

Juan de Recacochea's American Visa: *A Symbol of Hope and a Means of Salvation*

Milan Jazbec¹

ABSTRACT

This paper innovatively discusses the presence of consular affairs as a specific part of diplomatic activity in the internationally acclaimed novel *American Visa* by Juan de Recacochea. It focuses on the way the author perceives consular affairs and issuing visas as one of the most identified consular functions, with a reference to the applicant, his plans, social background and personal destiny, depending on the outcome of the application process. It uncovers psychological aspects of the applicant as well as those of consular officers and their supporting personnel. Consulates issue visas to persons who wish to enter the sending state or transit through it. American visas are viewed in the eyes of applicants from less developed countries as an entry ticket to a better life. The novel presents a set of detailed and complicated rules and procedures established to prove validity of each application as well as a range of practical, legal and other steps to obtain the visa for any price. The novel discussed is a masterpiece of related literature.

KEYWORDS: diplomacy, literature, protection of interests, consular affairs, visa, American visa

POVZETEK

Prispevek izvirno obravnava pojavnost konzularnih poslov kot posebnega dela diplomatskih dejavnosti v mednarodno priznanem romanu *Ameriška viza* avtorja Juana de Recacochea. Osredotoča se na način, kako avtor razume konzularne zadeve in izdajanje vizumov kot ene najbolj znanih konzularnih funkcij s posebnim ozirom na prosilca, njegove načrte, družbeno ozadje in ne nazadnje na njegovo osebno usodo, ki je odvisna od ne-prejema vizuma. Predstavljeni so psihološki vidiki prosilca kot tudi konzulov in njihovega osebja. Vizumi se izdajajo osebam, ki želijo vstopiti v državo pošiljateljico ali tranzitirati skozi njo. Ameriški vizum se smatra pri prosilcih iz manj razvitih držav za vstopnico v boljše življenje. Roman predstavlja po eni strani celoto natančnih in zapletenih pravil in procedur za preverjanje prosilcev ter po drugi strani vrsto praktičnih, legalnih in drugačnih korakov, kako pridobiti vizum za vsako ceno. Obravnavani roman je odličen primer tematizacije vizumskih poslov.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: diplomacija, literatura, zaščita interesov, konzularne zadeve, vizum, Ameriška viza

1 ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Milan Jazbec, PhD, Professor of Diplomacy, poet and writer. Former Ambassador of Slovenia to North Macedonia (2016 – 2020) as well as to Turkey (2010 – 2015), accredited also to Azerbaijan, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon and Syria, and State Secretary at the Slovene Ministry of Defence (2000 – 2004). Employed at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Slovenia. Email: milan.jazbec@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Diplomacy is a profession dedicated to the management of relations among states by various peaceful means. This is a very condensed and brief definition of the term, which we use in this article as a research starting point as well as a conceptual framework. More precisely, we pay our research attention to consular relations, which are part of a broader area of diplomatic relations. The connection and correlation between the two areas, namely diplomatic relations and consular relations, is present through the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (henceforth Diplomatic Convention) and the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations (henceforth Consular Convention).

The consular area is also known as an activity that provides protection of interests of citizens of the sending state in the receiving state, and also issues visas to persons from the receiving state (or from the third state), who want to enter the sending state (or transit through it). So issuing visas is a tool that provides hope or sometimes even a salvation for successful applicants. This very point lies in the center of our research attention. We are interested in how this issue on a general level, but also in details, is reflected in one of the most acclaimed modern Latin American novels – *American Visa*. Written and published almost three decades ago by Juan de Recacoechea, long time journalist and media expert and manager, it is the most successful Bolivian novel ever written. We stem from the preposition that intersection between diplomacy and literature could tell us more about both, i.e. consular affairs and contemporary literature, and would also consequently produce a better and wider understanding of the two of them.

There are two research questions, which we try to answer in the paper. Firstly, how the acclaimed author presents and perceives the concept and process of issuing visas in his renowned novel, and secondly, what interested readers can learn from this work for their understanding of consular affairs at the beginning of the 21st Century, when people commute as never before in the recorded history. The methods used for this research effort include analysis, comments, comparison and interpretation as well as – since the author is a career diplomat with broad and deep consular experience – the method of observing through one's own participation.² Because of the style and high importance of dialogues, there is a significant number of quotations – with the aim to

2 For more on the latter method see Burnham, 2004, and Mason, 2002.

show the atmosphere and the way the author has experienced consular affairs. Each given context and situation are always important and unique. This produces nuances, skilled and sensitive messaging, and creates specific atmosphere.

From one point of view we remain at a general level of analysis, following main trends and trying to reach some general conclusions, while from another one we go in concrete examples, focusing on procedural and psychological aspects and background. With this we try to illustrate not only understanding of particular aspects of providing visas, but also general trends in presenting consular business in a newly discovered context of appearance, i.e. modern fiction literature.

CONSULAR AFFAIRS AND THEIR FICTIONAL REFLECTION

THE COMPLEXITY OF VISA BUSINESS

In order to comprehend consular relations, we should first start with the understanding of diplomacy. Hence, we repeat at this point after Benko (1998, p.39) that there exist “numerous definitions of diplomacy, which do not contradict each other, but rather complement them.” Therefore, we refer to Jazbec (2018, p.113) to “understand diplomacy as a skill, negotiation, communication, mission, organization, foreign policy, activity, tool etc.”³ Diplomacy is, in its essence, defined by diplomatic functions, presented in Article 3 of the Diplomatic Convention, while consular affairs as a broader part of diplomacy, are defined in the Consular Convention, and more precisely by consular functions in the Article 5. However, while discussing this profession and the way it materializes, we should look at a broader frame that defines diplomacy.

