

PRAGUE, THE CZECH REPUBLIC

AMBASSADOR'S RESIDENCE, VILLA PETSCHKEK

The Neo-Baroque residence of the United States Ambassador in Prague was designed and built between 1924 and 1929 by Otto Petschek, a wealthy banker and industrialist. Petschek, the ultimate armchair architect whose design books are still in the building's library, gathered inspiration from many visits to Versailles. He died in 1934, four years after moving into the Villa.

In 1938 the Petschek family escaped the Nazis and settled outside Europe. For most of World War II the house was occupied by General Toussaint, the German military governor of Prague, then by Soviet and Czechoslovakian forces. It was first leased for use by the U.S. Ambassador and thereafter acquired by Ambassador Laurence Steinhardt as part of a war reparations settlement on July 20, 1948.

The Villa's floor plan is a sweeping crescent embracing a large formal terrace overlooking a manicured lawn and flower garden. Parisian salons, particularly the Musée Carnavalet, heavily influenced Petschek and his prominent Czech architect Max Spielman. The scagliola plaster by Italian artisans imitates luxuriant marbles.

The Villa's significant modern technology includes electrically-operated glass terrace walls that float into the basement, zinc storage rooms for fur coats, and an airy, open cage elevator. The residence includes guest quarters, two separate apartments, a separate residence, and a staff building on the grounds. Among the notable ambassadors who lived here was the late Shirley Temple Black. After the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, the Villa was the setting of presidential meetings that led to expanding NATO membership. The building is similar to two others in Prague, also built by the Petschek family, now the Chinese Embassy and part of the Russian Embassy.

During the Cold War the residence was a refuge for dissidents and considered a symbol of American support for the anti-communist movement. Writers, poets, and playwrights were invited to dinners, receptions, and concerts. The sanctuary ended at the gate, however – Václav Havel, a leader of the 1989 anti-Communist "Velvet Revolution" and later president of the new Czech Republic, was arrested two blocks from Villa Petschek returning home from one of these events.

