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# The *Nostoi* of Two Acclaimed Immigrant Picturebook Creators

Allen Say and Peter Sís Negotiate the Paradoxes of Nostalgia and Find “Home” in Art

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Peter Sís and Allen Say are two acclaimed immigrant picturebook creators who travelled illuminating Odysseys, setting sail on boats of image and text. Only a few years after the end of World War II, Caldecott Medal winner Allen Say emigrated to the US from Japan. And during the Cold War, Hans Christian Andersen Award winner Peter Sís fled to the US from the Communist regime of former Czechoslovakia. Even though they came from different cultures, geographies, generations, and emigration experiences, both immigrant artists turned to art to negotiate their yearning for *nostos* (returning home), solace, and identity. Their negotiation of the paradoxes of nostalgia led them on similar paths: valuing the imagined, reconstructing their homelands and childhoods through and within art, and forming their identity by building on their self-image as artists. Their highly autobiographical picturebooks show us how healing, home, and identity may be found in Art and Story.

**Keywords:** Allen Say, art, home, paradoxes of immigrant nostalgia, Peter Sís, picturebooks

This article examines the paradoxes of immigrant nostalgia as a common *topos* in the work of two highly acclaimed immigrant picturebook artists, perceiving immigrant nostalgia as a painful longing to return to one’s motherland. At the age of sixteen, and just a few years after the end of World War II, Caldecott Medal winner Allen Say emigrated to the US from Japan with his father and stepmother. At thirty-three, during the Cold War, Hans Christian Andersen Award winner Peter Sís fled to the US from the communist regime of former Czechoslovakia.

Even though they came from different cultures, geographies, generations, and emigration experiences, both immigrant artists found refuge in art through their highly

autobiographical picturebooks, negotiating their yearning for *nostos* (i.e., returning home), solace, and identity. I claim that their negotiation of the paradoxes of nostalgia led them on similar paths: valuing the imagined, re-constructing their homelands and childhoods through and within art, and forming their identity by building on their self-image as artists.

### Paradoxical immigrant nostalgia

Another immigrant artist, the composer and singer Alkinoos Ioannides, also negotiates the paradoxes of nostalgia through art. A Cypriot immigrant living in Greece, Alkinoos wrote and performed a song titled *Small Suitcase*, a paradoxical composition from beginning to end (Table 1). For the immigrant character in the song, foreign lands are too far away from home, but the homeland is also foreign. He is carrying a small suitcase, which is empty but at the same time unbearably heavy—full of rock and sun. Moving forward is gloomy, but going back is hard. He yearns to set the suitcase down and find a place to stand still. The empty but heavy suitcase is cutting through his hands. If he lets go, he will bleed, but if he keeps holding it, he will bend. There is no going or coming for the immigrant; there is no return.

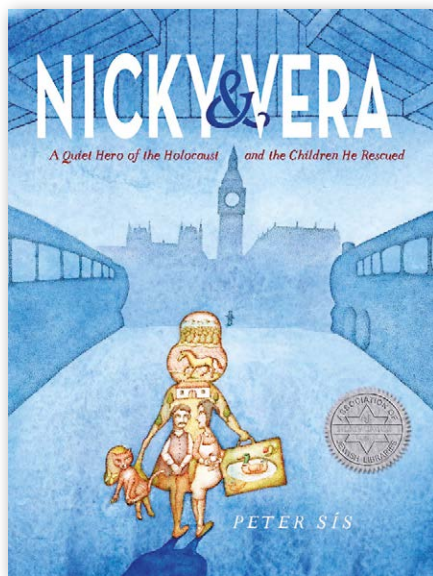
**Table 1.** Lyrics of the song by Alkinoos Ioannides, a Cypriot immigrant living in Greece

Μικρή Βαλίτσα	<i>Small Suitcase</i>
Και πού να πας και πού να 'ρθείς και πού να επιστρέψεις, που 'ναι τα ξένα μακρινά κι είν' τα δικά μας ξένα και πού να επιστρέψεις.	<i>And where can you go and where can you come and where can you return, that foreign lands are far away and our own land is foreign and where can you return.</i>
Μικρή βαλίτσα και βαριά, γεμάτη πέτρα κι ήλιο, είναι το εμπρός ανήλιαγο κι είναι σκληρό το πίσω και πού να σ' ακουμπήσω.	<i>Small suitcase and heavy, full of rock and sun, going forward is sunless going back is hard and where can I set you down.</i>
Μικρή βαλίτσα κι αδειανή κι ας μου 'κοψες τα χέρια, δε βρίσκω τόπο να σταθώ, ματώνω να σ' αφήσω, λυγώ να σε κρατήσω.	<i>Small suitcase and empty even as you cut through my hands, I can't find a place to stand, to leave you I bleed, to hold you I bend.</i>
Και πού να πάω και πού να 'ρθώ και πού να επιστρέψω, που 'ναι τα ξένα μακρινά κι είν' τα δικά μου ξένα και πού να επιστρέψω.	<i>And where can I go and where can I come and where can I return, that foreign lands are far away and my land is foreign and where can I return.</i>