From a comprehensive sociological perspective one can “on the whole understand diplomacy as a dynamic *social process*, which enables foreign policy communication among subjects of international public law, and depends primarily on the changing social situation within a given historical context and is in principal relation towards the nation state” (Jazbec, 2013). To understand diplomacy, one should be aware of its concrete social and psychological context.

This also applies to the understanding of consular business, where we

3 Comp. Anderson, 1993, Benko, 1998, Berridge, 2015, Feltham, 1994, Jazbec, 2009, Nicolson, 1988, Petrič, 2013 etc.

see visas as one of its cornerstones. It remains to be so in the time of the ever changing nature of diplomacy, influenced by globalization and the structural diversification of national societies as well (comp. Cooper, 2013). And consular relations are part of this changing pattern (comp. Okano-Heijmans, 2013). Additionally, one could say that diplomatic business in its essence is a political issue, while consular affairs are – since they relate primarily to bodies of private (and corporate) law – bound to a concrete destiny of an individual. Hence each application brings to the attention of a consular officer a different and new experience and case that should be treated carefully, with due empathy and sensitivity: “It’s very stressful [to be] dealing with [the future of] someone’s whole life” (Edwards, 1994, p.185). There hardly is a legal frame that would allow such an approach. A person’s destiny lies in a single application, while a country’s destiny hardly at all lies in a single diplomatic note.⁴

The second diplomatic function: “Protecting in the receiving State the interests of the sending State and of its nationals, within the limits permitted by the international law”⁵ provides a general diplomatic frame and background for the implementation of consular functions (thirteen all together).⁶ One could cluster them in three groups: those that refer to citizens of the sending State, those that refer to citizens of the receiving State (and in some cases to those of third states), and those that refer to all of them. Issuing visas is defined in the second part of the fourth function: “... and visas or appropriate documents to persons wishing to travel to the sending State”.⁷ Consular functions, such as also issuing visas, could be performed by either a diplomatic mission or a consular post.

Diplomatic Convention defines the possibility of issuing visas by either of the two mentioned authorities with an indirect diplomatic language as “Nothing in the present Convention shall be construed as preventing the performance of consular functions by a diplomatic mission” (Article 3, para 2.). Diplomatic mission does this within its Consular Section that is part of its general structure, following the pattern that remains in practice (Feltham, 1994, p.17). Consular Con-

4 The renown Slovene author Janko Kersnik (1852 – 1897) with whom realism in Slovene literature reached its peak, presents the importance of this approach towards a person’s destiny in his collection of short stories *Kmetske slike* (The Peasant’s Pictures, 1986). This further backs up our belief that consuls deal with people’s destiny.

5 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, Article 3.

6 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, *Article 5 Consular Functions*.

7 *Ibid.*

vention addresses it directly, as follows: "The provisions of the present Convention apply also, so far as the context permits, to the exercise of consular functions by a diplomatic mission" (Article 70, para 1.). If the sending State has in the receiving State both diplomatic mission and consular post, it decides, in consent with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the receiving State, the consular district and jurisdiction between the diplomatic mission and the consular post. In addition to this, let us also remark that states prefer to have consular department separated from the embassies also psychically (not only separate entrance for applicants, but also separate building, if possible). This enables smooth run of each of the affairs, in particular for those coming to the Embassy for business oriented reasons, media people, nationals, etc.

Unless there is a visa free regime in force between two or more countries, persons can not freely enter a given country.⁸ One can understand visa regime as "a set of norms which regulates the mode of entry, residence or stay and exit, on the territory of a State." (Markovski, 2017, p.71) Those persons must obtain visa for this purpose either at a diplomatic mission or at a consular post. Apart from the necessity of possessing a passport, a person "desirous of visiting a country other than his own would not only require a passport endorsed valid for the country in question from his own government, but he would also need an entry visa from the government of the state which he wishes to enter for the purpose of travel or residence" (Sen, 1988, p.399). Generally speaking, issuing visas is one of the most common activities of diplomats and consuls worldwide, since the number of countries with mandatory visa regime outnumbers heavily those with liberalized visa regime.⁹ We could claim that "for majority of people the word "visa" is a kind of diplomatic, in particular consular brand" (Jazbec, 1997, p.86).

Visa is most commonly understood as "a special authorization (stamped or placed in a passport) to visit or to undertake paid or business activity in a state." (Berridge and James, 2003, p.273) This means that visa is also an instrument of controlling who will enter or be allowed to enter the receiving State and why. Issuing visas also means "regulation, con-

8 An example of visa free regime between more countries is the Schengen system within EU that enables freedom of travel for all EU citizens.

9 Here we can bring to the attention of the reader the fact, that Kosovo is the only European country whose citizens have to obtain a visa to travel to the vast majority of European countries (apart from Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia). Although the European Commission claims that Kosovo fulfills criteria for a visa free regime, the EU member states in general do not share this opinion.

trol, selection and also disabling alien persons to enter a given state” (ibid.). An example from the British diplomacy clearly illustrates what this selection means: “The job of the Foreign Office’s entry clearance work is twofold: to ensure that the right applicants are allowed into Britain, and the wrong ones are not” (Edwards. 1994, p.183). Visa is not only a matter of pure administrative procedure and decision, but it bears political message as well: “States apply the visa regime to control migration, safety, economic and other issues which may present migration, as well as political risks” (Markovski, 2017, p.71).¹⁰ States formulate their visa regimes very carefully and pay attention also to changes in the international environment, primarily from the security point of view. Hence, visa regime is not fixed and unchangeable, but depends on many determinants and countries tend to implement it quite cautiously.¹¹ One could easily claim that cautiousness is one of the major principles in each visa regime.

