

MANSION

INSIDE STORY

Transforming a Home’s Dark History

Seized by Nazis during World War II, a Beaux-Arts mansion in the Czech Republic emerges as a symbol of progress and possibilities for America’s top envoy who lives there with his family

BY GORDON FAIRCLOUGH

Prague

In a room where high-ranking Nazi officers once dined, the U.S. ambassador to the Czech Republic earlier this month lit the candles of a menorah in a Hanukkah celebration.

The joyful ceremony held a special meaning for America’s top envoy here, Norman L. Eisen, whose mother, Frieda, was deported by the Germans from her home in what was then eastern Czechoslovakia to Auschwitz. She and two siblings survived the death camp. Her parents and other relatives perished.

“To engage in this Jewish ritual, in this house that was defiled by the Nazis, is in a way to rededicate it,” said Mr. Eisen. “As we celebrate, the shadows melt away.”

Such acts of reclamation have become a part of the 52-year-old ambassador’s daily routine in the official U.S. diplomatic compound where he lives. Once home to a wealthy Jewish family, the property was seized by the Germans in 1939 and used to house Nazi officials during their wartime occupation of Prague. The U.S. bought it from the Czechoslovak government in 1948.

Scattered through the complex’s ornate Beaux-Arts mansion and adjoining villas are traces of this dark chapter. German Gen. Rudolf Tausaint, who commanded occupying forces, lived in the compound, which also served as a meeting place for his staff. Some furniture still bears swastika stamps marking it as property of the Third Reich.

The three-story main house—with a mansard roof and wrought-iron balconies—was built in the late 1920s by the coal magnate and financier Otto Petschek. Mr. Eisen, a lawyer who previously served as White House special counsel for ethics and government reform, moved here in 2011 with his wife, Lindsay Kaplan, and daughter, Tamar.

It is a home built for entertaining, with spacious reception rooms and a wood-paneled dining room that could easily seat dozens. Between the world wars, the Petscheks were hosts to King Carol of Romania and King Alexander of Yugoslavia. Even the private spaces are grand. The tub in one bathroom is framed by soaring marble columns.

With the mansion now in the middle of a complete restoration, Mr. Eisen is living in a smaller villa in the compound. Mr. Eisen’s wife and daughter, who is now 11, returned to Washington, where Ms. Kaplan is a professor, at the end of the summer.

Regular Friday night Sabbath dinners that Mr. Eisen hosts have expanded from a solely religious observance into a lively ecumenical salon devoted to issues ranging from civil liberties to economic and security policy and even to philosophical topics, such as the nature of evil and the possibility of forgiveness.

The ambassador sometimes shares with his guests the story of his visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau last year. With his mother talking him through it on the phone, he saw the barracks where she lived. He went



Counter-clockwise from top: U.S. Embassy Prague (4); Junho Kim for The Wall Street Journal (4)

to the spot on the arrival ramp where she last saw her own parents—before she went back into the train to fetch a sweater left behind by a niece.

And he shares the fact that his mother, who died in February, liked to tell her friends that “the Nazis deported us in cattle cars and my

son flew back on Air Force One.”

The Eisens have decorated the home with art and artifacts on loan from the Jewish Museum in Prague. Among the pieces is an oil painting on rough burlap by Frantisek Petr Kien, a Jewish artist imprisoned in Terezin, a Nazi concentration camp north of Prague. It is a scene from

the camp in muted colors. Mr. Kien later died in Auschwitz.

One day, while looking through a pile of sheet music in a closet of the residence’s conservatory, Mr. Eisen discovered a Hitler Youth songbook, its cover decorated with images of smiling blond teenagers in brown shirts beneath a swastika emblem.

“History serves up great tragedy and heartbreak, but also amazing miracles,” Mr. Eisen said. “Could my grandparents ever have imagined ... that one day, not only would they have a grandson, but that he would be back here, representing the mightiest nation in the history of the world?”



SPREAD SHEET

The Most Gorgeous and Pristine of Them All

What is a fabulously awesome way to sell an incredibly terrific home? Try a little hyperbole.