Ioannidis's song offers a possible definition of paradoxical immigrant nostalgia. Even though it is usually not constructed as a paradox, the suitcase is a powerful symbol in immigrant children's literature. It is found, for instance, at the beginning of Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006). Also, a more recent picturebook by Chris Naylor-Ballesteros, appropriately titled *The Suitcase* (2020), builds its entire immigrant narrative on the suitcase metaphor. It is indicative that an article by Chryssa Kouraki, published in this special issue, is entirely devoted to analysing suitcases as symbols in refugee picturebooks: "Unpacking Nostalgia: Suitcases as Symbols of Nostalgia in Picturebooks about Refugees".

The immigrant's suitcase might not be a central theme in Peter Sís and Allen Say's work, but the immigrant's paradoxical nostalgia, as captured in the *Small Suitcase* song, certainly is. Sís and Say's nostalgia is so omnipresent that it cannot be contained in a single object, such as a suitcase. Their entire stories, including characters, are made of nostalgia; to a great extent, their art is nostalgia. This is visualised on the cover of Sís's *Nicky & Vera* (2021) (Fig. 1), where the asylum-seeking girl's silhouette merges with those of the objects she brings with her to the foreign land (a suitcase and a doll), replete with memories from her homeland.

The centrality of immigrant nostalgia in Sís's work is further highlighted by the publication of a second article in this special issue, by Alexandra Zervou and Vassiliki Vassiloudi, titled "Nostalgia, Diaspora, Memory and History in Peter Sís's picturebooks".



**Fig. 1.** The front cover of *Nicky & Vera* by Peter Sís (2021)<sup>1</sup>

**Sl. 1.** Prednja strana korica slikovnice *Nicky & Vera* [Nicky i Vera] Petera Sís (2021)

<sup>1</sup> All the images of the picturebook front covers in this paper are reproduced in accordance with the practice of fair use.

My personal immigrant experiences confirm the centrality of nostalgia in the immigrant psyche. I come to the present analysis from an immigrant positionality. In 2014, my family and I emigrated from Cyprus to the US. This was a challenging transition, but not nearly as difficult as that experienced by many other immigrants and refugees. We were a family with two young children moving to a foreign setting, language, and culture, but we were not fleeing violence or persecution or risking our lives in doing so. What we were fleeing was uncertainty, a severe financial crisis that had almost bankrupted Cyprus. We moved to the US looking for stability, hope, and a better future for our family. One might say that we were in a relatively privileged position, as our basic needs were met in the receiving country, and financial security was more-or-less guaranteed. However, paradoxical as it may sound, our lives are permeated by nostalgia to this day.

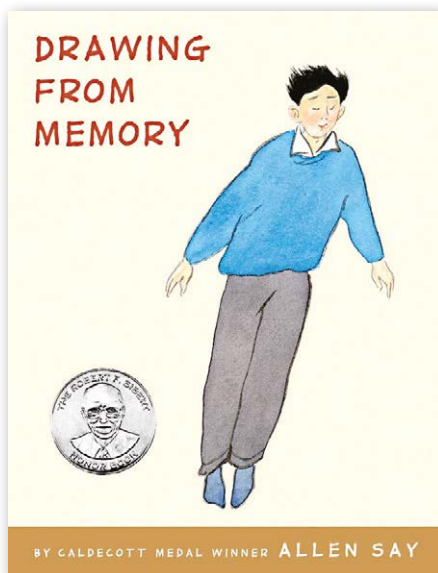
Both Allen Say and Peter Sís would be placed somewhere near the middle of an imagined immigrant trauma-to-privilege spectrum. Allen Say's father was a businessman who moved his business and home to the US, taking Allen with him and leaving Allen's mother behind as they had divorced. Growing up in Japan during and after World War II, Allen Say experienced significant trauma. Peter Sís also experienced traumatic events and situations in Czechoslovakia, brought by the Russian invasion and oppressive Communist regime, but he was already an acclaimed artist before he left. He was making animated movies, which gave him a different status from most of his compatriots. For instance, it allowed him to travel internationally, eventually enabling him to seek asylum in the US. Both artists' traumatic experiences in their respective home countries inform their ambivalent and paradoxical relationships with immigrant nostalgia.

