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## Profile: Vaclav Havel

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# Czechoslovakia's new President

by Gabriele Liebig

Who is this man who was chosen as President of Czechoslovakia on Dec. 29, although he would have preferred to have remained a writer, a man whose candidacy had the motto, "Truth and love instead of lies and hatred"?

What is best known about him is that he sat for years in prison as the spokesman and co-author of "Charter 77." Two weeks after release of the charter in January 1977, Havel was arrested for the first time, and subsequently given a suspended sentence of 14 months in jail in 1978. Until recently, he lived under house arrest and was prohibited from writing.

All attempts by the regime to break him politically failed. He suffered much as the result of slander campaigns, but survived them all. After mature reflection, he declined an exit visa to the United States, which was given to him following his second imprisonment. He also refused to sign an offer of pardon that came after almost four years in prison because it was clearly intended to be a gesture of "genuflection."

Vaclav Havel, born Oct. 5, 1936, grew up as a middle-class child. His father built up a large hotel-restaurant business in Prague. Prevented from continuing his studies, he became a chemistry laboratory assistant. During this time, he wrote a pamphlet on the structure of atoms, and constructed a new spatial model of the periodic system of the elements. As a child, he had written poems and, at age 13, a philosophical treatise. He was in the military from 1957 to 1959, when his youthful work *Life Is Before Us* was written and produced. Finally, he was allowed to take a correspondence course in playwriting, from which he learned very little. He learned far more during his time at the Prague Theater am Geländer, where he began as a stagehand and ended as resident author.

In the interview book, *Distant Interrogation* (1985-86), Havel depicted how his political work began with the cultural battle around the monthly periodical for recent literature, *Tvar*. This magazine published every possible old and new existentialist and non-conformist text, and was consequently soon prohibited. Havel belonged to the magazine's editorial board from 1965 onward. The battle took place within the official writers' union, and concerned whether the "anti-dog-

matic" Communists in the union had enough guts to end the prohibition of *Tvar*. They didn't, and the *Tvar* prohibition boomeranged, eventually leading the writers' union to break out from the Communist Party. This was the prelude to the so-called Prague Spring.

Havel himself viewed the Prague Spring somewhat soberly. In the Communist Party, the anti-dogmatists had succeeded and with some embarrassment introduced their reforms. They basked in their sudden popularity, and hid the conflict with Moscow from the population and from themselves. Dubcek's mistake and that of his people, with whom Havel at the time had lively but critical discussions, lay in their halfheartedness and their subservient attitude toward Moscow. Havel said in *Distant Interrogation*, "Had the leadership actually behaved proudly and confidently, they would have had powerful backing and powerful support in the society." Instead of reining in the opposition, of controlling and censoring it, the Dubcek group should have fully joined this movement and should have used its energy generally for their preventive defense. "It would have been enough to emphasize that we will not knuckle under, that we will . . . allow no foreign soldiers to violate our border; a civil defense could have been organized. . . . The Kremlin leadership only undertook the invasion because they knew there was to be no military resistance."

The dark years of the 1970s followed the occupation in August 1968. In 1976, a fundamental campaign for the defense of human rights unfolded from the ultimately successful campaign to free the rock group Plastic People from unjustified imprisonment. At the end of 1976, Havel and others collected 243 signatures for the Charter 77, which was written jointly and published with a huge fanfare on Jan. 1, 1977. The experiences Havel gained during collection of the signatures, he reworked in his tragic-comic one-act play *Protest* (1979). With Jiri Hajek and Jan Patočka (who died following an interrogation in 1977), Havel was chosen to serve as spokesman for the Charter. He was promptly jailed, and a vicious slander campaign began when he was released five months later, claiming that he had resigned his office as Charter spokesman, and thus had capitulated.

After his release, Havel founded with some friends the Committee for Defense against Unjust Prosecutors (VONS), which distributed documentation on all the cases. A charge was constructed against VONS for delivery of such reports to a Parisian newspaper, and Havel along with five others was sentenced on Oct. 23, 1979 to many years in prison. In prison, Havel was placed under a strict prohibition against writing. Some exceptions were his letters to his wife. The result was the book later published, *Letters to Olga*.

