

NPS-43/PREMINGER

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OTTO PREMINGER
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AUSTRIA, 1935

AGE UNKNOWN
PASSAGE ON "THE NORMANDIE"

NASH: Today is January 25th, and I am visiting with Mr. Otto Preminger, the producer and director. We are sitting in a very large office where the walls are covered with wonderful paintings, and we are going to begin. Mr. Preminger, when did you first come to this country?

PREMINGER: I arrived here on the 21st of October 1935, and I came on the ship called the Normandie in the company of a theatrical producer who was very famous then, called Gilbert Miller, and he had asked me to direct a play here for him after he heard that I was coming here on a contract to Twentieth Century-Fox. A man from Twentieth Century-Fox came to Vienna. His name was Joseph M. Schenck. He was the Chairman of the Board and when he heard about me at a very young age and I made quite a career in Vienna, I had taken over the theater from Max Reinhardt, the Viennese Theater when he retired in 1933, when he retired from this theater and it was a big thing because, you know who

Max Reinhardt was? And he was the greatest German and Austrian theatrical director and producer. And, Mr. Schenck offered me a contract to go to Twentieth Century-Fox and I accepted it and I told him I needed six months to wind up my affairs in Vienna. And I was lucky enough in 1935 to come to this country.

I always dreamed about going to America since I was a little boy. And I arrived here three years before the Nazis came to Vienna because if they had found me there I probably would have been killed or sent to a concentration camp like many of my friends. And I still don't like Vienna, to go to Vienna too much because there are too many sad memories about it there. I can also tell you an episode that will show you how coincidence takes, you know, part in our lives and in our futures. About a year or so before Mr. Schenck came, I got an offer from the State Theater in Vienna to become the head of the State Theater. And I was only, at that time, I was about twenty-five or twenty-six years old, and I accepted and we made a contract. And the Minister of Education invited me, his office was about three times the size of this office, all very beautiful antique furniture, and he was very polite. And he said, "At last they are going to have a young man at the head of the State Theater, you know, and his wonderful your ideas." And then he said, "Incidentally, I would feel very honored if you would permit me to be your sponsor when you convert to Catholicism. And I looked at him and without even thinking, and I am not religious, and I have not been brought up religiously, just as reflex I said, "But your Excellency, I do not plan to convert to Catholicism." And he was very polite, he continued talking, I never heard of the contract again. And if I had converted at that time to Catholicism, I would have still been in Vienna. I couldn't have left

when Joseph Schenck made me the offer to go to Hollywood. I would have been there when Hitler arrived, you see there was one thing about Hitler, a Jew converted or not, remained a Jew. And they would have had probably the same fate as all the other Jews had. So, I was very lucky that I, well this little episode talks for itself. But, you ask me what part it played in my career, this is very difficult to say. I changed my life, you know, because it is true I always wanted to go to America. And I found later, you know, when many of my friends came here, that only people who really like the country could make a career here. You know, I had many friends, actors, directors, who came here after Hitler came to Vienna, and they were very critical of America. See, there was a certain snobbish about Europeans. And I remember I was ah lunch once with a friend, a very good actor, who went back again. And he was very unhappy here during the immigration, and I said, "Well, why don't you enjoy it? You get offers, you can..." and he said, "My God, how can you, like, look," he said to the other table, "these people don't even know how to eat. They put the knife down and pick up the fork with their right hand, you know. You can't do this, it is bad manners." And I explained to him, I said, "Those are the bad manners in Vienna, but they are not bad manners in America. Everybody does it. Isn't it a miracle anyway that so many thousand miles away people still sit at similar tables, you know." I wouldn't be surprised, and I would enjoy it if people were lying on the couch here while they eat. And he is back in Vienna, and he is very happy and very successful there. But because, see I have found if somebody doesn't like this country or any other country, he cannot really live and work here successfully. And that is what I am ascribing, my

success, whatever success I had here in this country.