Allen Say writes in *Drawing from Memory* (Fig. 2), his part picturebook memoir, part graphic novel, part narrative history (2011: 10):

Then a war began in 1941. When bombs started to fall on our city, Mother took us and fled to a village named Tabuse between Hiroshima and Iwakuni. Father stayed behind. We never went home again.

The above-quoted text is accompanied by a pencil sketch of himself, his mom, and his sister holding their baggage and each other's hands. We can only see their backs as they move away from the reader/viewer. On the same page, a black-and-white photo of Allen and his sister at a young age—their gaze turned away from the camera as if they are looking for something—is captioned “THE LAST PICTURE OF ME AND MY SISTER, SANAE, IN YOKOHAMA” (Say 2011: 10). Yokohama being their hometown, the text and image combine to communicate the idea of *home forever lost*.

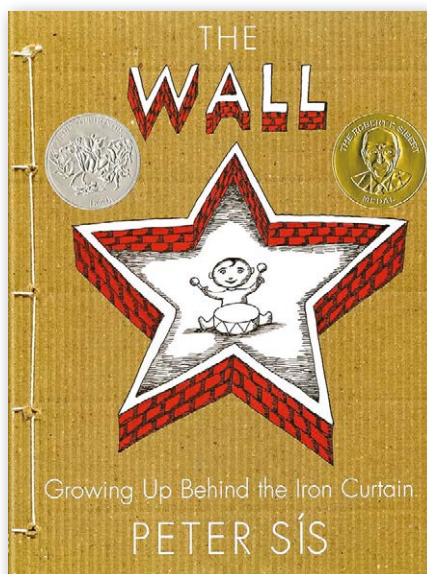
A couple of pages later, another black-and-white photo of a very young Say dressed up as a soldier is captioned, “I WAS FOUR WHEN THE WAR BEGAN IN 1941. I AM WITH MY BABYSITTER” (Say 2011: 12). The smiling, playful boy is contrasted to the background, which features a drawing of bombarded ruins. The only other text on the page reads: “When the war ended four years later, everything was broken” (ibid.). No additional words or images are needed to communicate the devastation of war and the trauma that Say underwent at this tender age.



**Fig. 2.** The front cover of *Drawing from Memory* by Allen Say (2011)

**Sl. 2.** Prednja strana korica slikovnice *Drawing from Memory* [Crtajući iz sjećanja] Allena Saya (2011)

Peter Sís's autobiographical picturebook *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain* (2007) (Fig. 3) depicts the trauma he experienced in his homeland at a more mature age than Say.



**Fig. 3.** The front cover of *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain* by Peter Sís (2007)

**Sl. 3.** Prednja strana korica slikovnice *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain* [Zid: odrastanje iza željezne zavjese] Petera Sís (2007)

Toward the middle of the book, a couple of bright and colourful pages about the Prague Spring of 1968 are followed by an entire page showcasing an imposing Russian tank in thick black lines. The only other colour on the page is the red flag flying on the tank. The text reads: “Then – it was all over” (Sís 2007: n.p.). The next page features a young adult Peter Sís, his face drawn in the style of Edvard Munch’s painting “The Scream”. As Peter drew about everything from a young age, in this illustration, he is holding a drawing of himself in the same Scream style. Behind him, a map of the walled city of Prague is saturated with red rectangles. The text reads, “Russian tanks were everywhere” (n.p.). A few pages later, a nightmarish image of police with dogs brutally beating down concertgoers features the text: “He was painting dreams... and then nightmares” (n.p.).

While recognising the artistic joys he experienced as a child, a teenager, and a young man, Sís resists nostalgic whitewashing of the past. Olga Maeots explains that (2009: 52):

*The Wall* expresses his protest against any nostalgia for socialist times. Sís opposes the desire to whitewash the past and so deliberately depicts first of all the negative features, those he himself suffered in his youth.

Sís’s nostalgia is ambivalent, as he is nostalgic only for certain aspects of his homeland and childhood/youth memories.

Often, trauma makes an immigrant or refugee’s relationship with their homeland ambivalent. Someone who is forced to abandon their homeland, going through traumatic experiences before, during, and after this uprooting, could come to view their homeland with a “nostalgic yearning combined with negative and traumatic memories – pleasure and affection layered with bitterness, anger, and aversion” (Hirsch and Spitzer 2010: 9). Perhaps this is one of the reasons nostalgia is paradoxical and bittersweet: “a bittersweet longing for former times and spaces” (Niemeyer 2014: 1). Recognising this ambivalence, scholars identify “nostalgic tensions” (Rizzi 2021) and discuss nostalgia as a “composite feeling of loss, lack and longing”, being at the same time “melancholic and utopian” (Pickering and Keightley 2006: 921).

