

Our Man In Prague

**America's Observant Jewish Ambassador
in the City of the Maharal & Other Greats**

Remarkably, the US ambassador to the Czech Republic is a fully observant Jew who keeps a strictly kosher home and hosts influential guests from all over the world—on *Shabbos*, no less! Prague itself has an extremely rich Jewish history, so when *Zman* sat down with Ambassador Eisen to hear his fascinating story we got more than we expected. This included shocking inside information about the palatial mansion the US government owns that the ambassador lives in, which was built by Prague's wealthiest Jew before the Nazis came and turned it into their headquarters for carrying out the Final Solution.

Yitzchok Wagschal - Shimon Rosenberg



Prague, capital of the Czech Republic, is one of the most beautiful cities in the world. Its many grand palaces and royal mansions come straight out of a storybook. Arriving in Prague, one gets the impression of stepping back into the pages of history.

It is January 28, 2011, as a motorcade snakes through the Prague streets. Sitting at the center in a heavily armored car and surrounded by vehicles of the US State Department and the Czech police is an observant Jew, Norman (Nachman Leib) Eisen. Mr. Eisen gazes out at the incredible panorama, transfixed as if in a dream. He has arrived in the Czech Republic to take over the position of US ambassador.

For Eisen, this position holds special significance, since he is a descendant of Czechoslovakian Jews. His mother Frieda, 90, was born and raised in what was Czechoslovakia and was deported from there to Auschwitz in a cattle car 20 years later. Now her son was returning to Prague to serve as ambassador.

Eisen is greeted at the historic American ambassador's residence with a grand reception, including formal greetings and various state ceremonies as befits the arrival of a new representative of the United States.

Late that night, after the busy day has drawn to an end, Eisen's wife and daughter settle down in bed at last in the mansion's residential wing. The new ambassador sits down in a soft recliner in the ornate library to relax with a glass of tea... and a *sefer*.

Suddenly, the door opens and the head of the household staff, Miroslav Cernik enters.

"Mr. Ambassador," Cernik begins reverently, "I would like to show you something."

Eisen is caught off guard. He is not yet accustomed to being addressed as "ambassador," and the behavior of the head of his household staff seems unusual.

Without a word, Eisen stands up and follows the white-haired Cernik out of the room. He leads him to the foyer and shows him a small antique table which is decorated with a wooden inlay of branches and leaves. "Please look under the table," Cernik says.



Ambassador Norman Eisen delivers his remarks during the 237th Independence Day celebration at the US ambassador's residence on June 27, 2013.



Eisen presents his credentials to President Vaclav Klaus.

Now the ambassador is completely thrown off. What is going on?

He looks under the table and his eyes open wide. There, on the underside of the table, is a swastika! The new ambassador feels the blood drain from his face.

"I must have skipped a breath," Eisen tells *Zman*.

Cernik was concerned that the new Jewish ambassador might chance upon the swastika himself, so he brought it to Eisen's attention at the earliest opportunity. For a while Eisen is speechless. A swastika in the residence of the US ambassador in Prague?! And with a Jewish ambassador to boot, the son of a Holocaust survivor!

The American Ambassador

The US ambassador serves as the highest American diplomat in the country. He is the personal spokesman of the US president. He

is one of over 160 individuals serving the US in this capacity across the globe.

From time to time the ambassador is sent to deliver a message to the head of state in the country of his office. And not always are these messages what the local head of state wants to hear. Still, because he represents the leader of the free world, the US ambassador is treated with inordinate respect. Most ambassadors' residences are beautiful mansions staffed by a full complement of aides. Every ambassador is sworn in at a special ceremony at the White House in the presence of top government officials.

American ambassadors travel with bodyguards. At times they are tasked to negotiate with sworn enemies. They may have to hammer out treaties or recruit military aid from other countries. In recent years, US ambassadors have become ambassadors of democracy, spreading the American ideals of equality and freedom.

In the case of America's representative to the Czech Republic, the ambassador serves his homeland faithfully at the same time that he fully observes Torah. He runs a completely Jewish home in all aspects, including separate kitchens with their own *milchig* and *fleishig* utensils. The doorposts of his official residence all boast kosher *mezuzos*. He *davens* three times a day with a *minyan* and keeps *Shabbos* according to *halachah*, carefully scheduling meetings with other officials to avoid engagements on the holy day.

A writer for the *Washington Post* reports that he was present at a meeting in the embassy at which the communications chief tried to convince Mr. Eisen to meet with a Czech journalist on *Yom Tov*. The ambassador flatly refused.

It was many months from the time we submitted our application to meet with Mr. Eisen until we were granted our interview. We had to submit a formal request through the State Department. We took it as a compliment when the State Department informed us that *Zman* passed its approval.

First we were invited to meet the ambassador at State Department headquarters in Washington DC. Eisen maintains an office there which he uses while visiting the country. Later, we flew to Prague to observe the interactions of the ambassador while he was on duty.

It was a balmy Friday several weeks ago when we arrived at the ambassador's mansion in Prague. The building bustled with activity, as servants dusted and scrubbed the residence in anticipation of an important guest: *Shabbos*. A large ballroom was prepared to accommodate the dozens of guests who were invited to join the *Shabbos seudos*. Ambassador Eisen has made it his weekly habit to celebrate the *Shabbos* in the presence of a large crowd. The scene reminded us of what a wealthy Jewish home of centuries ago must have looked like on *erev Shabbos*.

In an historical irony, the US embassy in Prague is located in a mansion that was built by a Jew and was later occupied by the highest Nazi officials. Here the Germans held their massive balls while planning the destruction of the region's Jews. Now the building is once again in Jewish hands. It is a sweet and dramatic turnaround, a testament to the eternity of the Jewish nation.



Zman correspondent Yitzchok Wagschal with Ambassador Eisen in Washington DC.