For these reasons, states developed quite complex and detailed systems of rules and criteria that have to be fulfilled to satisfy the aim of obtaining visa. Applicants have to verify their material position with clear evidence of having enough means to live in the entering state on their own behalf and that they will not present a financial or similar burden for the state concerned. Also an invitation from an individual from that state who takes all the necessary guarantees (and possible risks) is a must. The complexity of regulations is a reflection of the above mentioned cautiousness. But at the same time this complexity also pushes certain share of applicants to seek “shortcuts”, i.e. trying to outmaneuver the system with illegal or fake documents. This system also includes local agencies, which by the rule help applicants to get through those regulations and instructions easily. And in some cases they also get involved in applicants efforts to outmaneuver the system.

In practice, the system works quite simple: the applicant receives full and exact information from the diplomatic or consular authority on what the conditions and the procedure are (usually via social media). After contacting the post, there follows the interview and handover of the application. After careful and cross agencies check of documents at the receiving institution (diplomatic mission or consular post), and quite often also at the related authorities in the sending state, there comes the answer and possible visa – or its denial. Those systems work

¹⁰ Comp. also Wouters et. al. (2013, p.516), who list issuing visas among administrative and legal consular functions.

¹¹ For more on consular relations comp. Jazbec, 1997, for visa issues pp.86-107 as well as Edwards, 1994, pp.171-191.

efficiently and emotionless, although the whole issue is by the rule full of emotions on the side of the applicant. For those applicants who invest in visa a strong hope for better life, the whole process is a kind of social and psychological drama that could be – and very often also is – very stressful. Hence some applicants, in particular those who are unsure from the beginning of the success, tend to seek ways to outmaneuver the system and persuade officials that they fulfill all the conditions. Some try do to this with artificial self-assuredness, some with the help of faked documents and other approaches. Such tactic basically reminds – not only in a fictional reflection – on a zero sum game, where the applicant usually gets zero.

In addition to the above, one could firstly claim that the United States are the state that has been for decades attracting the most growing number of applicants. This is particular true for those from Latin America. Secondly, for the very same reasons their visa system is highly complex, cautious and restraint. During the last two decades, highly advanced technology supports these processes enormously, but at the end of the day, everything still rests with consular officers and personnel. Having in mind many aspects of visa business, this could be a highly favourable frame for any fictional literature plot (that by the rule stems from a variety of real situations).

VISA AFFAIRS BETWEEN REALITY AND FICTION

A general question is how any social reality reflects in fictional reality and what a possible correlation between the two of them is. The former exists without the latter, but it cannot be the case the other way around. But in spite of this they correlate among themselves and influence one another. It is by no means any wonder that someone can learn significantly about the former from the latter. Each reflection offers a view from a different, unique point of departure, while those views complement and contradict, too. The quality, strength and persuasiveness of the latter are in its fictional reflection of the former. This reflection could, however, in details, follow the social reality and not necessarily lose, but gain on its telling.

The American visa presents this very approach: with its highly relevant and often detailed reflection of social reality (visa procedures, the consulate's atmosphere, social and psychological portraying of employed personnel and of applicants) it creates the narrative as if it were pure-

ly fictional. We could guess this is the way novels work (Mullan, 2006).

As it is with diplomacy on a whole, also consular affairs became object of contemplation in fictional literature with the appearance of classical diplomacy. We could generalize that since the late eighteenth century this became a common practice.¹² A mysterious and attractive world of diplomats and consuls has been ever since offering much of topics to dwell on and be included in fictional reflection.

Great novels of European classical literature, like *Madame Bovary* (Flaubert, 1986), *The Red and the Black* (Stendhal, 1986), *War and Peace* (Tolstoj, 1977), *Bosnian Chronicle* (Andrić, 1989), and *The Honorary Consul* (Green, 2004) are only few out of many such examples. There are various and different approaches and aspects of presenting and discussing diplomacy in literary fiction, from admiring to heavy criticism. Receptions, elite circles, cocktails, off the record discussions, secret meetings, wasting of budgetary means, unreliable statements are just a part of series of those reflections (Uthmann, 1985, pp.7 - 11). As far as the Latin American literature is concerned, *The American Visa* was first published in 1994 and soon became not only an internationally acclaimed bestseller, but also one of the best Bolivian novels so far.

Generally speaking, it presents an outstanding elaboration on the majority of aspects and influences that pursue an ambition – maybe also an obsession – for the American visa and what it brings to an individual's life. That kind of individual, who is very well aware that he practically does not fulfill tough conditions for getting visa, but is, at the same time, determined to do everything to get it. We intend to analyze this endeavor and present it – both academically as well as practically – to an interested reader. With this we also try to demystify visa business and present it as a part of individual's life that has to go on also in the case of a possible visa denial. And it is a part of the daily routine business of the related official personnel as well.

¹² Comp. Jazbec, 2018, pp.116-117.

FROM RULES AND PROCEDURES TO THEIR OUTMANEUVERING

DETERMINATION, TRICKS AND UNCERTAINTIES

It all started promising and self-assuring: "A week from now I'm traveling to the United States" I offered" (de Recacoechea, 2007, p.15). "I've come to La Paz to get my tourist visa" (ibid.). This is an explanation that Mario Alvarez, former teacher of English and divorced of middle age from the Bolivian countryside, offers to the receptionist at a low class hotel where he intends to stay. Trying to be persuasive, he anyway notes a clear sense of disbelief in the porter's eyes: "He looked up, his gaze displaying incredulity" (ibid.).

