

Wes Anderson and Norman Eisen: Two Americans in Prague

By Daniel Anyz

<http://hn.ihned.cz/c1-61846420-dva-ameriane-v-praze> (Google translated)

U.S. Ambassador Norman Eisen influenced Wes Anderson's new film, The Grand Budapest Hotel, not only because one of the actors donned the Ambassador's jacket. Above all, Eisen taught Anderson to "take in" Prague.

Ask an artist how he created his piece of work. You will get a lengthy response on inspirations, incentives, small experiences, borrowings from colleagues, and feelings recast into a story. American film director Wes Anderson is no exception. The ideas for his new film *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, which hit the Czech cinemas yesterday, he says he "stole here and there." One thing is, however, certain: the film would not be what it is if Anderson hadn't met another American, U.S. Ambassador to the Czech Republic Norman Eisen, in Prague two years ago.

Looking For a Europe Gone By

The two slightly tired men are sitting on a sofa. Their conversations after the Prague premiere of the film, for which Anderson and several of his actors had come to the Lucerna Theatre directly from the Berlin Film Festival, had gone on until very late the night before. Today had started at five in the morning, when Ambassador Eisen drove actor Jeff Goldblum to the airport. The ambassador and the filmmakers did not sleep much.

"Previously, I was discovering Europe; lately it is the other way around. When I get back to America now I catch myself looking at something and saying, aha, aha, so that's how do it here in this weird, strange land ... " says Wes Anderson, originally from Texas, about what it is like returning "home" to the USA from Europe, where he has spent most of his time in the last fifteen years. At the end of his answer he turns to Eisen as if to say, 'can you believe it?'

The director is amused by his anecdote; it seems as if he has just discovered something, and who knows if it won't be reflected in his next film. That's how it goes with Wes Anderson; fatigue doesn't mean mental weariness. As soon as he starts answering the first question as to why he set the film in the fictional Eastern European country of Zubrovka in the 1930s, something powerful appears in his memory and imagination. At least that's how it looks to the listener, who is trying to follow Anderson's imaginative speech. Probably his most important inspiration was reading Stefan Zweig's description of the disappearing world of old Europe and the dangers of Nazism, which emerged over the horizon and from which Zweig fled. "Of course he only fled physically, because Europe was always in his head," Anderson says.

Inspirational Ambassador

After writing the first draft of the script, Anderson and his colleagues went to Europe: Berlin, Vienna, Budapest. After long journeys throughout Europe, further reading, and new

perceptions, "the story started to take shape and the original idea moved a little to the East." Two years ago, they also arrived in Prague. "I had been to Prague before, I had some work to do here, but I didn't know the city," says Anderson. He pauses, setting the scene for an important new character that enters the story.

"I served as a tour guide with slightly unusual qualifications," says Ambassador Eisen. Anderson sits up on the sofa and adds: "We walked around the city together and every now and then Norm said, have you noticed this or that and look at this" Previously, Anderson says he only passed through Prague, but through Ambassador Eisen he established a relationship with the city. "I started to get much more from Prague; the city with Norm was a continuous source of inspiration."

The Prague Jewish cemetery, the Municipal House, the palace housing the U.S. Embassy, where in 1917, Franz Kafka rented a cold unheated apartment for few months, perhaps stimulating his tuberculosis into a fatal attack, were some of the highlights. The residence of the U.S. Ambassador in Prague fits well into this mosaic of impressions. It was the original First Republic villa of banker Otto Petschek, headquarters of the Wehrmacht commander during World War II, Czechoslovak General Staff Headquarters for a bit after the defeat of Germany and since 1948, the residence of the U.S. Ambassador. One of the tables in the baroque residence with a beautiful inlay has a German eagle with a swastika on the bottom.

The Lawyer's Jacket

"I wanted to make the film as a collage, and suddenly all the things that I had been collecting for so long started to fit together. Here in Prague, I came to the point where I knew that I could actually start shooting the film," says the director. He began sending the other team members and actors to Prague to meet Norman Eisen, including Jeff Goldblum, who plays a lawyer in the film. And it was Norman Eisen, the real Harvard-trained lawyer, who was an inspiration for this character.

