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Avid cyclists head to Israel for gruelling charity ride

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MONTREAL — At 75, Marcel Zielinski figured it was time to get serious about cycling. Not really. The Cote St. Luc resident and Holocaust survivor has been an avid cyclist just about his entire life.

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Marcel Zielinski poses with the bike that will bring him to the top of Mount Hermon in the Golan.

On Nov. 1, he will prove it again as he joins hundreds of others from around the world in Israel for the 10th annual Wheels of Love International Bike Ride, a charity fundraiser for Jerusalem's Alyn Hospital, a rehab centre for kids and adolescents with orthopedic disabilities.

At least one other Jewish Montrealer – Gerald Wiviott – is also making the trip.

Zielinski is teaming up with his 51-year-old son, Bezalel, who lives in Rishon Lezion. A granddaughter, Tamar, 25, also lives in Israel and will be there to egg her saba on.

Zielinski has been soliciting support from family and friends and hopes to raise \$4,000 (\$2,000 is the minimum) for children at the hospital.

“No, I never cycled in Israel before,” Zielinski, a retired structural engineer at Bombardier, told The CJN, although he lived and worked there for nine years between 1958 and 1967, for Israel Aircraft Industries. “Right now, I’m in the middle of intensive training.”

Wiviott, a 68-year-old psychiatrist and veteran cyclist himself, told The CJN that he decided only one month ago to go he to Israel – competitor at the has previously travelled there as a fencing 1973 and 1977 Maccabiah Games.

“It sounds like it will be a very challenging ride,” he said, “similar to a ride I did this past summer in the Pyrenees. It’s substantial.”

Wiviott and Zielinski know each other from the common membership in a cycling club in Beaconsfield, and both will be riding in the “challenge” option of the event – other routes are less gruelling – which will ascend more than 11,600 metres over the five days.

According to the [alynride.org](#) website, the 500-kilometre ride starts at Rosh Pina in the northern Galilee, then runs along the Jordan River through the “finger of the Galilee,” the panhandle along northern Israel’s Hula Valley, and toward Tel Hai and Kfar Giladi.

The ride route runs parallel to the Israel-Lebanese border along the Ranim Cliff and through the Naftali Mountains. More experienced cyclists – including Zielinski and his son, and Wiviott – will climb up Mount Hermon in the Golan Heights, then back down again to the Sea of Galilee.

On the climactic fifth day, there will be a final climb from Modi'in to Jerusalem, where children from the Alyn will be greeting the cyclists as part of a poignant closing ceremony.

But it's not a race, emphasized Zielinski, who will be travelling to Israel with his wife of 52 years, Maryla. "It was mentioned at my cycling club, and I decided to do it."

Zielinski, who has also crossed Canada coast-to-coast by bicycle, will be packing a super-light – and super-expensive – Montreal-made carbon fibre bike – a Guru, for those in the know.

The bike weighs all of eight kilograms, and Zielinski was planning to rent a special hard shell case to protect it.

"It's the baggage handlers," he said.

To prepare, Zielinski has been pedalling 300 kilometres a week to get in shape, as well as doing indoor "spinning" sessions under the supervision of a personal trainer.

Wiviott is training less intensely and relying on his Pyrenees experience to get him to the top of Mount Hermon.

Not long ago, Zielinski and his wife returned from a month-long cruise to Alaska – keeping him off his bike – so there was still a kilogram or two to be shed before departure, he said, "but I'll do it."

The ride will also prove to be something of a victory in another sense, said Zielinski, who suffered a stroke only 18 months ago due to a blocked carotid artery.

The stroke left him – temporarily – literally speechless, and he lost some control in his right arm, but he appears to have recovered almost fully. Zielinski must now take medications to control his cholesterol and blood pressure, but there is no discernable trace of speech problems, and his doctor has given him the green light to cycle in Israel.

"One of the conditions for anyone is that you need to have a doctor's permission," he said, "and my doctor knows me. He knows me very well."