About the Author:
Vaclav Havel (1936-present)

A world-renowned playwright and human rights activist, Vaclav Havel (born 1936) became the president of Czechoslovakia in December 1989, a unique position in European history. His literary brilliance, moral ascendancy, and political victories served to make him one of the most respected figures of the late 20th century and led his country to be one of the first Eastern European nations to be invited into NATO.

Vaclav Havel was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia, on October 5, 1936, to a wealthy and cultivated family. His father was a restaurateur, real estate developer, and friend of many writers and artists, and his uncle owned Czechoslovakia's major motion picture studio. The coming of World War II did not much disturb the Havel's lifestyle, and young Vaclav grew up amid the trappings of luxury, with servants, fancy cars, and elegant homes.

The 1948 Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia radically changed the Havels' lives. Their money and properties were confiscated, and Vaclav's parents had to take menial jobs. The worst deprivation for the family was that Vaclav and his brother were not allowed to attend high school. Fortunately he discovered a loophole in the system by which he could attend night school, and so for five years he combined a full-time job as a laboratory assistant with school. The busy teenager also enjoyed an active social life, which revolved around a group of friends who, like Vaclav, wrote poetry and essays, endlessly discussed philosophical matters, and sought out the company of writers and intellectuals. In the fall of 1956 he first attracted widespread attention when, at a government-sponsored conference for young writers, he appealed for official recognition of several banned poets, an act which earned him much criticism.

From 1957 to 1959 Havel served in the Czech army, where he helped found a regimental theater company. His experience in the army stimulated his interest in theater, and following his discharge he took a stagehand position at the avant-garde Theater on the Balustrade. The eager would-be playwright attracted the admiration of the theater's director and he progressed swiftly from manuscript reader to literary manager to, by 1968, resident playwright. It was while at the Theater on the Balustrade that Havel met and in 1964 married Olga Spличalova. Of working-class origin, his wife was, as Havel later said, "exactly what I needed. … All my life I've consulted her in everything I do … She's usually first to read whatever I write…."
His wife did a great deal of reading as Havel's career took off. Heavily influenced by Theater of the Absurd playwrights, Havel's early plays were clever, rather depressing exposés of the relationship between language and thought. These plays, which included *The Garden Party* (1963), *The Memorandum* (1965), and *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* (1968), were instant successes in Czechoslovakia and abroad, where they were translated and performed to critical and popular acclaim.

The Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 brought an abrupt end to the cultural flowering of the "Prague Spring" and marked a watershed in Havel's life. He felt he could not remain silent, and so began his long career as a human rights activist with an underground radio broadcast asking Western intellectuals to condemn the invasion and to protest the human rights abuses of the new and repressive regime of Gustav Husak. The government responded by banning the publication and performance of Havel's works and by revoking his passport. Although he was forced to take a job in a brewery, he continued to write, and his works were distributed by clandestine, "samizdat" means—typewritten copies and illegal tapes, many of which were sent abroad for publication.

Like many of his compatriots, and in particular many intellectuals and artists, Havel could have fled Czechoslovakia to the freedom of the West. He was offered several opportunities to leave, and the government encouraged him to do so. He declined, however, saying, "The solution of this human situation does not lie in leaving it. … " His courageous decision to remain and face what he termed the "interesting" future in his own country made him a hero to many Czechs.

Havel's human rights activities continued with April 1975's "Open Letter to Doctor Gustav Husak," which decried the state of the country as a place which had lost all sense of values and in which people lived in fear and apathy. The "Letter," disseminated through samizdat channels, attracted much notice and clearly put Havel at risk.

In January 1977 hundreds of Czech intellectuals and artists, Marxists and anti-Communists alike, signed Charter 77, which protested Czechoslovakia's failure to comply with the Helsinki Agreement on human rights. Havel took an active part in the Charter movement and was elected one of its chief spokesmen. As such, he was arrested and jailed early in 1977, tried on charges of subversion, and given a 14-month suspended sentence. Havel was unrepentant: "The truth has to be spoken loudly and collectively, regardless of the results. … "
Havel and some other Charter 77 activists founded the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Persecuted, or VONS, in 1978. The members of VONS were arrested, and in October 1978 Havel was tried, convicted, and sentenced to four and one-half years at hard labor. He served his sentence at a variety of prisons under arduous conditions, some of which are chronicled in his book *Letters to Olga* (1988), based on his prison letters to his wife. A severe illness resulted in his early release in March 1983.

Henceforth Havel was viewed both at home and abroad as a symbol of the Czech government's repression and the Czech people's irrepressible desire for freedom. He continued his dissident activities by writing a number of significant and powerful essays, many of which are collected in 1987's *Vaclav Havel or Living in Truth*. Highly critical of the totalitarian mind and regime while exalting the human conscience and humanistic values, the essays contain some splendid and moving passages. The government responded by tapping his telephone, refusing to let him accept literary prizes abroad, watching his movements, and even shooting his dog.

In January 1989 Havel was arrested again following a week of protests and was sentenced to jail for nine months. On November 19, 1989, amid growing dissatisfaction with the regime in Czechoslovakia and similar discontent throughout Eastern Europe, Havel announced the creation of the Civic Forum. Like Charter 77, a coalition of groups with various political affiliations and a common goal of nonviolent and nonpartisan solution, the forum was quickly molded by Havel and his colleagues into a responsive and effective organization.