Historically, the very conceptualisation of nostalgia is riddled with paradoxes. The term *nostalgia*, coined by a Swiss medical student in 1688, combines the Greek words *nostos* (return) and *algos* (pain or yearning) to describe the suffering caused by a person’s yearning to return to their homeland. *Nostalgia* was initially perceived as a homesickness illness with severe bodily and mental symptoms. Modern psychology, on the other hand, has constructed more positive perceptions of nostalgia, with multiple studies showing it to function as an essential resource for a person’s psychological health and well-being (Routledge et al. 2013: 808). Svetlana Boym (2007) identifies different functions of nostalgia, some beneficial and some detrimental to individuals and social groups.

In his novel *Ignorance*, Milan Kundera writes about Irena, the story’s immigrant protagonist (2023: 17):

The same moviemaker of the subconscious who, by day, was sending her bits of the home landscape as images of happiness, by night would set up terrifying returns to that same land. The day was lit with the beauty of the land forsaken, the night by the horror of returning to it. The day would show her the paradise she had lost; the night, the hell she had fled.

Day and night, happiness and terror, beauty and horror, paradise and hell – Kundera manages to capture the tensions and paradoxes of immigrant nostalgia. Of course, I should point to the connection between Irena, Kundera, and Sís, as all three are expats who fled Czechoslovakia during the Cold War.

As Scharioth and von Merveldt explain, Sís fled the hell of an artist who was not allowed to express himself freely (2009: 30):

His deep creative power and his unconditional determination to live as an artist free from “prescribed” commissions and ideological brainwashing impelled Sís not to return home to Communist Czechoslovakia from a trip to Los Angeles in 1982. He was thirty-three years old at the time, and he had to start all over again.

The same scholars recognise this as a central idea in the acclaimed artist’s work (30):

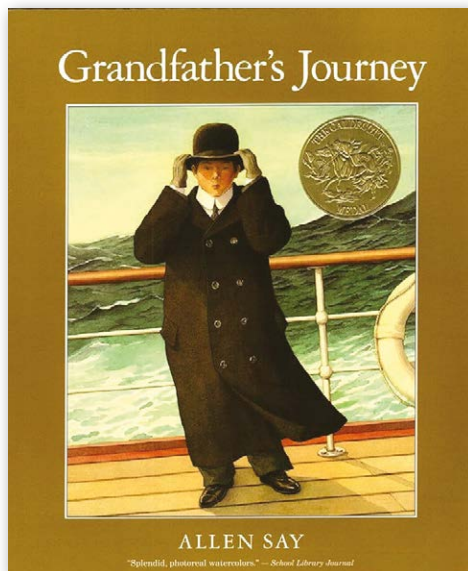
More than many other contemporary artists, Sís’s thinking, way of seeing the world, unique themes, as well as choice of artistic media are determined by his reflection on state-ordained and controlled propaganda and the attempt to evade their influence.

## The immigrant’s great return

In the same novel mentioned above, Kundera also manages to capture the allure of *nostos*, or the “Great Return” as he calls it. He coins the term “Great Return” to describe how *nostos* (the immigrant’s return home) is often glorified in literary, real-life, and traditional stories: “Odysseus sighting his island after years of wondering; the return, the return, the great magic of the return” (2023: 4–5).

Say’s most acclaimed and autobiographical picturebooks, *Grandfather’s Journey* (1993) and *Tea with Milk* (2007), focus heavily on the immigrant’s return. Both books, but especially the first one, capture the immigrant’s desire for *nostos*, for the “Great Return” (Fig. 4).

The Caldecott-award-winning *Grandfather’s Journey* tells the story of Say’s grandfather, who emigrated from Japan to the United States. Grandfather is shown to love California, his new home, but constantly misses his home village in Japan: “He remembered the mountains and rivers of his home. He surrounded himself with songbirds, but he could not forget” (Say 1993: n.p.). The wording “could not forget” implies the immigrant’s conscious but unsuccessful effort to forget and leave behind his homeland. This text accompanies a masterfully designed illustration showing the grandfather dressed in Western clothes, standing in his California home with his back turned to his caged songbirds, longingly looking outside.



**Fig. 4.** The front cover of *Grandfather's Journey* by Allen Say (1993)

**Sl. 4.** Prednja strana korica slikovnice *Grandfather's Journey* [Djedovo putovanje] Allena Saya (1993)

The text on the following page reads: “Finally, when his daughter was nearly grown, he could wait no more. He took his family and returned to his homeland” (n.p.). Once again, the immigrant fails in his fight against nostalgia: “he could wait no more”. Thus, Say’s grandfather has his *nostos*, his return, but it is not a “Great Return”, as Kundera would describe it. He moves back to his old village and is reunited with his old friends; however, he is soon forced to move to a big city, as his American-born daughter (Say’s mother) feels out of place in her dad’s rural village.