Havel has written eight full-length plays, three one-act plays, many essays, articles, pamphlets, and numerous political articles, calls for action, and so forth. This is not the place to list, let alone discuss these works. His work *Notification*, about the self-destructive absurdity of bureaucracy in a totali-

## 'Turn words into deeds'

On Feb. 22 Vaclav Havel addressed a joint session of the U.S. Congress. Excerpts of his speech below show the promise of this poet, now President.

"We are living in very extraordinary times. The human face of the world is changing so rapidly that none of the familiar political speedometers are adequate.

"We playwrights, who have to cram a whole human life or an entire historical era in a two-hour play, can scarcely understand this rapidity ourselves. And if it gives us trouble, think of the trouble it must give to political scientists who spend their whole life studying the realm of the probable and have less experience with the realm of the improbable than us, the playwrights. . . .

"Thanks to the great support of your President Wilson, our first President Tomas Garrigue Masaryk founded our modern independent state. He founded it, as you know, on the same principles on which the United States of America had been founded, as Masaryk's manuscripts held by the Library of Congress testify.

"In the meantime, the United States made enormous strides. It became the most powerful nation on earth, and it understood the responsibility that flowed from this.

Proof of this are the hundreds of thousands of your young citizens who gave their lives for the liberation of Europe and the graves of American airmen and soldiers on Czechoslovak soil.

"But something else was happening as well. The Soviet Union appeared, grew and transformed the enormous sacrifices of its people suffering under totalitarian rule into a strength that, after World War II, made it the second most powerful nation in the world.

"It was a country that rightly gave people nightmares, because no one knew what would occur to its rulers next and what country they would decide to conquer and drag into its sphere of influence, as it is called in political language.

"All of this taught us to see the world in bipolar terms as two enormous forces—one a defender of freedom, the other a source of nightmares."

Havel urged the United States to support the Soviets in a transformation of their regime. He called for the Helsinki conference to become the equivalent of a European peace process which would "finally put a formal end to the Second World War and all its unhappy consequences."

"I will end where I began: History has accelerated. I believe that once again it will be the human mind that will notice this acceleration, give it a name and transform those words into deeds."

tarian state, made him internationally famous. The *Vanek Trilogy*, consisting of three tragic-comic one-acts, *Audienz* (1976), *Vernissage* (1976), and *Protest* (1979), is wonderful. With cabaret-style humor and simultaneously loving powers of feeling, he shows the public the psychological banality of life in an unfree society, and thus strengthens in men the inner necessity of freeing themselves from this banality.

Remarkable is reworking of the Faust theme in *Temptation* (1985). Dr. Faustus signs a pact with Satan, and pays, in contrast to Goethe's version of the story, with his own destruction. Satanism and the New Age esoterica are thus exposed as what they have always been: instruments in the hand of the powerful, the secret services, and intriguers. Whoever takes part in this game and counter-game is lost.

One characteristic of Havel's works is that they are "not avant-gardish": "Where everything is allowed, nothing is a surprise. Drama presupposed order, be it only so that, violating this order, something can still surprise." Havel sees world history not as a "disastrous superworld . . . as though it had its own course, independent of us and totally inexplicable. . . . History is not 'elsewhere'! It is here, we all make it."

When he was asked in *Distant Interrogation* whether for

example Gorbachov gave him hope, he first explained what he understood by hope, as a "condition of the spirit . . . not a condition in the world." "Either we have hope within us or not at all. . . . The measure of hope . . . is not the measure of joy at the good course of things and our will to invest in undertakings that visibly lead to quick success, but rather the measure of our ability to exert ourselves for something because it is good and not because it has a guaranteed success."

To Gorbachov, he had only this to say: "I leave for professionals the considerations about what is to be expected from Gorbachov and generally 'from above,' and thus from events in the sphere of power." He has always been more interested in events "from below," and there he sees—he said this at the end of 1985—the beginning of an awakening from a 17-year "corpse-like immobility . . . as if people gradually returned to their senses and took new courage. . . . A new generation is growing up, not traumatized by the shock of Soviet occupation."

Vaclav Havel has immeasurably contributed to the fact that the construction of political freedom in Eastern Europe has moved forward by such an important step. Czechoslovakia is to be congratulated on its new President, Vaclav Havel.