

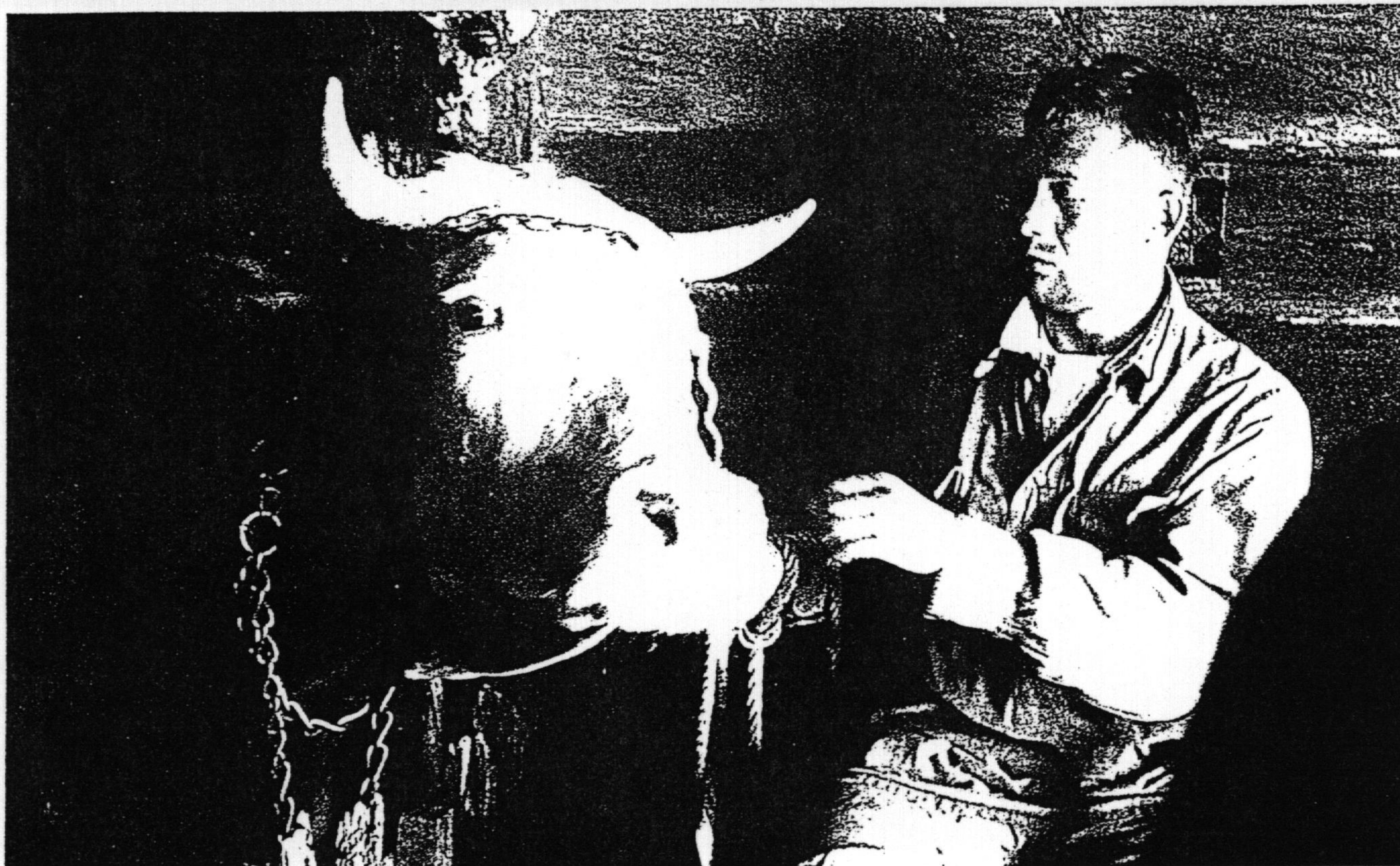
Document Citation

Title	On location: Czech Republic
Author(s)	
Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	Motion pictures -- Production and direction -- Czech Republic
Film Subjects	Zivot a neobycejna dobrodruzstvi vojaka Ivana Conkina (The life and extraordinary adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin), Menzel, Jirí, 1994

Czech Republic

Twenty five years after the Prague Spring and less than five years after the Velvet Revolution, a British-produced (but European-cofinanced) film satirising the old Soviet Union is now underway in the Czech Republic. Rachel Murrell finds out how *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin* was put together

ON LOCATION



Produced by Eric Abraham and Katya Krausova of Portobello Pictures — in association with Channel 4 along with French, Italian, Russian and Czech partners — *Chonkin* is the biggest-budget film in the history of Czech cinema. At \$2.6 million, it costs three times the average Czech film.

The Russian cast is led by an unknown 26-year-old. Gennadij Nazarov brings his gentle charm and protruding ears to the part of Chonkin, the simple soldier sent to a remote Soviet village at the outbreak of WWII to guard a Soviet plane forced down by engine trouble. Chonkin's unit forgets about him and he stays on, enjoying a quiet life and an affair with the village postmistress, until events force a confrontation with the Soviet military.

Based on the comic novel by Vladimir Voinovich, the film satirises the old Soviet Union, the Party, the

PRACTICAL GUIDE TO SHOOTING IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

People tend to say what they think you want to hear, so take nothing at face value from your Czech crew. Don't rely on them to pass information on or respond to changing circumstances in other departments. Chase everything all the time.