NASH: I recall reading, I did a little bit of reading before I came here, and that you once got a note from somebody, maybe it was an actor, he signed the note, "Good-bye Otto, going to see Adolf." (she laughs)

PREMIINGER: No, this was, no, this actor was not Jewish. He was a very famous star called Rudolph Foster. And he, I was producing and directing a play by Claire Boothe Luce called Margin For Error. It was just before the United States entered the war in 1939, and he played the lead, a German Consul, a Nazi Consul, and in the middle of rehearsals he left this note, which was much funnier in German. It said, "Dear Otto, I am rejoining Adolf. Love Rudolph." And he left and we couldn't find any Nazis at that time in New York. I mean any actors who could play Nazis. So Claire Boothe Luce told me wouldn't I play it, and I played it, you know. This is how I played a few Nazis in the play and then in several pictures because I had given up acting at the age of nineteen. But, you see I consider myself, in spite of my accent, American. Well, when people, you know, speak to me about, I speak German, of course, and when I was in Vienna I made part of the film, The Cardinal in Vienna, and this was the last time I was there. And I found there a terrific hypocrisy even now. There was, for instance, the Minister, Yenderman [PH] of Education, and he didn't permit me to shoot in the National Library. I got terrific cooperation from everybody else, but he didn't. And he was man who was touring the United States and giving very liberal speeches, and we had a big fight

that went into the papers because he said, "You should not show the arrival of the Nazis in Vienna," which is shown in this picture. And if not for the Cardinal Koenig, who is a wonderful man, I couldn't have done it because everybody, you know, who was, I wouldn't say Nazi, but still in fond memory of the Nazis, remembering them fondly, tried to stop me. For instance, the Cardinal had permitted me to work in the famous cathedral in Vienna, Saint Stephen's Cathedral, and then the Pastor of the cathedral said, "Oh, we are so busy. It is before Lent, you can't shoot here." So, I went to see the Cardinal again and said, "Your Eminence, the Pastor says I can't shoot because of Lent." And he said, "When do want to shoot?" and I said, "On Wednesday." He said, "What time?" I said, "Eight o'clock in the morning we start." He said, "On Wednesday at eight o'clock in the morning the Pastor will be in front of the cathedral and hand you the key." And he did and he was wonderful, you know. He let me shoot in this room because we shot the whole episode, I don't know if you have seen the film. You know there was a Cardinal Ennister [PH] at that time, you know, in Vienna who was kind of friendly to the Nazis, and the thing was that they eventually killed him. And that is all in the film that he was persecuted. And you see, the Viennese who, I wouldn't say that they are Nazis because I cannot make any statements which I can't prove, but they are not, you see. Vienna was always anti-Semitic in the southern part of Germany while the northern part never was. It was only imported there by Hitler. And they still feel that if Hitler had not made a few little mistakes he might still be there and they would have

this nice "Heil Hitler" greeting.

NASH: Where did you grow up?

PREMINGER: In Vienna.

NASH: In Vienna?

PREMINGER: I went to school there. And my father was a very successful man. He was first the prosecutor with the whole Austrian empire. And then during the First World War he went to the Army and he was the prosecutor for the Army in the most famous spy trials in Austria, you know, against the Czechs and other suspected traitors. And then he became after the First World War, he became a lawyer and was a very successful lawyer. But by the fact that I was here, it was possible for me, in 1938 when the Nazis came, to help him, you know. And he came here and then he came on a visitor's visa. And my brother too and his wife, and my mother and my father, my bother's children, although they were very small at that time. Well, actually, they had only one child then. And another friend here did something really beautiful for me. It was Tallulah Bankhead. She called me one day, she had heard about this and she said, "I made a date with my father and my uncle for you in Washington tomorrow at eleven o'clock." And you know, they were the Speaker of the House and the Senator respectively, and I arrived there and they brought a special bill because this quota, the immigration quota, was

filled, for my parents and for my brother and his wife to become citizens. And they became citizens this way.

NASH: You say that you always dreamed about America. What did you dream about?