The week following the creation of the forum marked the beginning of the so-called "Velvet Revolution," by which Czechoslovakia's Communist regime collapsed like a house of cards. With almost dizzying speed, a new, democratic republic was smoothly and bloodlessly established. Havel and the Civic Forum played a decisive role in this revolution, meeting with the government and applying pressure by mass demonstrations. On December 10, 1989, Husak resigned as president. On December 19, Parliament unanimously elected Havel to replace him. To the cheering throngs which greeted him after his election Havel said, "I promise you I will not betray your confidence. I will lead this country to free elections. …"

The new president was a new type of leader for Czechoslovakia. The long-persecuted but never silenced dissident was a modest, diffident intellectual, who, lacking a professional politician's self-conscious self-confidence, readily admitted his fears for the future and amazement at his success. In his first months in office
he accomplished much. His very presence as president manifested Czech unity and freedom, and he retained his great personal popularity both at home and abroad. He was enthusiastically received in Germany and accorded respect in Moscow, where Premier Gorbachev agreed to withdraw Soviet troops from Czechoslovakia. He was deliriously applauded in the United States, where he addressed Congress, met with the president, and was lionized by celebrities. His government began the long, and, as he warned his people, often painful process of social and economic change to democracy and a free market economy. Most importantly, in June 1990 the promised free elections—the first since 1946—were held, with Havel's Civic Forum's candidates winning large majorities in both houses of Parliament. On July 5, 1990, Parliament reelected an unopposed Havel as president for a two-year term.

Havel's government had considerable success in its first year and managed to avoid some of the awkward adjustments faced by other Eastern European countries. Nonetheless, Havel and his country faced some weighty problems. The first of these was the resurgence of Slovakian nationalism, which was stayed by Havel's popularity and a constitution which ensures a Slovakian prime minister. Then there was Havel himself, who as a dissident criticized the government but did not have—and could not have had—a realistic program as an alternative. He therefore had to do a great deal of learning on the job, a process not without its hazards. When he released prisoners, for example, he crippled Czechoslovakia's main automobile factory, which depended on convict labor, causing severe though temporary economic dislocations.

More serious was the split of the Civic Forum between those wanting a complete and rapid transformation of the Czech economy to a free market system, led by Vaclav Klaus, and Havel's more cautious followers, who believed in a gradual approach. To the surprise of most observers, and of Havel himself, Klaus was elected chairman of the Civic Forum in October 1990, defeating Havel's candidate. Many viewed this as Havel's first serious political setback, and the split of the forum into two distinct factions did not bode well for its long-term survival as a political entity.

In August 1992, the Slovak parliament passed its own constitution, and Havel resigned as president. In December, parliament passed a law dividing Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia, a separation Havel had tried to prevent. However, Havel's political career was not yet over. In 1993 parliament elected him first president of the Czech Republic.
In January 1995 a crisis occurred. Havel's wife of 32 years died of cancer. One year later, Havel married Czech actress Dagmar Veskrnova. In just a few months, Havel entered a clinic with what was thought to be pneumonia. While performing exploratory surgery, doctors found a tumor on his right lung. The tumor was removed on December 2, along with half the lung. During this time, his nation waited anxiously. Supporters called Havel the "chief stabilizing force in this country." Fortunately, Havel was released in good condition on December 27, and three days later was addressing the nation on Czech television.

The positive changes in the former Soviet block country under Havel's leadership led to a landmark event. On July 8, 1997, NATO invited the Czech Republic, along with Poland and Hungary, to be the first Eastern European nation to become a part of the Western Alliance. According to the Associated Press, United States President Bill Clinton told his fellow leaders, some of whom were opposed to the expansion of NATO, that "they have met the highest standards of democratic and market reform. They have pursued those reforms long enough to give us confidence they are irreversible." NATO planned to admit the new members in April of 1999, the 50th anniversary of NATO. Havel called the invitation from NATO "the crowning achievement of enormous efforts by those countries to shed their communist pasts."

Of Havel's survival as a national figure there can be no doubt. It is impossible to predict if he will remain president after his term expires or if, as he often indicated, he will return to his writing career. Whatever his plans, he will leave a formidable legacy. His career demonstrated what he called "the power of the powerless"—of one courageous writer, unable to "live within a lie, " who inspired his countrymen to overturn the oppression of 40 years despite the obvious dangers and despite a natural fear of change. Havel also inspired others, and will continue to serve as a symbol for those whose revolutions are still in progress or have not yet begun.

Of his own works, *Disturbing the Peace* (1990), set in the form of answers to an interviewer's questions, presents a great deal of otherwise unavailable autobiographical information as well as an explanation of his philosophies. For the general reader, this is the most accessible of his works. Several of his plays, notably *The Memorandum* (1965) and *Largo Desolato* (1984), provide insight into Havel's beliefs. George Galt's "Gentle Revolutionary, " *Saturday Night* (September 1990), is a temperate but admiring review of *Living in Truth, Letters to Olga,* and *Disturbing the Peace*