Alone in the hotel room later, he continues to be vigilant: "I picked up my gray English cashmere suit – the one I would wear for my visit to the imperial consulate – as if it were a glass doll" (ibid., p.17). He remains to be self-persuasive: "I lit a cigarette, and then the saying of a drinking buddy from Oruro popped into my head: "*The Yankees read your face. If you look nervous, you're finished*" (ibid., p.24). Most important is "to impress the feared American consul" (ibid., p.25). Being displaced between firm and eager decisiveness from one point of view and self-doubt and carefulness from another, he takes a look at his documents: "I held out the statement from my bank in Oruru. According to the figures, I had a sum of five thousand pesos, a tidy fortune. The Americans wouldn't know that for two months I'd begged some friends to make deposits into my meager bank account, then sent them each checks in return" (ibid.). We also learn that he is well aware of the importance of having settled financial affairs. All in all, high standard is a must: "A notary famous for his skills as a forger had also written me up a convincing contract of sale on a house in downtown Oruru" (ibid.). So, "[W]ith this pair of parchments, a no from the gringos was unlikely" (ibid.).

The pattern of clear determination to get the visa and the ongoing present and clear doubt in achieving it that was formed immediately upon his arrival to the capital, has been reproducing all the time. It was being fed with both those who admired him and those who were expressing misbeliefs.

An older hotel mate,¹³ asthmatic, was curious to learn, how long he in-

13 All of them persons from the social margin, striving to survive.

tended to stay “in this Ritz of the upper barrios” (ibid., p.18). This question is an example of a superb sarcasm, since from the novel it is more than obvious that the hotel is a low level one. For the whole narrative and the social as well as psychological portrait of Mr. Alvarez, the applicant, these descriptions with direct and indirect messages are highly useful and indicative. We get to know rather soon what kind the main protagonist is. There is an early doubt in him receiving visa and one could not get rid of this feeling the more the story continues. A careful reader could also claim the following: the more the plot develops, the stronger this very observation is becoming. Here not only the experienced consul’s eye would notice similarity with the atmosphere of Kafka’s novels, what also Stavans points out: “His [Mr. Alvarez’s] plight is utterly Kafkaesque. Like Joseph K. in *The Castle*, he’s lost in a labyrinth without exit, condemned to a miserable life” (2007, p.258). We, however are interested in the labyrinth of consular bureaucracy and that produced by Mr. Alvarez himself when trying to bypass the rules. But still, the applicant shows that he is aware of the complexity of this project and that he has managed to gather enough skill and determination to succeed. The reader, who would only like to enjoy the narrative, has plenty of opportunities to do so.

The applicant’s answer was straightforward: “Until I get my American visa. I’m going to visit my son who lives in Florida” (de Recacoechea, 2007, p.18). A clear admiration was obvious from the reply: “What blessed luck” (ibid., p.19).

Another hotel mate, a young, pretty and dynamic girl, Blanca by name, from the country’s east, who came to the city to earn money, joined him at breakfast. She tells him that she is coming from work, commenting, “I still smell like perfume” (ibid., p.30) (from their later discussions we learn that she is a prostitute) and he presents her with his plan: “You know, today’s a big day for me. I’m going to the American consulate to apply for a tourist visa” (ibid.). She continues the talk in a curious manner: “You want to stay in the U.S.A. for good,” she suggested, “or am I wrong” (ibid., p.31)? In addition, she comments later on: “I don’t understand why people dream of going to America, since you get screwed over there just the same when you don’t have money” (ibid., p.32).

After a while, the waiter brings him the second cup of coffee. “You look anxious. Is that visa important?” (ibid., p.33) he asks him. Apparently,

he also does not hide reservation towards going to America, claiming that one could live well at home. Blanca pushes her approach forward: "And if they deny you the visa" (ibid., p.34)? His reply is nervous and superstitious: "Don't talk like that. You'll jinx it" (ibid.). While leaving, she adds: "I'll be in the hotel. If they give you the visa, we'll go out for some beers" (ibid.).

From the very introductory part of the novel, we are acquainted with the main protagonist, his ambition and plan, but also his doubts and concerns. He is pleased with positive, even admiring, reactions that he receives. He would prefer to mishear the negative or doubtful, although we get familiar with his own skepticism. We learn that he is well prepared to fulfill tough conditions and to impress the American consul by his appearance.

After a huge, tasty and highly costly breakfast, he is ready: "... my face needed to shine, healthy and alert for the American consul" (ibid., p.27). He takes a shave at the barbershop of his long forgotten uncle - since he expects it to be free of charge. His explanation why he needs a well-done shave surprises the barber and his assistants, even more when he underlines: "It's not easy to get a visa. You have to go there looking sharp" (ibid., p.40). When it is done, the comment is cheerful: "How do you like it, godson? The visa's in the bag" (ibid., p.41). Though, there's never enough of cautiousness: "The gringos don't like handsome Latin men" (ibid., p.42). With this comment the master barber finalizes his work and places on the nephew's nose cliché looking glasses.

Along with this follows his last advice:

"What profession did you put down in your passport?"

"Businessman."

"Not bad. If you had put down teacher, they would send you home right away. The gringos know what our poor educators earn. "

"I've got everything I need" (ibid., p.43).

But in spite of his determination and everything with which he was trying to support it, he couldn't get away fully from the porter's first impression.

The next stop is the American Embassy in La Paz, consular section. Consulate, de facto.

RENDEZVOUS WITH THE CONSUL

Another promising start: “It was one of those mornings that make you forget that life is hard and then you just die” (ibid., p.35). After the episode with the barber, a taxi took him close to the consulate. It was midmorning around ten, “a chic time to see the gringos. I found the consulate in a run-down building” (ibid., p.44). This impression is by all means not necessarily unreal. Countries always try first with the outlook of embassies and only afterwards with consulates; and practically there does not exist a country that would not have to take care about spending. Financial resources are by default scarce ones. No wonder that insiders on a relaxed manner describe consular affairs and conditions for its pursue as “a Cinderella work” (Edwards, 1994, p.171). When we add to this also the picture of long queues of applicants, waiting outside, day by day with the same issues, consuls give the impression they are always walking in the circle. Each day starting from scratch, as if they haven’t managed to do anything the previous day.