All the while, Grandfather is missing California. When his grandson, Allen Say, is born, he tells him stories about California. The immigrant’s nostalgia is now reversed. In the illustration, Grandfather is now wearing Japanese clothes and is sitting on the floor. He is facing the opposite way compared to the earlier image, and instead of looking out of the window, he is looking at his songbirds. He is ignoring the Japanese garden, partly seen behind the shaded window. The text reads: “He raised warblers and silvereyes, but he could not forget the mountains and rivers of California. So, he planned a trip” (n.p.).

When the war comes, Grandfather’s plan for a return to California is cancelled, and his city home is bombarded and left in ruins. He returns to his village, where he never raises songbirds again, and passes away with the unfulfilled desire to see California one last time.

At the end of the book, the immigrant cycle is repeated, with the grandson, Allen, emigrating to California “to see it for himself”. Like his grandfather, Allen also comes to love California but also misses Japan: “So I return now and then, when I cannot

still the longing in my heart” (n.p.). The phrase “when I cannot still the longing in my heart” is reminiscent of the wording used earlier to describe Grandfather’s paradoxical nostalgia, once again highlighting the painful inevitability of immigrant nostalgia. The paradoxical nature of nostalgia is also foregrounded in the very last sentence of the story, which describes the grandson’s conflicting feelings about his two homes: “The funny thing is, when I am in one country, I am homesick for the other” (n.p.).

Notably, during his Caldecott Medal Acceptance Speech, Allen Say spoke extensively about his actual return to Japan. His narration was not that of a “Great Return”. He tells the audience, for instance, how disappointed he was to find out that his family home was no longer there: “All the houses were still standing except mine. It had been demolished only a month before my return” (1994: n.p.). He describes his visit to his prep school in similar terms (n.p.):

Some of my old teachers were still there, and one of them presented me with a thirtieth anniversary school album. The slick book had pictures of anyone who had ever had anything to do with the school — teachers, parents, and caretakers. All except me. I had spent a fifth of my young life there, and yet I did not exist in the school history.

Then, at a school reunion, he tries to remind his old schoolmates of a visit by a black American soldier (which Say turned into a picturebook story). Still, no one remembers (Say 1994: n.p.):

They looked at me with embarrassment and incomprehension, even pity. Then they laughed and called me Urashima Taro, the fisherman of the ancient folktale who returns home after being away for four hundred years.

Taro is an Odysseus-like character in a traditional Japanese story who leaves home and stays with Princess Otohime in her underwater palace. When he becomes homesick and longs to reunite with his parents, he returns to his homeland only to discover that four hundred years have passed. Everything has changed: his home is gone, his mother and father are dead, and all the people who once knew him are also gone. Indeed, Say seems to feel like Taro, returning to a foreign homeland.

“How does one ultimately recognize one’s island?” Barbara Cassin asks. And she answers: “One recognizes it, I think, because one is recognized there, that is, because one has one’s identity there” (2016: 15). She continues to assert that the entire *Odyssey* is powered by Odysseus’s quest for identity as much as it is by his nostalgia for Ithaca (ibid.). Allen Say, like Taro, is not recognised in his homeland: “Like Urashima Taro, I had gone back to a world without a past. My childhood was entirely in my mind. A dream. Feeling a sense of irretrievable loss and uncertainty, I came back to California” (Say 1994: n.p.).

## Negotiating the loss of home through art

Colin Haines (2021: 28) observes that *Grandfather’s Journey* entails the loss of home and the negotiating of this loss. Drawing on Sigmund Freud’s theory of mourning and melancholia, Haines examines how different immigrant or migrant protagonists cope

with the loss of home. He explains that “[i]n mourning, attachment to the lost object is gradually, albeit painfully, given up”, and thus the loss is eventually accepted (29). In melancholia, on the other hand, “the lost object is not given up, but is preserved within the subject’s own ego, becoming a part of him or herself”, leading to “an inability to accept” the loss (ibid.). Pointing to the grandfather’s and grandson’s melancholia about their loss of home(s) in Japan and California, Haines then argues that the protagonists of *Grandfather’s Journey* do not accept their loss of home. This is correct in as much as it describes immigrant nostalgia, this paradox of knowing that “home” as you remember it will never exist again but still the immigrant yearns to return there.

Moreover, as demonstrated by the way in which home is preserved within the subjects’ egos, making the lost home a part of themselves is a much more productive mechanism than Haines implies. Grandfather tells stories about “home”, surrounds himself with beautiful things that remind him of home, travels, has a family, reunites with old friends, and makes plans to return. The grandson also travels, living a productive life and, most importantly, telling beautiful nostalgic stories and creating unforgettable art through his picturebooks.

