



Vaclav Havel - President, Dissident, Playwright

By Dave Olson

Born in Prague to a prominent intellectual family before the Soviet invasion in 1948, Vaclav Havel was subject to the policy of normalization as his family was classified as bourgeois enemies of state, their property seized and activities monitored. Additionally, they were denied access to certain education and cultural pursuits.

Undaunted, he pursued higher education and began writing plays subtly mocking the oppressive policies and absurd bureaucracies of the communist regime during his time of required army service.

Following the army, he found work at a Prague theater and wrote rather existentialist revolutionary plays as well as studying dramatic arts at an academy in the 1960's. During the decade, the spirit of revolution swept across the country and led to a period of increased artistic and political freedom which became known as "the Prague Spring."

In 1968, Havel visited the US during their own period of revolutionary excitement. He returned to Prague, taking a prominent place in the progressive activities only to see the reforms squashed when Soviet tanks rolled in and returned Czechoslovakia to the oppressive policies of old.

Reforms were reversed, artists and writers were exiled or jailed and Havel's plays were banned, his passport confiscated. Though he was offered opportunity to leave the country, he refused and stayed to help his homeland through this difficult time.

From his home in the country, he continued to publish plays and essays in the underground press as well as publishing an open letter to the president in which he outlined the country's ills and garnered international attention to his cause at the same time. The essay "The Power of the Powerless" and the human rights manifesto "Charter 77" are among his most noteworthy works from this period.

After mass arrests of revolutionaries, he organized a citizens group concerned with documenting cases unjust prosecution. These activities in which over 400 cases were logged, led to his repeated jailings (five years total), police harassment and illness throughout the 70's and 80's. His brilliantly subversive weekly letters to his now-deceased wife from this time were later published as a book and served as a beacon of hope to dissidents everywhere.

Finally, in 1989 after another prison term, he was released to a public eager for change. In less than two months, he had formed a political group called the Civic Forum who pressured the Communists into a coalition government with elections in what became known as the "Velvet Revolution." In December he was elected interim President and moved into Prague Castle and invited new Minister of Culture Frank Zappa to play. A few years later, Slovakia decided to separate and, while Havel resigned in protest, he was re-elected as the President of the new Czech Republic and quickly introduced social reforms and revamped laws.

In 2002, Havel hosted the NATO summit in Prague in which seven former Soviet republics were invited to join, a path forged by the Czech Republic in 1997. While his political career is soon ending, his impact and reputation as a non-violent activist, playwright and committed champion of human rights and freedom will live on and serve as example for years to come.