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Contact: Jennifer Doerr, Publicity Manager, 212-206-5367, jennifer.doerr@fsgbooks.com

THE WALL

Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain

by Peter Sís

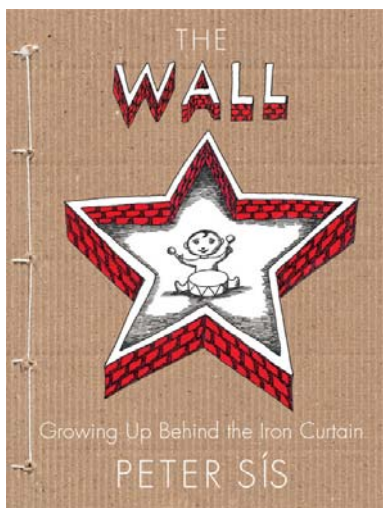
“Peter Sís’s book is most of all about the will to live one’s life in freedom and should be required reading for all those who take their freedom for granted.” —**Václav Havel, former president of the Czech Republic**

★ “A masterpiece for readers young and old.”—**Starred, *Kirkus Reviews***

“Peter, born to dream and draw, is now also teaching the tragic history of his native Czechoslovakia under communism in this beautiful, poignant, and important work for those of all ages.” —**Madeleine Albright, former U.S. Secretary of State**

★ “Younger readers have not yet had a graphic memoir with the power of *Maus* or *Persepolis* to call their own, but they do now.” —**Starred, *Publishers Weekly***

“This stunning book is a MUST for anybody who is curious to learn about the world we live in!” —**Milos Forman, Oscar winning-director of *Amadeus*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest***



For years Peter Sís talked himself out of creating a book based on his childhood and coming-of-age in Communist Czechoslovakia during the Cold War. It was still recent history, he told himself, too raw, too soon to be looked at objectively. But echoes from Peter’s childhood came back to him after 9/11, and he was unable to ignore his story any longer. In his graphic memoir **THE WALL: GROWING UP BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN** (Frances Foster Books / Farrar, Straus and Giroux / September 2007), Sís’s legions of fans will be mesmerized by his deeply personal recollection of the period, from his boyhood to his defection to the U.S., which he renders through a combination of richly complex art and never-before-seen private photos and journal entries.

“I’ve been bothered by what’s happened since 9/11 and what we’ve been willing to give up in the name of security,” says Sís. “Watching my children growing up free made me think about my own childhood and not growing up free. So this is a cautionary tale about the most important thing—freedom.”

The creative evolution of **THE WALL** was intense for Sís. He created reams of material—reviewing the history, tracing the roots of the Cold War, going back to World War I and the Russian Revolution—while also searching for ways to tell the story in pictures. He completed several versions, decided not to do the book at least twice, thought he had killed it. But it wouldn’t die.

From its opening images, **THE WALL** transports readers into a world dominated by military presence, brainwashing, and compulsory public displays of loyalty, in both art and behavior. But the oppressive environment could not thwart Sís's creative life. As a boy, he drew constantly. While he grew up, cracks slowly appeared in the Iron Curtain that allowed glimpses of Western culture: Allen Ginsberg's beat poetry, American blue jeans, long hair for men, Coca-Cola. As an adolescent, Sís embraced rock 'n' roll, hungrily listening to songs by the Beatles, the Beach Boys, and the Rolling Stones. When 1968 dawned and a new head of the Communist government arrived in office, Sís's world slowly began to open up. Censorship was lifted. For the teenage Sís, Prague in the spring of 1968 was full of possibility. That hopeful moment, however, soon was crushed, brought to an end by the Soviet-led invasion of the city in that same year.

In 1984, Sís was allowed to come to California to create an animated film based on Czechoslovakia's participation in the Olympics. But the Soviets boycotted the Olympics, and Sís was ordered to return to Prague. Instead, he stayed in America.

"This time I resisted. I was tired of being told what to do, what to think, and what to draw . . . but after a lifetime of being brainwashed, it was not an easy decision. I was afraid I might never see my family again. I thought the Soviets would be in power forever," Sís says.

Sís's fears were allayed in the coming years. In 1989, he watched from the U.S. as the Berlin Wall came down and the "Velvet Revolution" took place in Czechoslovakia. Its nonviolent protests, seen by the world, succeeded in sounding the death knell for the Communist government there. Then in 1991, the Soviet Union dissolved. The Cold War was over. "Now when my American family goes to visit my Czech family in the colorful city of Prague, it is hard to convince them it was ever a dark place full of fear, suspicion, and lies," Sís reflects.

For anyone interested in history, memoir, or art, **THE WALL** provides an astonishing fusion of all three. And while in the U.S. debates rage about where the balance between federal authority and civil liberties should fall, **THE WALL** will have readers thinking about just how fine the line between government intervention and oppression can become.

Peter Sís is an internationally admired artist who has been named a MacArthur Fellow and has twice received Caldecott Honors, for *Tibet Through the Red Box* and *Starry Messenger: Galileo Galilei*. He lives in the New York City area. For more information on Sís and his work, visit www.petersis.com.

**The Wall:
Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain**

by Peter Sís
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