PREMIINGER: But it isn't dreaming the way I saw films about America. Maybe it is difficult for you to realize, but there is something very romantic about America when you grow up in Europe. I mean Europe is the new land, I mean, not for everybody, and particularly now, you know. You see, at that time the traffic between America and Europe was really mostly only one way. Only American tourists came to Vienna or to Austria or to Europe altogether because it was a very big thing for Europeans to make a trip to America. And I always wanted to see America.

NASH: What had you heard about it?

PREMIINGER: Well, I read about it, I heard about it, I saw American films. And when I went to school even, you know, because my father felt that I would never really want to be in the theater, he asked me the favor to him to finish some form of studies and I became a Doctor of Law. So, I read. What did you hear about it read, you hear about and see those pictures of the tall buildings in New York. The

highest building in Vienna was maybe eight floors.

NASH: And did it live up to your expectations when you got off the boat?

PREMIINGER: Yes. I love New York in spite of the fact that I am not quite happy about the insecurity. You saw my son. You know this boy was thirteen years old and was in Central Park about six weeks ago, and he was bicycling with a few friends and a man came up to him, also a young man, and said ah, pulled a switchblade and said, "Get off your bicycle." And got on the bicycle, turned around to the four boys, "If anyone follows me I am going to kill you," and drove away. I must say that the police, it took them three and a half weeks, they found the man, they found the bicycle. And I was surprised the effort and the diligence that the police showed because people always complain about the police. And they were really wonderful. But, I mean that this can happen. It was two o'clock in the afternoon on 72nd Street and Central Park, is sad. But, let's hope it won't last.

NASH: So, you came to America as a, you had already decided for yourself that you were coming here permanently?

PREMIINGER: Yes, I got a contract. Yes, and you see, after I been here, you know, you know how careers are, sometimes I had setbacks before Hitler came to Vienna. I never

dreameed of going back.

NASH: And what was the reaction of the American film industry to European directors?

PREMIINGER: But there are many Europeans. There have always been many European directors here. I mean, this is a very international business. There's no special reaction.

NASH: They weren't especially respected or especially...

PREMIINGER: No. There was, before me there was Ernst Lubitsch here many, many European directors.

NASH: Is there anything that is particularly special to you about having become an American citizen?

PREMIINGER: Well, as I told you in the beginning, I feel very lucky that this happened to me because part of it did happen as I told you and it could have happened differently if I made different decisions in small other matters. And I am very happy. First, well it saved my life, but I also see, I couldn't imagine, see I go to Europe quite often, as a matter of fact I am going now to make a film in Europe.

And I go to Paris and London. There is no place that I would prefer to the United States. I might have been content with a summer house in the south of France, which is very pleasant. But, living and being a citizen and all, I would not like to be any other place. And the same thing is true about my children, I hope they will always be Americans and learn this from me. They were born here.

NASH: So, the you don't consider yourself an international figure? (she laughs)

PREMIINGER: I don't sit around and think about what I consider myself. I don't consider myself, I mean, I don't think about myself. It is very difficult, often people ask me what is your favorite film, what is the, you don't, at least I don't sit around and think. Only when I am interviewed like this. And now I am doing my autobiography and I must think of the past, but it is against my nature really. I like to think of the present, the future.

NASH: Were there any other points in your career in which your having come from Vienna made a difference?

PREMIINGER: No.

NASH: No. In your selection of themes?

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PREMINGER: I don't think so, you know. Usually, very few of my films have European themes. I usually try to avoid it because having been born in Europe my outlook on Europe, my perspective is often different from an American audience.

NASH: In what way?

PREMINGER: Huh?

NASH: In what way is it different?

PREMINGER: Well, I don't know, I mean, I can't tell you in what way, but they have a different opinion of Europe and they will see Europe in many ways glorified like I saw America in my mind, and I see Europe as it is, sad.
(she laughs)

NASH: Could you explain why it is sad?