Kundera titles the novel mentioned earlier *Ignorance*, drawing inspiration from the Spanish word for *nostalgia*: “In Spanish *añoranza* comes from the verb *añorar* (to feel nostalgia), which comes from the Catalan *enyorar*, itself derived from the Latin word *ignorare*” (Kundera 2023: 6). He explains that when thinking about it through the Spanish term, “nostalgia seems something like the pain of ignorance, of not knowing. You are far away, and I don’t know what has become of you. My country is far away, and I don’t know what is happening there” (ibid.). This “pain of ignorance” is similar to Say’s and Taro’s pain. The pain of not recognising/not knowing your homeland and the pain of not being recognised/known in your homeland.

Allen Say turned to his art and his imagination to alleviate this pain. In art, he found both solace and identity. In the same Caldecott Medal Acceptance Speech mentioned earlier, he explains that ever since his childhood he has tended not to distinguish dream from reality, and does not value the real over the dreamed. “Sleeping and waking are the two sides of the same continuum”, he says. This is why, whereas he had earlier created picturebooks in an effort to build bridges between his two cultures, he eventually realised that what drives him is much more elemental and honest (Say 1994: n.p.):

I am striving to give shape to my dreams – the old business of making myths – the fundamental force of art. And so, *Grandfather’s Journey* is essentially a dream book, for the life’s journey is an endless dreaming of the places we have left behind and the places we have yet to reach.

Everything is accessible through our imagination, both our memories and our dreams for the future, and so it is the imagination, the dream, that Allen Say strives to capture and explore in his art. Even if he cannot recognise his homeland when he visits it, he still recognises it in his dreams and in his art.

Peter Sís also turns to his art and his picturebooks to recover the loss of his homeland and negotiate a bittersweet nostalgia for the Prague of his youth. In accepting the Hans Christian Andersen Award, Sís also privileges the imagined over the real home (2012a):

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.

Similarly to Allen Say, Peter Sís tends not to distinguish between the real and the imagined. Here is a revealing excerpt from his Hans Christian Andersen Award acceptance speech (ibid.):

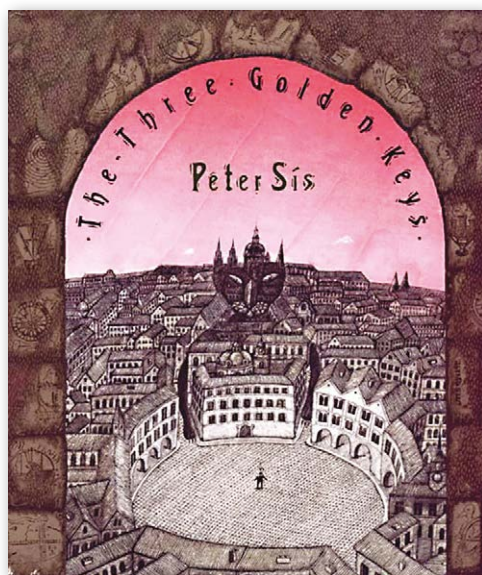
I grew up near the Charles Bridge in Prague – a bridge with ancient statues where many people have walked through many ages...and where I believed as a boy, I could meet all of them on a full moon night...

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

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

Thank you, Mr. Andersen.

True to his conviction, Sís imagines his “Great Return” as a dream captured in his picturebook, *The Three Golden Keys* (1994) (Fig. 5).



**Fig. 5.** The front cover of *The Three Golden Keys* by Peter Sís (1994)

**Sl. 5.** Prednja strana korica slikovnice *The Three Golden Keys* [Tri zlatna ključa] Petera Sísa (1994)

Even though he sets out to tell the story to his daughter, Madeleine, so she learns more about where her father comes from, his return is described as involuntary and accidental: “A wind and turbulent storm took control of my hot-air balloon and sent me far off course” (Sís 1994: n.p.). Perhaps, like Say and his grandfather, Sís is also vainly trying to resist the pull of *nostos*. Or maybe Sís’s conflicting emotions about Prague, where he had both euphoric and traumatic experiences, are reflected in this reluctant return. Early in the picturebook story, the verbal narrator says: “Every house, every window, every cobblestone brings back some memory. The signs on the old buildings tell of good times and bad” (n.p.).

This contrast between good and bad memories – the paradise he lost and the hell he fled, as Kundera would have it – is embodied in the contrast between happy childhood memories described in the text and gloomy, almost monochrome buildings and ghost-like figures in the images. The eeriness of the situation is heightened by the fact that the city is entirely void of people: “There was nobody anywhere” (n.p.). The dark and gloomy pictures capture the bittersweet aspect of nostalgia and the immigrant’s ambivalence and uncertainty. “Would I still remember the way through the twisting streets to my family house?” (n.p.) the narrator wonders.

