

Paying tribute to a great Czech

Jonathan Luxmoore | Jan. 5, 2012



Former Czech president Vaclav Havel waves to participants during a ceremony in late October in Prague. (CNS/Reuters/Petr Josek)

Appreciation

A party was under way at the apartment on Prague's Engels Embankment. The brother of playwright Vaclav Havel had just got married, and his friends had come back to celebrate, under the watchful eyes of the StB secret police.

It was May 1988, and I sat talking with Havel and Fr. Vaclav Maly, who, like Havel, had been beaten and jailed for signing Charter 77, a human rights declaration, a decade before. Talk of democratization in communist-ruled Czechoslovakia should be treated cautiously, Havel told me. The regime was too fearful to risk introducing reforms.

But he and his friends were determined to "create spaces" for some free activity. Despite the year's repression, ordinary people still had consciences. They knew instinctively that "certain things are right and certain things are wrong."

"It really doesn't matter whether Charter 77 has a thousand or a million signatories," added the playwright, who was being regularly vilified in the state-controlled media. "What's more important is whether or not it has the truth on its side. And the truth exercises an indirect and invisible influence which represents a special kind of power."

Havel was to spend much of the next year back in prison.

But when I met him again in December 1989, everything had changed. Communist rule had collapsed in the face of a mass uprising, the "Velvet Revolution," and Havel and Maly had played key roles in negotiating a peaceful handover of power.

We were in Prague's Magic Lantern theater at an impromptu press conference for a newly formed Civic Forum, which was busy appointing a government out of Charter 77's most trusted supporters.

I saw him again four months later when he came with his wife, Olga, to Maly's first Easter Vigil at St. Anthony's Church down the Vltava River. Maly was overjoyed he could now work openly as a priest again. And Havel, in an extraordinary twist of fate, was now Czechoslovakia's president.

What had made him so exceptional?

Denied a proper education because of his "bourgeois background," Havel had dropped out of Prague's Technical University in 1957 and taken up playwriting after a correspondence course as a theater stagehand in the late 1950s.

He became known internationally in 1968, when his fifth play, "Vyrozumeni" ("The Memorandum"), was performed at New York's Public Theater. A year later, he and his works were banned from the theater in Czechoslovakia after a short-lived reform movement, the Prague Spring, was crushed by Soviet tanks.

Havel found work at a brewery and continued writing satirical plays. He also became active in dissident circles, serving from January 1977 as a spokesman for Charter 77, alongside a former communist foreign minister, Jiri Hayek, and a liberal philosopher, Jan Patocka, who died that March after a brutal police interrogation.

He also wrote essays, drawing on his own "philosophy of life," that helped articulate a moral framework for opposing communist injustices and proved influential among dissidents throughout Eastern Europe. His best-known, "The Power of the Powerless" (1978), described life under communist rule as "living within a lie."

Initially, only 247 people dared add their signatures to Havel's on Charter 77, and the movement would have remained marginal if it hadn't attracted widespread sympathy. This owed a lot to the Catholic church.

Lay Catholics such as Vaclav Benda were active in Charter 77, and helped forge a coalition with liberal and ex-Marxist dissidents. So did influential priests such as the Jesuit Fr. Josef Zverina. The persecuted church had spawned a network of underground groups that would later break surface with mass protests, backed by the Czech Cardinal Frantisek Tomasek.

This was largely thanks to Pope John Paul II, who brought millions into the streets of neighboring Poland during his first 1979 homecoming, and provided crucial moral guidance for Solidarity, the trade union and social movement that erupted there a year later.

In their different ways, both Havel and John Paul would be epic figures in the subsequent struggle for human rights and democracy.

Like the pope, Havel knew agreements with communist regimes were worthless unless backed by pressure. Like him, he was also aware that opposition groups, however courageous and committed, lacked this strength by themselves and had to find common ground.

Above all, both grasped that the modern world functioned not through governments, but through people -- people whose creative, revolutionary energies could be mobilized to break through the barriers of power and ideology.

Havel's own attitude to religion was intensely personal, evoking the skeptical spirituality that found echoes in Czech history.

Though baptized and confirmed by his lapsed Catholic parents, he had long since given up practicing as a Christian. But he had attended underground Christian seminars, run in Prague by the Catholic Radim Palous, who invited participants regularly to his family's country house in northern Bohemia.

Havel would sit listening very quietly, saying little, another participant, Fr. Tomas Halik, who was secretly ordained, told me. I think these sessions influenced his thinking and that his own ideas about the priority of moral values over political and economic calculations were largely conceived under their impact.

During five years of imprisonment in 1979-84, Havel made sure his brother, Ivan, kept him up-to-date with the seminars. He shared a cell with a Jesuit, Fr. Frantisek Lizna, who had signed the charter, and with a Dominican provincial, Fr. Dominik Duka, now archbishop of Prague. Maly, now a Prague auxiliary bishop, thinks their many hours of discussion led Havel to admire the figure of Christ as a real historical personality.

Havel never overcame his doubts sufficiently to declare belief in God, Maly recalls, but he became increasingly convinced of Christianity's ethical and cultural importance. In this way, his spiritual searching brought him close to the church.

The collapse of communist rule would be traced to systemic fault lines and a false view of mankind, as well as an unstoppable mix of economic stagnation, ideological meltdown, Western pressure and Soviet overstretch. During our talk in 1988, however, Havel acknowledged the key role played by the new wave of activity among Catholics that had helped mobilize the people's power of hearts and minds in the system's final year.

I don't know what a miracle is, Havel said in his official airport address when John Paul visited Czechoslovakia in April 1990. But at this moment I daresay I'm party to one. A man who six months ago was imprisoned as an enemy of his own state today welcomes, as president, the first pope ever to set foot in our country.

When I saw Havel again in September 1993, at the first meeting in a post-communist country of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences, he was clearly struggling with his new political responsibilities. He had steered the country to a multiparty democracy, overseeing the release of political prisoners and removal of Soviet troops. But former fellow dissidents had been trounced in June 1992 elections by a new generation of hard-edged politicians, and that January, Czechoslovakia had split into separate Czech and Slovak states.

Havel's much-lauded status as a contemporary philosopher-king had not been without its failures.

He was re-elected president, this time of the Czech Republic, and guided the country through another 11 years of institutional recovery and economic growth, as it joined NATO and prepared to accede to the European Union with seven other ex-communist states.

When he retired after two terms in February 2003, to be succeeded by a technocratic archrival, Vaclav Klaus, Havel was already in poor health. But he would continue to campaign internationally against intolerance and prejudice.

Havel took up a research post at the U.S. Library of Congress in 2005, and was a visiting artist at Columbia University the following year. He wrote some short scripts and his first full-length play in 18 years, *Odchazeni* (Leaving?), which became a film.

His achievements were recognized with numerous awards. In 2005, he was fourth in *Prospect* magazine's list of 100 top world intellectuals.

But Havel's greatest legacy would always remain his role in bringing communist rule to a nonviolent end.

In a 2000 interview with Poland's Catholic Information Agency (KAI), he described John Paul as a close friend, paying tribute to his help in inspiring and emboldening communist-era dissidents like himself.

?I remember the moment we heard news of his election -- we cheered and shouted with joy, celebrating till late evening,? the playwright told KAI. ?We felt instinctively this was a monumental prop for all freethinkers -- those fighting for freedom. From that first moment, with many friends, I saw the pope would be a major source of support for all dissident movements.?

That mutual support and acknowledgement between the secular and religious was reciprocated when Havel died on Dec. 18 -- not least by his friends, Maly and Duka, who concelebrated his state funeral five days later in Prague?s St. Vitus Cathedral.

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