PREMINGER: Well, it is behind, you know, now. And it is torn, it's, maybe it is getting better now. And America, you see, for instance, scandals, like the present Watergate scandal, and all the things around President Nixon, are very frequent in Europe, in some countries in Europe, but

people, you know, hide them. I mean that it could come out like it did, you see, sad as the facts about these scandals are, but it was all aired, you know. And the Congress investigated and there is investigating still going, and some of the Cabinet members have been indicted and the Vice President had to resign. And another member of the so-called Plumbers unit, you see. Don't forget all these people were very close to the White House. Whether the President knew it or not is another question and it has not been proven yet. But whether he knew it or not, he is responsible for these people. Those are his people and they also counted on him and he promised them to protect them, but he couldn't. You see, this is where he speaks for our system, for the way justice is handled here, and this is wonderful. The people, you get used to it, but look at other countries. They are all hushed up. If the President of any country, I don't want to mention the country's name, would be in that situation that President Nixon is in, he would have hushed it up long ago. The papers would have been scared to write about it and the people and the Congress wouldn't have investigated it. This to me, that a judge like Judge Sirica could bring out the whole thing, is wonderful. That speaks for the system and the system works and I hope

it will keep on working like this.

NASH: Was there any way that your being an immigrant, well coming from another country, do you feel it hampered you in any way?

PREMIINGER: No, absolutely not. I have never had any prejudices. On the contrary, I was a guest in the White House under every president except Eisenhower. There was Franklin D. Roosevelt, Truman. As a matter of fact about six or eight weeks after Mr. Nixon, for whom I did not vote and to whom I didn't know, was inaugurated, I got a card that President and Mrs. Nixon request the pleasure of Mr. and Mrs. Preminger for dinner on such and such a day. And I called my wife and I said, "Somebody must make a joke. Why should Nixon invite us to dinner?" And she said, "Are we going?" And I said, "Certainly, if the President of the United States invites us for dinner we are going." And besides I said, I knew President Johnson very well, even when he was still a Senator. I made a film in Washington and we saw each other quite often. And it took him five years of being President until he invited us to a very dull state dinner for the Prime Minister of New Zealand. And here is that Nixon invites us after six weeks. And she said, "Yes, but he is much more desperate for guests." And it was kind of looking in the future statement. I was invited it turned out because it was the birthday party for Duke Ellington, and he put me on the list. And he is a very good friend of mine. And I must say that Nixon in private life is a much different man. He is very easy going, at least he was then, he probably isn't anymore, and charming. It was a very good party, one of the

best parties I have seen at the White House.

NASH: It's all so interesting. I keep dragging this thing back to immigration. (she laughs)

PREMIINGER: To what?

NASH: I said I keep dragging us back to immigration, away from such, you know, interesting topics as the White House.

PREMIINGER: Well, you asked me if I had done anything, it is interesting that an immigrant can be invited, you know, by Roosevelt. You know, I was in the White House with a play that I had produced here with Laurette Taylor, was selected by Mrs. Roosevelt to be shown on his birthday on the 30th of January, 1940 in Washington. It showed every year a play after that for the March of Dimes. And afterwards I was sitting at the table in the White House next to the President and that was in only five years after. Well, I was not even a citizen yet, only five years after I arrived in this country, which I think speaks for the fact that this country is hospitable to immigrants.

NASH: It seems amazing to me that you came to this country and

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from what I know about your career, so soon you could make a film taking place in America. For example, I with Mr. Isaac Bashevis Singer, and he said it took him thirty years before he could write about American life, that he felt, you know, that he could communicate.

PREMIINGER: Well, because I came very young and it was easy for me to assimilate. You see, as I told you, I feel completely American, you know. The only thing about me which is not American is my accent which, strangely enough, I cannot lose.

NASH: Well, is there anything you would like to say further?

PREMIINGER: No, I think we have spoken enough. No museum would want to keep all this, but you can edit it anyway you want to. It's up to you. Thank you very much.

NASH: Thank you.

PREMIINGER: It's running out of tape, these tape recorders don't, is there anything on?

END OF INTERVIEW