Hence, the second impression about the consulate (or of the consular entrance of an embassy) that Mr. Alvarez was faced with, were applicants waiting in front of the building: “[a]t least thirty people were pushing and showing each other” (de Recacoechea, 2007, p.44). Mr. Alvarez passed by the queue in a routine manner, bribed by the way the front police officer and found himself in front of the policemen: “I answered that I had come to apply for a tourist visa” (ibid.). Inside he faced another motionless appearance with blue eyes of an American marine soldier checking personnel IDs: “Take a number and wait your turn”, he said in correct Spanish. My pulse raced like an astronaut’s:” (ibid., p.45). The first encounter’s description with the consulate was proficient. Reading those pages an expert and experienced practitioner’s eye cannot get away with the feeling that Senior de Recacoechea must have visited consulates often, since his description is so well to the point. Motionless faces, short instructive sentences that leave no room for explanation and stop any possible ambition to engage in a chat. All these elements provide tense and produce high uncertainty. With a clear purpose, of course.

With a number thirty-eight in his hand, he sat down and monitored the place. Applicants were speaking on the edge of silence, upon which he immediately concluded they are scared to death. Three persons on

the other side, behind the armed protected glass and broad desk were calling numbers. Two males were obviously Americans and the female must have been Bolivian (ibid.). It is common practice that the counter staff consists of the sending State nationals and locals. They were in the focus of the applicant's attention: "I studying them, thoroughly, as my fate was now in their hands" (ibid.). He was trying to find out with whom of the three of them he could get involved in a chat. With his heart still at high frequency he noticed that applicants, whose documents did not appear to be in order, were questioned by the consul personally: "The consul wasn't physically impressive - he was chubby (...) however, upon finding the slightest defect in someone's papers, he became as rough and stubborn as a mule" (ibid., p.46). The applicant understood that although the consul's face was soft looking, he was able to deny "them tickets to paradise" (ibid.).

The applicant's analysis of the surrounding was continuing. He was listening, observing and contemplating. Along with this, his concerns were raising higher and higher. His stream of thoughts showed why: "The Americans were strict when it came to your assets: proof of properties, current tax records, and checking accounts. I had everything I needed, but my documents were all forged. My only hope was that the consular officials would fall for the fraud" (ibid., p.47).

As the time was passing by, he noticed that the officials became less polite, they were already fed up with everything. For consular work, this is very normal. In an average consulate, the number of applicants amount between fifty to one hundred on a daily basis. This presents an amount of pressure on the personnel, in particular since they listen all the time to same stories, much of which are on the edge of truth: "And entry clearance work is psychologically the most educational as well as the roughest" (Edwards, 1994, p.184). Working for longer time in such an environment, an employee develops a special sense of discovering suspicious behaviour, mimics and similar body language signals of applicants that try to outmaneuver them. Practice makes perfect also in the never ending and ever repeating work. Each experienced consul would verify this practical instinct.

The applicant could not believe what he heard: "*Verify the documents, I thought. What the hell is that about*" (de Recacoechea, 2007, p.48)! Portraying of the scenery in the waiting room would hardly be more concise and exact. It's psychology that rests as a burden on the shoul-

ders of applicants. Those, who are like Mr. Alvarez, feel this mostly. And practically nobody is without at least a slight concern. It is the hope and sometimes the despair that drive a person to apply for visa and with this for better life, as the cliché says. And – as the experience from consular practice goes – applicants from poor surroundings strive more to get visa, but they, since coming from poor districts, have less chances to fulfil tough criteria. So they tend more to outmaneuver rules, which make them more uncertain and more exposed to be discovered. Psychology always works in favour of consuls, not applicants.

The lady next to him seemed to be the exemption that always proves the rule. She was sitting on his right side, waiting calmly for her turn. He engaged in discussion with her, to somehow relax himself, having the issue of possible faked documents as an excuse. But her comment was as a matter of fact not of that type: “Imagine all the people who want to leave the country and how easy it is to falsify documents. (...) The first time is somewhat difficult. They have the idea stuck in their heads that all the people who travel as tourists are going to stay on to work” (ibid., pp.44–49). Her calm, cool and dry explanation only worsened the applicant’s feelings.

And as if this would not have been enough, she continued: “I think that they even hire detectives to do background checks at City Hall and the banks. The gringos don’t sleep” (ibid., p.48). The more his number was approaching, the more depressed he was: “I would have sold my soul to the Devil for that visa, but there was no time for ceremony” (ibid., p.50). When they announced his number – even twice –, he just kept sitting. He was simply immobile; paralyzed. He left from the Consulate directly to the first bar. French cognac first and then the rest. He knew that his “quest for a visa had become a fiasco” (ibid., p.51). And he also knew: “Either I would travel to the United States or I would commit suicide” (ibid., p.52).

At this point, it should be repeated that by reading the pages mentioned above we get fully acquainted with the atmosphere, psychology and development of the situation in the waiting room at a consulate. Everything goes by the book. What is particularly remarkable are the descriptions and analyses of different profiles of applicants and their feelings as well as how this relates to each other and streams pressure. Exactly as the system of bound vessels in physics, when you add tension in one, the level rises also in another. Let us add to this highly rel-

evant, detailed and professional description of visa business, that the majority of applicants visit this place only a few times, while consuls and their supportive staff do this day by day.

There was only one way left for Mr. Alvarez to get the visa. He had to visit an agency.

