

Peter Sis  
Three Mentors

Thank you [International Jury of the Hans Christian Andersen Award](#) for selecting me!

Thank you Czech IBBY for nominating me!

Dekuji Vam mnohokrat za tuto poctu !

I was illustrating before I knew what illustrating means. And I knew Hans Christian Andersen stories before I knew who he was.

I was always drawing because I was a child growing up in the age before television, computers [and iPhones](#). I did not know anything about the size of my country or the politics of the time. I was told stories and fairy tales by my grandparents, parents, and relatives. And I have illustrated what I heard- It all became one wonderful story really: “Magic Tinder Box,” my grandfather’s trip to America and my father’s adventures in Tibet. Only much later did I find out my grandfather designed railways in America, my father traveled to Tibet, and the haunting fairy tales I loved were written by Hans Christian Andersen, the Brothers Grimm, Karel Jaromir Erben, Bozena Nemcova and many others.

My mother, an artist, was always making sure I had paper and pencils. And I drew pictures as early as I can remember and on every surface possible - newspapers, walls, light switches, chairs, and even a door of our fridge.

It was time to grow up and go to school and my drawing came in handy. Fellow students liked me because of my funny drawings of them, but the teachers were less impressed, especially in the science classes... So it was determined, as was the custom then, that age fifteen I would be a student at the art school.

The Middle School Of Applied Arts-I was supposed to paint realistic flowers and fruit while I was drawing pictures of the Beatles and Yellow Submarine. I did not fit the expectations of the serious artist at that time. I

had serious doubts about my future until Jiri Trnka picked up my portfolio when selecting five students for his new class at the Academy of Applied Arts in the spring of 1968. Now this was special! Jiri Trnka, the most amazing artist, illustrator and filmmaker would be my mentor! And freedom was in the air! Prague spring 1968 was the best time of my life. We could play rock music and stage avant-garde theater, grow long hair, draw Beatles and travel outside the country. It all came to a crashing end in August while I was visiting Denmark of all places. While many of my generation were trying to get out of Czechoslovakia I was trying to return home to Prague to be Jiri Trnka's student. He was awarded the Hans Christian Andersen Medal in 1968, but could not get to the IBBY congress in Switzerland that same year because of politics and tanks in the streets of Prague. He died in 1969 in a young age of 59 some say because of sadness about what happened to Czechoslovakia. Still, I had a year to talk and learn from him. I wanted to make films like him. He wanted me to be an illustrator. "Too many producers telling you what to do in film," he warned me. "To be a good illustrator you must be a true artist - and that is hard - that can get very lonely sometimes."

But I was making films and they could take me places. An animated film I made won the "Golden Bear Prize" at the Berlin Film Festivals, which opened the doors of the world for me, while most of my countrymen could not even dream about traveling. It gave me a chance to attend the Royal College of Art here in London- where Quentin Blake, yet another Hans Christian Andersen Award laureate, tutored me in the department of illustration. I remember I asked him what color to use as the background for the picture I was working on, and he said something very different from the Central European tradition, "Just think what is the color you want - deep down you know - you are just asking me because you want to be sure...."

Still I was no illustrator even though I had done pictures for a book here and there, Hollywood and world of film were calling, and I was sent to America in 1982 to make an animated short for the summer Olympic games. First it was all great – palm trees and swimming pools -and then it did not go so well, because Soviet Union and [eastern bloc](#) countries decided to boycott the Games. I was ordered to go back. What to do? I stayed to finish the film. But there was no use for the film in the end! So here I was, out of a job, out of my country, when just like in a good fairy tale the third Hans Christian Andersen Award recipient comes to the rescue. Maurice Sendak, upon seeing my work, agrees to introduce me to the publishing world! He asked: "SO- [you](#) want to be an illustrator? Are you sure?"/ Oh I was sure-I was

desperate .../He continued : "It is not just for your glory as an artist. You are responsible to the children. You have to be truthful and remember what you wished for when you were growing up.."

You can follow your dream....but follow the dream of every child as much as you can...

And this is when I became an illustrator. First making pictures for other people's books, then coming up with my own stories- about my childhood, about leaving home and about exploring the world. I found out that one doesn't have to discover new continents, that people can explore in their mind even when locked in a prison cell and that books can be my home, my language, my country. I can share with my children and children of the world the universe of dreamers, seekers and people who dared to think differently. Books are bridges taking you places.....

One of the first bridges for children was built by the Czech educator and philosopher Jan Amos Comenius. His was the first illustrated book for children in the Western World, "Orbis Pictus", published in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It was teaching people how to live together in peace...teaching language,building bridges.....

I grew up near the Charles Bridge in Prague- a bridge with ancient statues where many people have walked through many ages...and where I believed as a boy, I could meet all of them on a full moon night...

Mozart...Galileo...Darwin... Saint-Exupery...

Oh....do I see Mr.Andersen with his tall hat over there?

Thank you Mr. Andersen.

Thank you my mentors... I know that all of you have walked here

Thank you for showing me the way...

I am trying to do the same thing

Thank you Jella Lepman for building "A Bridge of Children Books" many years ago.

Thank you IBBY--- for building the bridges- all over the planet...