River, a river that rises up every 500 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 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 across the river, 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.

St. Vitus

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 cold air, underneath the soaring vaults and write to the stained glass windows, including the stunning window designed by Alfons Mucha. This is a place of devotion, of suffering and alchemy. In the castle we see workshops 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 descend the wide, stone stairs, thinking about voices, magic and all the things that time can and cannot change.

Ebel

From Old Town Square we wander into stores and jazz clubs. We navigate winding alleys and the bewildering aisles of Tesco. We walk through market stalls and buy fresh fruit. Between our flat on Templova Street and the busyness of Old Town Square, Ebel Coffee House sits in a corner of a quiet courtyard, waiting for us. Just behind Tyn church, next to the bookstore. Bright and warm, with tall doors leading out onto the cobblestone patio, this is where we meet most mornings and almost every evening. This is where we sit with tea and coffee and wine and cakes, to laugh and talk and read to one another. They know us here. The guy with the mustache. The woman with the hummingbird tattoo. On our last night in Prague this is where we meet friends to say goodbye and exchange gifts. This is where we let our guard down, tell each other stories, recount the saga of the washing machine with a mind of its own. This is where we are homesick. This is where we care for one another. This is where we feel most at home.



Vysehrad

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 where all of the most loved Czech artists, writers and musicians are buried. Dvorzak's grave is always covered with flowers. 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 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.

Terezin

We commit our eyes and hearts to two days of looking at darkness. We visit the Jewish Quarter of the city. Their walled cemetery, 12 layers deep, with thousands of leaning gravestones, many of them so old that they have grown into the sides of trees. In the Pinkas Synagogue we find white walls where the names of all 77, 297 Jewish victims from Bohemia and Moravia who perished in the Holocaust have been inscribed. We visit the Bone Chapel at Sedlec, thinking about bones, remains, what we make of what is left. We take a day trip to Terezin, 50km north of Prague, a 200-year-old fortress town that was transformed by the Nazis into a Jewish Ghetto. This is where 140,000 deportees were sent to death camps in the east. This is where they fooled the International Red Cross into thinking that Hitler simply wanted to build separate towns for the Jews. Meanwhile, 87,000 men, women and children were sent to the death camps in the East, including 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 bigotry and the carnage of racism. We visit the place 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 outside the fortress writing, writing. Survival. Resistance. Bravery. Anger. Courage. What the children of this place wrote. What we are writing now. How they fed one another. How their names are here. Their stories and their history.

Stromokova

On a sunny day when we need a break from the city, we head down to the quay and board a riverboat that takes us two hours up the Vltava to Stromokova park. Stromokova, which means "orchard", is a 250-acre park of woods, ponds and walking paths. Since 1268

people have come here to sit among hundred-year old oaks and enjoy the physical beauty and the quiet. We find a tree of our own, with branches so low they sweep the ground, and we climb up in it to write and read to one another. From this place we think about memory, about our own histories and all that has brought us to where we are now. Back in the city, we walk 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. The footpaths of Petrin lead us to the top of Nerudova Street where we stumble into Maly Buddha, our favorite place for dinner.

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