A MULTIFUNCTIONAL AGENCY

It is a common practice that consuls in the receiving state have well established cooperation among themselves. This includes exchange of views, information, good practices and particularly tricks, which applicants try to use to outmaneuver them. But also the other side, to say so, uses the same approach. It is remarkable to notice, how everything that applicants witness at interviews and encounter at consulates, circulates around, partially as gossip and partially as warning. A careful reader has already noticed something of this from our quotations so far.

When speaking about the role of agencies in this business, one should bear in mind that lately they became almost an indispensable part of the whole visa application process. Some embassies and consulates contract selected agencies, but agencies also work on their own.¹⁴ Their main role is to collect the whole documentation from applicants and check if it is complete in each case. This means that consuls deal only with complete cases, what agencies, with which they cooperate, deliver to them. This is very important for consuls and their visa work, since it reduces as well as shortens their workload and releases them from the already heavy burden and pressure from dealing directly with applicants. This also means that agencies get to know the whole process, its characteristics and conditionality, but also they get personally acquainted with the members of the consular post.¹⁵ Hence, human factor becomes part of the whole process.

Coming back to the hotel, he had to explain, why he was so depressed: "I blew my visit to the American consulate" (*ibid.*, p.56). The immediate advice was expected: "just go on back to the consulate" (*ibid.*). But the second thought referred already to the agency, and the experience

¹⁴ For the applicant this means that he/she has to pay not only the regular visa fee, but also an additional fee for the agency's work.

¹⁵ The Consular Convention defines "member of the consular post" as consular officers, consular employees and members of the services staff, practically meaning all at the post employed persons (*Article 1 - Definitions*).

of an acquaintance of the hotel mate, who got the visa with the agency's support: "She flashed me her passport bearing the royal stamp from the American consulate" (ibid., p.57). American visa. American dream, a spectator would comment with ease and with a point. He eloquently presented how the mysterious world of consuls and the result of their work look like. Sometimes, in the eyes of certain applicants, it borders almost with a miracle. This is the real impression of both sides: applicants, who long for a visa, and consuls, who see this in their eyes. Cinderella work perhaps, but with almost an alchemist's fleur. However, consuls don't walk around with a magic stick in their pocket or sleeve, but have to stick to the rules.

And the respected advice: "Some shady travel agency had fixed her visa problems for cash. Supposedly, it was all done legally through their connections at the consulate" (ibid.). Hence Mr. Alvarez went straight to the point: "Do you know where that agency is" (ibid.)? "In a building behind the Cultural Center. I think it's called Andean Tourism, something like that. Go on, they'll take care of your problem" (ibid.).

It was past three p.m. when he stepped out of the taxi. In the small office in the corner of the lobby in the ninth floor an uninterested secretary received him. He started the conversation: "I'm here to apply for a tourist visa to the United States" (ibid., p.62). Referring to the anonymous friend he continued: "That you know all the secrets to write a strong application. She said you're well connected in the U. S. consulate and she spoke highly of your professionalism and your attention to detail" (ibid., p.63).

From this we could learn how Mr. Alvarez started learning diplomatic style, manner and dictionary. Among the various definitions of diplomats and their characteristics is also that they tend to exaggerate, to mislead and manipulate, if necessary. Such approach stems, among others, from writings of the Italian medieval diplomat and philosopher Machiavelli (Benner, 2013) who coined the following statement that serves also as an advice: "The ends justifies the means".¹⁶ It would be difficult, of course, to deny that Machiavellianism is not part of diplomatic approach nowadays as well, but on a much sophisticated level. One would also say that diplomats are persons, who are not diplomats by profession, but know how to deal with people, to go along with them (Jazbec, 2005/2006, p.103).

¹⁶ Berridge (2001) offers a highly indepth account on this topic.

After a careful and cautious conversation started, the agency's director commented: "Now and then we give good friends of ours a hand with their visa applications. What's your last name?"

"Alvarez, from Oruru."

"Do you have a valid passport?"

"Yes, plus a round-trip ticket." (de Recacoechea, 2007, p.63)

As an experienced eye would say, the conversation looked as if the director were a consul.

Then follows another skilled example of the text:

"Have you been to the consulate yet?"

"No, I came straight here. I just got in yesterday from Oruru" (ibid., p.64)

And Mr. Alvarez himself is also behaving as if he were being interviewed by a consul. But the "as if a consul" is a bit more open than a consul:

"We have connections, friends who help us speed up the paperwork every now and then. If everything's in order. (...) But usually everything isn't in order; an expired document here, an undated deed there ..." (...)

"All these people in the consulate ask for is a few pesos. They help us and we help them" (ibid.)

The applicant remained to be worried, though.

"What's your problem anyway?"

"I'm just worried some jackass will deny me the visa and then I won't be able to see my son" (ibid., pp.65-66).

The explanation, probably the final, follows:

"They put their jobs and their integrity on the line even though all they're doing is making sure your papers don't get lost in the pile or filed away until Christmas. The consul himself looks them over, signs them, and stamps them with his official seal" (ibid., p.66).

The discussion is continuing:

"The fat man smiled as he squashed his cigar like a cockroach. "The visa is totally legal. We just expedite the paperwork to keep those private detectives from sticking their noses where they don't belong." (...)

"Think it over, Señor Alvarez. That's the price and not a cent less. It's worth it, especially if you find a job in the States and stay there for good. Goodbye, Oruru, hello good life" (ibid.)!

These quotations present an excerpt from a brilliant, perhaps the best description in the whole novel.¹⁷ We clearly see the role of the agency that is walking on the very edge. We see the despair of the applicant, who knows what he has, what he would like to get and is aware that it is not possible to get it by legal means. And we see the picture of heaven. And American visa is its symbol. A symbol of hope. Hence, the customer would give everything for the visa. Not necessarily a kingdom, since we learn that the price is eight hundred dollars (*ibid.*, p.65)¹⁸. But is this really also a means of salvation?

