

## A Tripping Book

By Ana Tajder

*Don Rothenberg's book "Hollywood to Vienna" promises a portrait of cultural differences and delivers instead personal story of a 68er's coming of age*

Reading the blurb on the back of *Hollywood to Vienna, a Trip and a Half*, you might expect a book about cultural differences between sunny California and fog-bound Middle Europe. Instead you find a coming of age of the sixties counterculture told in flash back by one of its own. Jesse is a middle-class Jewish boy who grew up in LA and while nobody special, he goes to school with the children of Hollywood stars. A teenage hippie, his search for love and peace ultimately takes him to Vienna where he meets Anna, the young Austrian woman he will later marry.

Just like "Jesse," Donald Ellis Rothenberg was born and grew up in Hollywood. But he didn't move to Vienna until 1992, at the age of 46, finding work as an English teacher. Still, he is married to an Austrian woman, just like his character, and they have two sons. A doctor of Transpersonal Psychology, he is also a photographer, a poet, a writer and a singer/songwriter with four published CDs.

However, although the plot mirrors Rothenberg's own life, the author claims "Hollywood to Vienna" is not an autobiography. And he never set out to write a book; he just started writing down his thoughts, trying to figure it all out. The book just happened – and this adds to its charm. In style, this book is as free as a flower child, whimsical and undisciplined – Rothenberg will take you in one direction, spinning off his thoughts, and then just leave you there, while he on to something else, and you are left still trying to relate to what he just told you:

"The approval ratings, the keep-up-with-the Rabinowitz's, the maintaining of the proper conduct to exhibit in personal and private and public spaces. The acceptance of norms, anarchy, chaos and mind-fucking, liberal and conservative, the military, the poetry and the mediation, and money-madness, the tall skyscrapers, the raping of the Earth, the woman and the wild-man simpatico, the sensitivity, the confusion of being a man – what is all that?"

This compiling of thoughts without structure sets up a rhythm creating a pastiche of hippie art, of those colourful collages of pictures and messages of trips real and imagined. But in spite of the apparent confusion, the message "1968, love & peace!" is unmistakable. It seems a bit childish, but perhaps a better word would be unselfconscious – it feels like a book the author wrote for himself, without too much thought of seducing an audience.

Still, sometimes this *naïveté* takes a wrong turn, tending toward simplified black-and-white judgements and labelling. The biggest victim here is Austria: Rothenberg paints an poorly-defined picture of suffocating traditionalism, blurring nostalgia for the old Empire with images of boorish nationalists still walking around in Nazi uniforms.

"There is this mystique of the monarchy, the lost or fallen empire with the crown jewels. It is this small country hoarding heirless artwork stolen from private homes of Jews during WWII, and the slow-to-admit guilt, and blaming only the Germans as culprits, that reeks of hypocrisy. Why, it was actually the Austrians that were more often the better Nazis."

And elsewhere: "Jesus is hung up in every classroom, and religion is taught in schools, despite the wiping out of the Jews and despite the new invaders – the immigrants and refugees and Islamic exiles, etc. There is a sort of hidden terror here."

The reader will often wonder why the character and its author have chosen to live in a country in which the only positive aspect is national health care and public transit. Rothenberg admitted he was not aware of having created such a negative picture of the country where he has been living for the past 17 years.

“But didn’t I mention the great social system somewhere?” he responded, surprised. Sure, and clean subways, nice woods, organic food and classical music. But Vienna deserves so much more.

Still, this lost, horny, self-obsessed, truth-seeking main character still manages to charm and entertain, to provoke a few thoughts and take his readers on a trip. Somewhere between Hollywood and Vienna, between 1968 and 2008.

*Hollywood to Vienna a Trip and a Half, by Don Rothenberg*  
*Regent Press 2008 ISBN: 978-1-58790-156-0*

*Don Rothenberg will be reading from his book at Shakespeare & Company on Apr.16, 2009 at 19:30. The book is available at*

*Shakespeare & Company Booksellers*  
*1., Sterngasse 2,*  
*(01) 535 5053*  
*[www.shakespeare.co.at](http://www.shakespeare.co.at)*

*The British Bookshop*  
*1., Weihburggasse 24*  
*(01) 51219450*  
*[www.britishbookshop.at](http://www.britishbookshop.at)*

*Frick, Wilhelm Buchhandlung*  
*1., Kärntner Str. 30*  
*(01)5137364*  
*For additional locations, see*  
*[www.buchhandlung-frick.at](http://www.buchhandlung-frick.at)*

*Buchhandlung Morawa Wollzeile*  
*1., Wollzeile 11*  
*(01) 513 7 513-0*  
*[www.morawa-buchundmedien.at](http://www.morawa-buchundmedien.at)*