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THE BASQUE PYRENEES FREEDOM TRAILS' ASSOCIATION (BPFTA)

(Registered with the Basque Government as a Cultural Association, N°: AS/G/19762/2016)

President: Joe Linehan

Secretary: John Morgan

Treasurer: Felipe Etxeberria Agirretxe

The cross-Pyreanean WW2 historical memory trail St. Jean-de-Luz - Bera, June 2-4 June 2023

In 1942/3 soldier Tom McGrath from Waterford in Ireland escaped from a Nazi stalag camp in Poland and through Germany, Holland and France to the Basque Country. In June 2023 the Basque stage of this escape will be commemorated by BPFTA with a guided weekend mountain trail from St. Jean-de-Luz on the French Basque riviera across the Pyrenees frontier at Col d'Ibardin and down to Bera in Navarre, thus paying tribute to all those who helped and to the escaper himself.

Our Aims

The **Basque Pyrenees Freedom Trails' Association (BPFTA)** is a voluntary organisation based in the Basque Country, with an international membership and registered with the Basque Government and Hernani Town Council as a cultural non-profit entity. It is dedicated to the recovery of the historic memory of the WW2 Escape Lines across the Pyrenees frontier, and which aided many in their bid for freedom from Nazi-occupied Europe during that conflict. These commemorative events are aimed at paying tribute to all those involved in all the Basque WW2 escape lines.

During WW2, clandestine smugglers' paths across the Pyrenees were a major link in the escape lines' networks. Agents of Allied governments, young Frenchmen escaping obligatory military service, Jewish families and Allied personnel, amongst others, escaped from Nazi-occupied Europe across the Pyrenees to the Iberian Peninsula. There were various safe-houses on either side of the border and most of the mountain guides were local people. Those dark times were full of anonymous heroes - the Basque guides, those responsible for logistics and the multifaceted women who were couriers and safe-house keepers responsible for communications, accommodation and the provision of food and clothing for the fugitives.

It is important that all those involved on both sides of the frontier are forever remembered for their brave and selfless actions during WW2, knowing that, if caught, they would be tortured, sent to concentration camps and/or executed. Many were.

Thus, the aims of BPFTA are to disseminate knowledge of these WWII escape lines over the Pyrenees, through commemorative walks across the frontier and by passing on the history of these clandestine fugitive routes to second and third level education students - their historic heritage.

(In June 2021 we commemorated the trail from Saint Jean-de-Luz, via the Pyrenean frontier in Aldudes, to Elizondo in Navarre and, in September of the same year, a BPFTA group hiked the Walter Benjamin escape route across the Pyrenees in Catalonia, from Banyuls de la Merenda to Port Bou. In June 2022 Canfranc Station in Aragon was our commemorative Trail end-point from France to Spain, crossing the Pyrenees frontier at Somport).

Recommended reading/viewing for the BPFTA June 2023 event:

- *Unspoken* written by Tom McGrath; ISBN: 978 07171 92540 (in English), the story of the amazing escape by Tom's father (also Tom) from a Nazi Stalag camp in Poland in 1942, crossing Europe and reaching the Basque Country in 1943 where he managed to cross the border at Col d'Ibardin.
- John Sturges' classic film *The Great Escape*, loosely based on a real-life break-out from a Polish stalag. In the last scene, "Sedgewick" (James Coburn) escapes in a train through France to the Spanish border, where a Basque guide helps him to cross the Pyrenees!
- Ex-UK minister and son of Spanish republican fugitive, Michael Portillo presented *Great Railway Journeys (Canfranc)* and has made documentaries/radio interviews describing his father's escape.

Thus, from the 2nd to the 4th of June, 2023, the Basque Pyrenees Freedom Trails' Association has organised the commemoration of this Basque section of that great (Tom McGrath's) escape!

Overall programme 2 - 4 June, 2023

After the arrival of the participants at their hotel in Donostia-San Sebastián on Friday 2 June, they will be taken to nearby Hernani at about 19.00 for a tribute at the monument to the Basque WW2 mountain guides there – a tribute to them and all others involved in the escape routes and who risked or lost their lives to ensure the freedom of women and men fleeing Nazism, and also to the fugitives themselves. Local people, descendants of those involved in escape lines and the town Mayor will attend.

On the Saturday and Sunday our guides will take us on this easy commemorative trail from Donibane Lohizune (St.-Jean-de-Luz) on the French Basque coast and then to nearby Urruña, where a similar tribute will take place with the Town Hall. On the Sunday, we will walk up to the Pyrenean frontier at Col d'Ibardin and down to Bera (de Bidasoa) in Navarre where there will be a final tribute event with local people, descendants of those involved in escape lines and the town Mayor. We will thus emulate the final (Basque) section of Tom McGrath's escape in 80 years ago.