He does find his way to his family home, but the front door is locked with three padlocks. So, following his childhood pet, a black cat that appears out of nowhere, he sets off on a quest throughout the city to discover the three golden keys that open the door to his childhood home. Interestingly, he gains these keys through the art and stories he rediscovers in the city. When he finally unlocks the door, the interior of his family home comes to life with people, voices, and colours.

Peter Sís’s actual return to Prague must have been less dramatic. In an interview he gave with Leonard S. Marcus, he jokes about his return (Sís 2012b: 227):

The first time I returned to Prague it was amazing. It was still under Communist rule. I had become a U.S. citizen in May of 1989, and I immediately went to Prague – seven years after I’d left. I went to see that everyone I had known there was still alive. I was hoping that some policeman would stop me just so that I could say, “I have an American passport.” The only thing that happened was at the airport when I was going through the Passport Control, somebody asked me, “Is this your first time here?” I almost think it was a joke, but I’m not sure.

He may speak about it in jest, but at least three important things stand out in this account. One, as soon as he could safely return “home” he did so, albeit as a visitor. Two, he wanted to dispel his traumatic memories by confronting a policeman, one of the oppressors who made life difficult for him during his youth. And he wished to do so by showing the policeman that he was now different, a free American citizen. Lastly and paradoxically, even though he valued being different, he also wished to be recognised upon his return, looking for everyone he used to know in Prague. This is why he was astounded when he was treated at the Passport Control as a foreigner visiting Prague for the first time.

## Finding home and identity in art

As mentioned in *The Picture Book Odysseys of Peter Sís*, early in his life, Peter had realised that “the Arts were among the most potent vehicles of freedom” (Lass 2019: 8). It was literally Sís’s art that made it possible for him to flee to the USA, as he did so while visiting Los Angeles to work on an animation movie. The wings he uses to fly over the wall in his autobiographical *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain* are made of his drawings. Art has also allowed Peter to experience multiple odysseys through his picturebooks, often featuring real or imaginary characters embarking on fascinating journeys and quests. Christophe Meunier describes Sís’s “picture traveling” as a quest for home, meaning, and identity (2015: 5):

Picture traveling is exactly what Peter Sís invites us to do, but it is also the life of the American author of Czech origin. The account of his seclusion behind the Iron Curtain, of exile, of the loss of socio-geographic bearings, of appropriating new territories, this is the heart of the work of Peter Sís. The creation of children’s books, of stories in pictures and text, was for him a chance to build bridges between two banks, to unite the “where I come from” with the “where I am,” to give meaning to the “where I’m going.”

Art is fundamental in Sís’s and Say’s negotiations of nostalgia and identity. Through their work and their commentary on their work, they both seem to find their lost home in their art, so much so that it becomes the central pillar of their identity. In a recent documentary about his life and work, Peter Sís confesses: “I thought I’d find fulfillment in the USA. Then, I eventually found out that life is similar no matter where you were and that I was searching for an answer inside. I’m searching for it through my books” (Czech Centre London 2021). He has always turned to art to find answers, to find solace, to find community, and to find himself. In an afterword to *The Wall*, he shares that when things got unbearable in Prague, he would throw himself into art, drawing and painting on every surface available: on chairs, light switches, even on the refrigerator. In the same afterword, he writes: “I find it difficult to explain my childhood; it’s hard to put it into words, and since I have always drawn everything, I have tried to draw my life – before America – for [my family]” (Sís 2007: n.p.). In creating *The Three Golden Keys*, he turns to art to show his daughter where he grew up.

One could claim that Peter constructs, or re-constructs, his childhood and his homeland through his art. Giorgio Busi Rizzi explains that nostalgia is often part of one’s working through their identity: “[B]y longing for who we were (where we lived, what we did, and so on), or even for who we wished we were, we reconnect those identities with what we see as our core identity and who we are now” (2021: 648–649). Peter Sís is exploring – even defining – his identity through nostalgia, and the laboratory for this work is his art studio. Meunier writes about Sís’s studio in New York: “In this little hole in the wall, some 40 square meters, this two-room apartment on the second floor of the corner of Elizabeth and Prince Streets, Peter Sís redrew life, the city, the world, his world, his universe” (2015: 217).

It is indicative that *The Wall* begins with the phrase “As long as [Peter Sís] could remember, he had loved to draw” and concludes with “As long as he can remember, he will continue to draw”. The first phrase accompanies the image of the toddler-Peter drawing, and the second labels the image of the elder-Peter still drawing. Sís defines himself first and foremost as an artist.