Spread Sheet asked real-estate listings company Zillow to analyze 14 enthusiastic adjectives like “amazing,” “beautiful” and “fabulous” in home listings going back to 2007. The findings: For homes priced at \$1 million or higher, overall hype is up more than 58% from five years ago.

“Agents are always looking to give something a little pop, anything to catch people’s attention,” says appraiser Donald Boucher, president of Washington, D.C.-based Boucher and Boucher Inc.

What are the most commonly used adjectives? “Beautiful” ranks first in the select list, appearing in more than a quarter of luxury home listings. “Great” comes next at 21.6%,

followed by “gorgeous” at 9% and “fabulous” at 6.9%. The word that saw the biggest uptick since 2007 is “pristine,” which has seen a nearly 140% increase in use.

These words are particularly appealing to real-estate brokers because they are vague and nearly impossible to dispute, says Mark Callister, associate professor of communications at Brigham Young

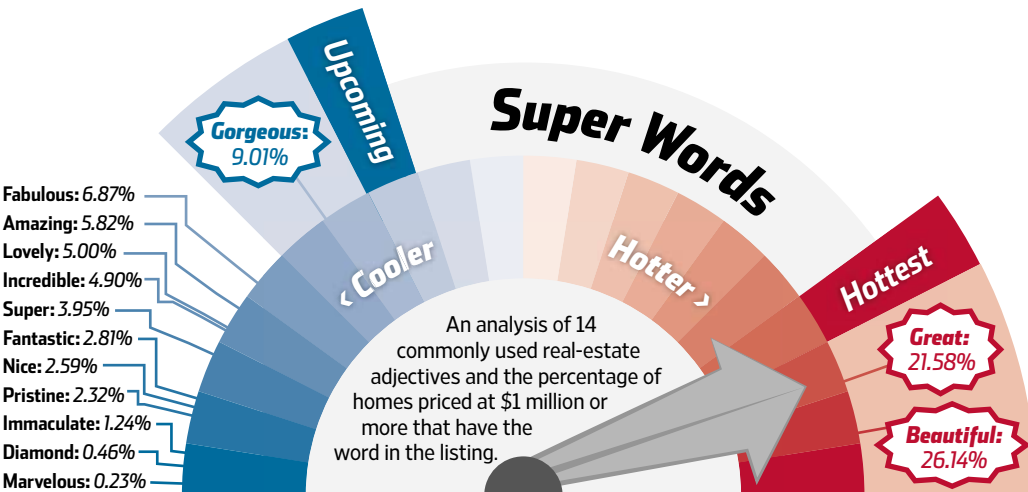
58%

Percentage increase in hyperbole in listings for homes for \$1 million or higher, compared with five years ago.

University.

Exaggerating descriptions can give people a positive first impression that can be difficult to shake. “When you’re really happy and have this promise of wonderful fulfillment, you don’t pay attention to the details as much,” says Dan Hill, president of Sensory Logic, a facial-coding research firm based in Minneapolis, and author of “Emotionomics.”

Buzz words change over every five to 10 years, says Eric Boyenga, real-estate agent at Interio Real Estate in Silicon Valley. Mr. Boyenga selects words to create a certain aesthetic and capture the essence of a house. For modern homes, he might capitalize on “expansive” or “dramatic.” For a French chateau, he’ll tap into “luxurious,” “elegant” and “opulent.” Then there are the safe words that fit every house



type, he says, like “beautiful” and “stunning.” “We’re selling the lifestyle, so we try to frame the brochure and marketing around that lifestyle,” he explains.

The strategy can backfire if the promise is too far from reality, Mr. Hill says. Also, over-

used adjectives fail to serve their purpose of making the home stand out. For example, “marvelous” is one of the few words on our list that saw a decrease in use last year in the luxury sector. “Diamond” also slipped last year in luxury-home descriptions, but its use

increased in the overall market. Worn-out words are a broker’s cue to tap into more specific terms or coin a fresh phrase. “It’s like the stock-market crash, you want to get out before it gets ugly,” Mr. Hill says.

—Sanette Tanaka