Over the three days, places of historical interest will be pointed out and tribute events with descendants of escape line members, local people and authorities will take place. When hiking, only a small day pack is needed, with water, a packed lunch (on the Saturday) and light clothing; other belongings can be left at our hotel in Donostia-San Sebastián, on the BPFTA coach or in the support vehicle. The first day (Saturday) hike is on the flat over urban and rural roads and so light walking shoes would be more suitable than boots. The second-day walk (Sunday) is through the hills and so boots will be required.

The nearest airports are San Sebastián, Biarritz and Bilbao; all three Basque cities are well-connected with trains and buses.

Friday 2 June, 15.00-18.00 – ARRIVAL OF INTERNATIONAL PARTICIPANTS

Participants arrive at our hotels in Donostia-San Sebastián (Sercotel Codina next to the Concha beach and Olarain, a 10-minute walk away). At 19.00, BPFTA will transport participants to the monument to the four local WW2 mountain guides at Loidi in nearby Hernani for the tribute. After

a visit to the birthplace of local guide, Florentino Goikoetxea, we will dine in a local cider house (payable in cash *in situ* and for which prior reservation is required) and after which the group will be taken back to their hotel in DSS.

Saturday 3 June, 08.30 – THE FIRST DAY TRAIL

After an early breakfast (from 07.30) and each walker with their packed lunch and in hiking attire, the BPFTA coach will depart our hotel to drive us across the border to our walk start point at San Jean-de-Luz fishing port not later than 09.00. At the plaque on the port in tribute to the *Orion* escape line, and in the presence of the daughter of network courier, Andrée Grioterray, a tribute will be paid to all those involved, from either side of the frontier, who aided escapers and evaders flee Nazi-occupied Europe during WW2 and to the fugitives themselves. This is a 14km trail involving 3 hours walking + 1 hour for rests and readings from *Unspoken*. Today's trail does not involve mountain hiking but walking over asphalted urban and rural roads, so walkers may decide good walking shoes more suitable than boots.

A second tribute will take place at the nearby San Jean-de-Luz train station where Tom McGrath stepped off the train in 1943 on the final stage of his bid to freedom. The next halt will be at the Sokoa cemetery where flowers will be laid at the graves of the Hernani mountain guide Florentino Gokoetxea and Comète line organiser Katallin Aguirre. Shortly after, we will pass the streets in the same neighbourhood named after them. Then we walk to the Our Lady of Succour shrine in Urruña and down to the village of Urruña and the war memorial which honours, amongst others Jean Larburu, also from Hernani and Comète line helper, who was deported to and died in the Nazi *Mauthausen* extermination camp. Here a tribute will take place, attended by the mayor and descendants of those involved in escape lines and local people. The last stop before our destination will be the *Bidegain Berri* farmhouse, used as a safe-house during WW2.

We arrive at our first-day destination of *Départ d'Ibardin* at about 13.30 and where we will have our packed lunch. Our coach will then take us back to our hotel for about 15.00-16.00. Free evening. Recommended the walk west along the Concha Bay maritime promenade and Ondarreta beach to Chillida's *Comb of the Winds* sculpture (refreshment stop at the Tennis Club) and/or east along the Concha Bay to the Old Town of the city, famed for its gastronomic *pintxos*.

Sunday 4 June 09:30 – THE SECOND DAY TRAIL

After breakfast from 08.00 in our hotel, and not later than 09.00 the BPFTA coach will take us to the 2nd-day Trail start point at *Départ d'Ibardin* (the end-point of the 1st-day Trail) to begin the leisurely 5km ascent to the frontier at Col d'Ibardin at 10.00. We should arrive at the top before 12.00 for our 'elevenses' (*hamaiketako* in Basque) at the cafeteria/bar - 1¼ hour walk + 40 minutes for rests and readings on the way up at the lake and another in front of the menhir. The equally leisurely walk down from there to Bera (de Bidasoa) is about 6km and again about 2 hours with rests and for readings at one of the post-WW2 Francoist bunkers.

At Bera a final tribute event will be held for all those involved, especially Tom McGrath, and attended by the mayor, descendants of those involved in escape lines and local people. There will be a sit-down restaurant lunch in the town at about 14.00 (payable *in situ* and for which prior reservation is required).

The BPFTA coach will take us back to our hotel in Donostia-San Sebastián at about 17.00. Free evening. For recommendations about excursions, visits or walks in the city, ask Cristina or Sinéad.

Registration

Registration is now closed. There are some free places available for Basque High School students accompanied by a parent, guardian or teacher. Each participant must have their own personal accident/medical insurance cover.