Allen Say also defines himself first and foremost as an artist. In *Drawing from Memory*, he highlights a disconnect with his father, who did not value art, while highlighting his relationship with his spiritual father, his *Sensei* (mentor), the great cartoonist Noro Shinpei. His love for art and his *Sensei* are breathed into every page of that book. Talking about his early childhood, he writes: “When I was drawing, I was happy. I didn’t need toys or friends or parents” (Say 2011: 9).

A better title for *Drawing from Memory* might have been *Drawing Memory*, as this is what Allen Say does in this book and several others; he imagines and draws his memories, not necessarily distinguishing between the real and the imagined. He imagines – or dreams, as he would say – his past and the places where he has lived, performing identity work through nostalgia and art.

Because the stuff of his art is both lived and imagined memories, when one compares the stories Say tells about himself, his parents, and his grandfather in his books, they do not always corroborate. There are several incongruities, for instance, regarding his decision to move to the US. In *Grandfather’s Journey*, his grandfather is shown to be influential in this decision, but there is no mention of the grandfather’s role in *Drawing from Memory*. In the second book, his father decides to move to the States and invites Say to join him. Say chooses to join his father only after his *Sensei* advises him to do so.

I am unsure if Say has been asked about these or any other contradictions in his books, but had he been asked, his answer would probably be, “It doesn’t matter”. What Say considers “the most wondrous gift of all” is indicative of this: a magnificent ceremonial sword he once dreamed of having been gifted by a lordly personage (1994: n.p.). He shares that this imagined object is the greatest gift he has ever received. He also shares another dream, during which he tells a friend, “Look, we’re in a dream”, and the friend replies, “I know, but it doesn’t matter”. Say explains that in this dream, “the friend is clearly the voice of my intuition, telling me that sleeping and waking are the two sides of the same continuum. ‘It doesn’t matter’” (n.p.).

Kundera claims that “Homer glorified nostalgia with a laurel wreath and thereby laid out a moral hierarchy of emotions. Penelope stands at its summit, very high above Calypso” (2023: 9). Peter Sís and Allen Say have shown us that, perhaps, it is neither Penelope nor Calypso who sit at the top of this moral hierarchy. They seem to feel (or imagine) that *The Odyssey* itself – art, story, dream, imagination – belongs at the top. Sís and Say have shown us that what our dreams were – indeed what our dreams still are – what we imagined and still imagine ourselves and our home to be (or to become) is more important than our actual lived experiences. And that we can find healing, a magical place of home and identity, in Art and Story.

Despite coming from different cultures, geographies, generations, and emigration experiences, both immigrant artists turned to art to negotiate their yearning for *nostos*, solace, and identity. This negotiation led them on similar paths: turning to art to reimagine their homelands and re-construct their identities and personal histories.

Concluding with the *Small Suitcase* song analysed at the beginning, I wonder if the immigrant composer and singer Ioannidis eventually finds a place to set down his suitcase. I wonder if he ultimately sets it down in his songs, just like Sís and Say set down their suitcases in their picturebooks. And where does he go, and where does he return? He goes, and he returns to his Music. Just as Sís and Say go and return to their Art. Art is, at the same instance, the vehicle and the destination for these acclaimed immigrant artists' *nostoi*.

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### **Nostoi dvojice istaknutih imigranata, autora slikovnica: Allen Say i Peter Sís prolaze kroz paradokse nostalgije i pronalaze „dom“ u umjetnosti**

Peter Sís i Allen Say istaknuti su autori slikovnica i imigranti koju su prošli svoje odiseje ploveći na slikovnim i tekstualnim brodovima. Samo nekoliko godina nakon završetka Drugoga svjetskoga rata, dobitnik medalje Caldecott, Allen Say, emigrirao je iz Japana u Sjedinjene Američke Države. Tijekom Hladnoga rata, dobitnik nagrade Hans Christian Andersen, Peter Sís, pobjegao je u SAD iz komunističkoga režima bivše Čehoslovačke. Iako potječu iz različitih kultura, zemljopisnih područja, naraštaja i emigrantskih iskustava, oba umjetnika, imigranta, okrenula su se umjetnosti kako bi se suočili sa svojom čežnjom za *nostosom* (povratkom kući), utjehom i identitetom. Njihovo prolaženje kroz paradokse nostalgije dovelo ih je do sličnih putova: vrjednovanja zamišljenoga, rekonstruiranja svojih domovina i djetinjstva kroz umjetnost i unutar nje te oblikovanja identiteta temeljena na slici o sebi kao umjetniku. Njihove izrazito autobiografske slikovnice pokazuju nam kako se iscjeljenje, dom i identitet mogu pronaći u umjetnosti i priči.

**Gljučne riječi:** Allen Say, umjetnost, dom, paradoksi imigrantske nostalgije, Peter Sís, slikovnice