Ensure heads of departments report to the UK producer or Czech production managers as well as to the production accountant as they normally would. Pick young teams with proven Western experience. The East-West Producers' Seminar (071 379 5566) has extensive contacts across Eastern Europe.

With local bureaucracy, find out who has the authority to make decisions and target them. Once you know who to talk to, local administration is usually co-

Army and the secret police. Although banned in the Soviet Union, the novel was widely circulated and smuggled out to the West. As a result its author was expelled, and it was only after the collapse of the Soviet Union that the book was published in Russia.

Abraham and Krausova had a crack at filming the novel in the Soviet Union with a Russian director in 1989 but found that liberalisation was not yet far enough advanced.

When the time came to try again, Abraham courted his friend Jiri Menzel, Academy Award-winning director of *Closely Observed Trains* and *My Sweet Little Village*, to direct: "I knew him as one of the few directors with a subtle touch with humour, which is very necessary for this piece."

Menzel had been anxious about a Czech directing Russian actors in the Russian language, but in fact it was his participation that clinched

FILM

that of some of the Russians. Vladimir Iljin, who plays the chairman of the local co-operative, was wary of exposing his country to ridicule. "Everyone can smile about our life but they shouldn't look on it with sarcasm. I saw Menzel's films and they were very intelligent. I knew he would not laugh at our country."

Production designer Milan Bycek travelled 2,000km across the Czech Republic to find a site to build the village, and he found what he was looking for in Milovice, 50km from Prague. Ironically it was the former HQ of the occupying Soviet army.

The surrounding landscape is flat and rural. Fields stretch for miles, interrupted by birch forests and the crumbling remains of the Soviet presence: a concrete blockhouse here, an overgrown runway there.

Abraham needed to build a \$300,000 village of half a dozen wooden houses, a church and a post office. It transpired that ownership of the land had reverted to the MOD and then to the municipality. Abraham leased the land for the ten-week shoot, had 30 landmines cleared and sowed cabbage and corn for harvest when filming began in June.

With the exception of a pre-war Soviet U-2 bi-plane from the Czech Aviation Museum, most of the props came from Mosfilm in Moscow along with some costumes. Others were designed by Irina Ginno in Moscow.

The crew was mostly Czech with some Brits. The key people — DOP, production designer, costume designer, editor and composer — were selected by Menzel and contracted directly by Portobello. They included Jaromir Sofr, director of photography on *Closely Observed Trains*, and scriptwriter Zdenek Sverak, who worked on *My Sweet Little Village*.

Czech working practices are conditioned by film-making under State patronage and, as a result, the main problems are with co-ordination. "People are used to state finance, no

operative, but you will need a lot of patience.

Hotels in Prague are awesomely expensive — easily \$150-250 a night. Out of town, hotels cost a tenth of that.

The exchange rate is around 29 Czech crowns to the dollar. The crown is very stable, so there is no significant black market and no discounts for paying in hard currency.

Well worth considering for any Russian-based productions is the Moscow-based company Trite which handled casting on *Ghorkin*.

The film was processed at Rank and edited in Prague by Jiri Brozek.

direct accountability and the director going unchallenged," says Abraham. "So their attitude to time and its relationship to money is alien."

Communication was also a major problem, but not simply language. The difficulties have to do with what Abraham calls the not-my-job-syndrome: "The Czech crew see jobs as rigidly compartmentalised, and that militates against cohesive teamwork," he says. "They don't tend to talk to each other. We ended up having daily meetings with all heads of departments in one place so they could all hear the same information."

Another problem is overcharging and theft. "The Czech Republic has undergone a moral holocaust," says Abraham. "People used to consider stealing from the State morally acceptable. Now it is foreigners who are fair game. You need to keep very tight control of production finance."

"With very few exceptions, there are no Czech production managers capable of doing the job. Those who can are all under 35, all men, all brilliant, and all constantly in work. The film business is not known for its honesty, but here dishonesty is institutionalised. Younger people are straighter and harder working. You can pretty well write off anyone

older unless they have considerable experience with Western crews.

"It all comes down to individuals," says Abraham. "You're totally reliant on the people you employ, so choose them after microscopic inspection and cross-checking with Western producers they've worked with. Pick well and it'll be very productive. Pick badly and you'll age ten years."

But Krausova says people with the right skills and attitude are getting easier to find throughout Eastern and Central Europe — and this is due in no small part to the East-West Producers' Seminar, a training body she set up with producer Linda Myles in 1990. The organization has run crash-courses for more than 200 producers and has contacts with technicians across Europe.

Abraham has nothing but praise for many of his Czech staff. The production accountant, Daniela Jenckova of EFA, "was wonderful. I wouldn't do a picture there without her." He's just as enthusiastic about props man Jaroslav Lehman and Jiri Zavrel, head of construction company Specialni Efekty which built the village on time and on budget.

Abraham estimates it would cost 50-75% more to make this film in the UK, but the gap is narrowing. "Labour costs in the Czech Republic are rising and you lose on pilfering and poor scheduling. Plus accommodation in Prague is astronomical — I wouldn't film there unless I was getting an amazing deal on accommodation. There will come a time when this, and the hassle factor, make it far less attractive to film there."

But for a while, the Czech Republic will continue to be attractive in terms of costs of labour, materials and location fees. "Changing the morality will take longer."

Abraham admits to being worn out by the experience. But, for the right project, would he go back?

"Yes, I would go back. My eyes are open and I know who to pick." ■