Needless to say, the applicant seized the opportunity. And it obviously paid off, since he received the visa.

FROM HOPE AND DESPAIR TO A SALVATION

It was a long way though, from zig zagging diabolics between hope and despair, till he opted for the agency and finally received the visa.

The evening drink and dinner with Blanca before she started her work brought a new point of view. For the first time he was fully aware of it: "... I stopped thinking about American visa" (*ibid.*, p.80). He was deep in his thought, but it seemed as if something started to emerge: "If I hadn't been so caught up in my visa problem, I would've considered it" (*ibid.*, p.85). In the morning, when she was sleeping next to him, he was thinking of the "puzzle in which I found myself" (*ibid.*, p.88). Later on, he was thrilled: "She stopped to stare at me for what seemed like an eternity" (*ibid.*, p.90). "You need someone to take care of you. You're gonna crack up. It's not good to be alone. Loneliness kills", she said" (*ibid.*). The seed of salvation was planted as if by the way, without being practically noticed by the target, namely Mr. Alvarez. It looks like she was cultivating that seed with various approaches: "You're still thinking about that visa" (*ibid.*, p.115). Although she was only expressing her pristine opinion, he was able to absorb it only on the level of sub consciousness.

Although despair didn't let him alone: "The coffee reminded me of the American visa and the American visa made me think about how pathetic my situation was at that moment" (*ibid.*, p.101). Pathetic and poor, since he used all the money that he brought with himself. Obsession

¹⁷ See pages 62-66.

¹⁸ "Eight hundred is awful." "It depends." (*Ibid.*, p. 65)

with visa brought him that far that he got involved in a robbery where one of the top Bolivian politicians got killed by accident by him (*ibid.*, pp.191-193). But the applicant, as the guilty one, managed to remain undiscovered. Media brought into the news that the senator don Castelion died from heart attack (*ibid.*, p.208). Apparently, Mr. Alvarez just happened to find himself in the middle of a political plot, where he appeared to be unimportant. And he got money for the visa. A lot of money.

Before leaving to the agency he was looking for Blanca: "I would have liked to see her, invite her out to an expensive restaurant, take her dancing, and seriously propose to her that if I was successful up north and she was willing, I would send her a ticket so that she could join me" (*ibid.*, p.222). He forgot what she told him some time ago: "I don't want any of that" (*ibid.*, p.210). The seed was obviously well planted.

The director of the agency promised him to get the visa within twenty four hours, which was a direct consequence of the one fourth higher contribution from the applicant (*ibid.*, p.207). When he checked later by phone, the answer was that the visa is almost for granted, something that encouraged him to ask them - being a travel agency - to make a flight reservation as well (*ibid.*, p.219). Later on the director received him with a smile: "Here's your passport with a multiple-entry B-2 visa, valid for three months starting today, and your ticket for the flight tonight" (*ibid.*, p.224). Finally, the salvation for the applicant. One way or another, he managed to get it. He would never need to go to the consulate again. This is it as far as the issuing of the (American) visa is concerned: "I saw it and I didn't believe it" (*ibid.*).

At the airport he didn't care either for a smoking or non-smoking seat (*ibid.*, p.227).

Le grand finale (*ibid.*, pp.227-234) is an example of masterpiece by itself. It proves what a careful reader could feel from the very beginning of the novel, although having his heart fully on the side of the applicant's ambition.

The employee at the check in counter told him: "Please go to immigration. The flight is delayed" (*ibid.*). After showing his passport to the official there, he was asked to follow the policemen: "They'll explain you" (*ibid.*). He chilled with suspicion when he heard it. Inside, there

were already three other passengers from the same flight, and he was questioned in details.

Finally he found out: “He falsified the visas. These passports never went to the American consulate.” (...) “That can’t be”, he said. “Nobody falsifies American visa” (ibid., p.229).

It came out that it was true. The director of the agency Ballón was part of an international criminal gang and he managed to escape. The group was denied boarding the plane. They were sitting at the gate observing the crowd entering the plane. The aircraft took off and disappeared beyond the clouds: “There went our hopes and dreams, the happiness we coveted” (ibid., p.233). Another shock was waiting for them at the luggage counter: “Our luggage left on the plane to Miami”. He couldn’t manage not to laugh. (...) “Our luggage got the visa” (ibid., p.234).

The rest of the group returned back to the city, while he, in a growing despair, took a night walk around the quarter. He was too desperate to see what a mistake he had done: on the outskirts he was attacked by a small gang, robbed and beaten heavily. As a matter of fact there would hardly be a need for him to commit suicide, since he could have easily died of this late night episode. He woke up in pain at the hospital, slowly recovering his mind and memory: “All for an American visa that in the end turned out to be fake” (ibid., p.250).

“I’d be better off dead”, he comments to a nice, sympathetic nurse (ibid., p.252). She replied: “The young lady who brought you here doesn’t think so. She cried her eyes out thinking that you were going to die” (ibid.). In the middle of their conversation, Blanca entered the room: “Upon seeing me awake, her face lit up” (ibid., p.253). “The visa was fake”, I said. “They beat the hell out of me. I’ve got nothing left” (ibid.). She didn’t wait for a single moment: “You have me” (ibid.). And she didn’t wait to stop the conversation as well.

“We’ll travel to my hometown”, she said. “I’m sick of Villa Fatima.¹⁹ I want to go home. You’re coming with me.”

“I don’t need a visa.” (ibid., p.254).

It looked as if he finally met the enlightenment:

“I had gone from being a poor visa reject to a wealthy killer, only to

¹⁹ The name of a place, where she was earning her money.

turn into a dud from El Alto. I had survived the most humiliating beating of my life and a simple peasant girl from Beni had rescued me and saved me from a schizophrenic future” (ibid., p.255).