"I told Jeff that he should go to Prague and see Norm; this is your man, I said. And it worked out...." The ambassador agrees that it worked out on both sides. "We spent time together in Prague and we became friends. At the end, Jeff told me, 'I'm sure you've heard about method acting....Can I borrow your tie and jacket?'" The jacket was a perfect fit for Goldblum who wore it thereafter. "Well he just donned something that was part of a lawyer," laughed Eisen.

Goldblum's supporting role in the film is important. "The character of the lawyer Kovacs in the film maintains the awareness of law and justice," explains Anderson. He inclines his head towards Eisen and says "the character is actually a kind of ethics czar for the whole film." This is a reference to Ambassador Eisen's years at the White House when, before coming to Prague, he oversaw legal compliance for public officials (receiving the nickname "the Ethics Czar"). "I won't give away how counselor Kovacs fares in the film. But when President Obama sees it, he may say 'see how ethics czars can end up if they aren't careful!'"

Perhaps we can reveal that "Eisen's" lawyer is defeated by injustice, crushed by force. In the film, which is characterized by the humor typical of Anderson, with his slightly ironic

detachment, this sets a dark tone. It is a reminder of the ruthless black evil that would soon take over Europe, while in the small spa towns and local hotels, carefree life was still going on. Some people did recognize the creeping danger. "And when the worst things started to happen, those people were already gone, just like the inhabitants of this house," says the director in reference to the Petschek family that lived in the villa before the war, the same villa where we were doing the interview.

But others, and there were many more of them, didn't make it. "And probably they could not even do anything. Where would they have gone? There would have to have been someone on the other side who would take them," says the director. As he knows, Ambassador Eisen's family were among these people. A moment later, however, when we talk about Karlovy Vary and its Grand Hotel Pupp -- two additional inspirations for the director -- Anderson finds out a detail which Ambassador Eisen hasn't yet managed to share with him. "Do you know where my mother ultimately went to live after returning from Auschwitz?" Ambassador asks the director. "To Karlovy Vary. And before she arranged an apartment and a job, she stayed in the Hotel Pupp."

"Wow," Andersen slips in a typical American word. He discovered the Hotel Pupp in Karlovy Vary in an old picture from 1905 and then went to the town to check it out. "The hotel and the statue of a stag up on the hill... I knew that this was our place," explains Anderson. That is directly reflected in the first images the viewer sees in the film, as well as the nostalgic atmosphere of the scenes.

Prague Put Its Little Claws in Wes

Anderson lives with his girlfriend in Paris. When festive markets take place at the Champs Élysées at Christmas, people there can search digital pictures of famous places in one of the stands to see what those places looked like thirty or fifty years ago. "I cannot help myself and I go again and again, waiting in line. It is always crowded there. Out of nostalgia, or who knows why, history holds on to us," says the director.

Ambassador Eisen nods approvingly. The extraordinary charm of Prague is in the fact that places, which elsewhere oftentimes can only be found in old photographs, we see here in real life every day. The city reveals layers of life from the Middle Ages until today. That was something he wanted to show Anderson. "And we succeeded," continues the director turning to the Ambassador, "and you said it best when you said that the physicality of history can be seen in Prague."

After the half-hour interview, the director had to get up to pack and the Ambassador to escort his friend and partner to the airport. It's time for one last question. Is it true that the film was not shot in Prague due to the unfavorable financial conditions for foreign filmmakers? Anderson finally found his stand-in for Prague in the fictional town of Lutz on the German-Polish border, Görlitz. "I cannot specifically say," answers the director. "It is essential to absorb all the real impressions and then find a place to bring them to life. "It could have been Prague, but maybe it's even better that it wasn't. We have avoided the danger of making it topography, while in this case Prague morphed into our imagination."

Departing, the ambassador notes: "As Kafka wrote, mother Prague has claws." Norman Eisen and Wes Anderson, two Americans in Prague, have joined the many others into which these claws are firmly stuck.