With the above presented quotations from the final part of the novel we are able to follow the development of the plot, the way the applicant was going down in his despair and how he finally managed to get in the possession of the visa. And then, again, a sudden turn down at the airport and, later on, a sudden turn up in the hospital.

One has to admit that the way the story is presented and developed follows much of the practice connected to the visa business. Consuls dealing with visa issues for a long time practically know and are familiar with all such situations. As claimed earlier, consular business, and with it visa affairs as well, bring in each single case a condensed destiny of an applicant. Each of them has his/her own experience, not only the unsuccessful ones who search for better life. Visa is a means of travel, be it for private or for business purposes and this brings along a variety of events and stories. In particular when we follow cases as the one of Mr. Alvarez. One could be able to claim that the solid majority of visa issues are related to such stories.

Therefore visa affairs relate to broad, complicated and developing legal and operational instructions and rules. This business is closely related to immigration affairs, security, work regulations, various types of exchange (students, sport, culture, art), everything that people nowadays use to commute around the world. The ever growing tourism is in the focus of all of these issues. Consequently, consuls have to be educated, at least basically, in all these areas and practically as well as frequently trained. For example, how to distinct between valid and falsified documents, what kind of combined and overlapping questions to use when interviewing applicants that seem to be unsure, suspicious or similar. Still, “although it is all about human beings, consular work is immensely technical and requires a vast range of knowledge of all sorts of rules and regulations” (Edwards, 1994, p.180).

The case of Mr. Alvarez, however, reaches beyond the horizon of an average consul. It is not the business of a consul to ask himself/herself about the social and psychological background and situation of the applicant. Still, practitioners know that “much of the work is routine, and much of it involves dealing with people at their most vulnerable

or their worst” (ibid., p.182). For a consul it is important that the applicant should prove that he/she will not present a risk to the country of entrance and that will not present a burden from this point of view. This is as much the rules demand from the consul: “They have to stay strictly within the rules and write a report explaining why any visa has been turned down” (ibid., p.190).

In one thing the applicant was right from the very beginning: by not having enough resources to satisfy the tough criteria and having lots of falsified documents, he knew they would detect him. He was hoping for a positive outcome, but this hope was without a justified background. He just understood visa as a symbol of hope and a means of salvation. And he came that way to become obsessed with that visa. As we know now, it turned the other way around. Or not just exactly, since the American visa was an indirect means of salvation for him. He could not have known this from the beginning, upon his arrival to La Paz and, also, had he, he would have not believed it and would have not even been able to believe it. Although this was clearly pointed out by his hotelmate Don Antonio prior his departure to the airport: “You’ve grown fond of her, eh? She loves you in her own way. She’ll be sad too. Those girls have their soft spot. I’ll tell her you were looking for her” (de Recacoechea, p.226). Finally, a dialogue between the former applicant and Blanca towards the end of the story proves this: “I wanted to talk to you, but I knew it was hopeless. You were obsessed with that visa” (ibid., p.254). And the endless hope turned out to become an evolving salvation.

CONCLUSION

The novel *American Visa*, which is in the focus of our examination, is a part of the cluster of novels that not only deal with diplomacy, but build the entire narrative and plot on diplomacy as a frame, story, tool and case. From this point of view it is similar to the already mentioned *Bosnian Chronicle* (Andrić, 1989) and *Honorary Consul* (Green, 2004). Consequently, also our analysis follows a different pattern to that of novels that include diplomacy only as a part of the narrative and style (comp. Jazbec, 2018).

We could also claim that the stream diplomacy, consular affairs, issuing visas produces the narrative and the plot, and not the other way around. Diplomacy serves as a reflection of a historical situation that produced that type of diplomacy, i.e. that type of diplomatic narrative, in this case referring to visa business.

Consular affairs include detailed descriptions and contemplation from psychology and social atmosphere. We know there are cases where a vertical promotion is possible with the obtaining of a visa to travel to the USA. This is a clear formula in the novel discussed. Hence this formula produces hope, obsession and despair. When everything is lost, it comes out that the protagonist's life is worth much more than just obtaining a visa. He gets acquainted with the country side girl that proves to be his salvation. But he would not have met her, had he not stayed in the same low class hotel where she was also staying. Without dreaming of a visa he would not have arrived to the capitol. He was alone, desperate, and so she was. He wanted to earn money in the USA and she went to La Paz to earn money there. But nothing more. She knew that this was not the life that she wanted. The visa turned out to be the salvation for the both of them, since it brought them together. This is the final message of the novel.

But the novel by itself is also a masterpiece of literature and as such also a top handbook of consular practice on the area of issuing visas. It uncovers a variety of approaches, methods and rules that contextualize the issuing of visas. But it also introduces to the reader a variety of approaches and tricks that applicants, who know they do not fulfill all the strict conditions, use to obtain a visa anyhow. And this achieved through a skilled presentation of the psychological and so-

cial background as well as the current situation of the applicants that appear in the novel.

The structure of the novel follows a dual approach. One is the literature narrative by unveiling the story as it develops. The other one is the unveiling of the visa business as part of the diplomatic and consular relations. Both processes are brought together and form a clear, firm and refreshing complementarity. Here lies the very specific weight of this fictional work. As each substantial writing of that type, it reflects situations from real life and dwells upon them. And diplomacy with visa business is an indispensable and fundamental frame of this concept.

And visa - that small, but highly relevant piece of authorization - is much more than this, as we learn from the novel. It proves to be an instrument of understanding life with its real values that could be found everywhere: in the Promised Land, but also in one's own home yard. It is just a matter of looking at what is important and understand it. The way to that finding is not easy, it could even be painful, and every means that helps to reach this goal, is welcome. Even an American visa.

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