

## Václav HAVEL (5. 10. 1936 - 18. 12. 2011)

*Writer and dramatist; one of the first spokesmen for Charter 77; leading figure of the Velvet Revolution of 1989; last President of Czechoslovakia and first President of the Czech Republic.*

Václav Havel grew up in a well-known entrepreneurial and intellectual family, which was closely linked to the cultural and political events in Czechoslovakia from the 1920s to the 1940s. Because of these links the communists did not allow Havel to study formally after having completed required schooling in 1951. In the first part of the 1950s, a young Václav Havel entered into a four-year apprenticeship as a chemical laboratory assistant and simultaneously took evening classes to complete his secondary education (which he did in 1954). For political reasons he was not accepted into any post-secondary school with a humanities program; therefore, he opted to study at the Faculty of Economics of Czech Technical University. He left this program after two years.

The intellectual tradition of his family compelled Václav Havel to pursue the humanitarian values of Czech culture, which were harshly suppressed in the 1950s. Following his return from two years of military service, he worked as a stage technician - first at Divadlo ABC, and then, in 1960, at Divadlo Na Zbradli. From 1962 until 1966, he studied Drama by correspondence at the Faculty of Theatre of the Academy of Musical Arts, and completed his studies with a commentary on the play "Eduard", which became the basis of his own play **The Increased Difficulty of Concentration**.

From the age of twenty, Václav Havel published a number of studies and articles in different literary and theatrical periodicals. His first works were presented at the Divadlo Na Zbradli; amongst these was the play **The Garden Party** (1963). It soon became a component of the revivalist tendencies of Czechoslovak society in the 1960s. This civic self-awareness culminated in the historic Prague Spring of 1968. During this time Havel not only produced other plays, such as **The Memorandum** (1965) and **The Increased Difficulty of Concentration** (1968), but also was the chair of the Club of Independent Writers and a member of the Club of [Politically] Engaged Non-Partisans. From 1965, he worked at the non-Marxist monthly Tvar.

In 1956, he became acquainted with **Olga Splichalova** and their diverse family backgrounds attracted them to each other. After an eight-year acquaintance they married. From that point on, Olga would accompany Václav through the most difficult experiences of their lives. The future President would later refer to her as his indispensable source of support.

Following the suppression of Prague Spring by the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies, Havel stood against the political repression characterized by the years of the so-called communist "normalization". In 1975, he wrote an open letter to President Husak, in which he warned of the accumulated antagonism in Czechoslovak society. The culmination of his activities resulted in **Charter 77**.

Published in January of 1977, it embodied the character of Czechoslovak population which silently protested against the communist government and resultant oppression, as well as providing a name for the movement. Václav Havel was one of the founders of this initiative and one of its first three spokesmen. In April 1979, he became a co-founder of the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted. He was imprisoned three times for his civic views and spent nearly five years behind bars.

During this time, Czechoslovak authorities made it impossible to publish any of Havel's texts. Under the guidance of Havel's former literary agent, Klaus Juncker, the German publishing

company Rowohlt, based in Reinbek near Hamburg, compiled a nearly complete publication of Havel's works.

In the second half of the 1980s, at a time of increasing dialogue between the Soviet Union and the Western Democracies, there was an perceptible increase in open dissatisfaction with the government in Czechoslovak society. The citizens became less willing to accept the repressive policies of the communist regime, which was seen in the willingness to sign the petition of **A Few Sentences**. Havel was one of the authors. Whereas Charter 77 had only a few hundred signatories, ten thousand Czechoslovaks signed the Petition.

The beginning of social change began with a peaceful demonstration of students on **17 November 1989**, on the occasion of the closure of Czechoslovak post-secondary schools by the occupying Nazis. The communist regime's police force brutally suppressed this demonstration on Narodni trida in Prague. Students and Artists came to the forefront of subsequent civic uprisings. The meeting of the Drama Club of November 19th gave rise to **Civic Forum**, which became an umbrella group for organizations and individuals who demanded fundamental changes in the Czechoslovak political system. From its inception, Václav Havel became its leading figure. The social upheaval came to a climax on 29 December 1989 when Václav Havel, as the candidate of Civic Forum, was elected President by the Federal Assembly of Czechoslovakia. In his inaugural address, he promised to lead the nation to free elections, which he fulfilled in the summer of 1990. He was elected to the Czechoslovak Presidency a second time by the Federal Assembly on 5 July the same year.

Due to his unyielding political stance through the years of communist totality, Václav Havel became a recognized moral authority. The depth of his perception of the problems of civilization and his contemplation of their formulation enabled him to become very well-respected, even in the framework of his new function as Head of State, and outstanding amongst politicians.

During the course of his second term in office as President of the Czech and Slovak Federation, however, a rift between the Czech and Slovak political representatives over the future organization of the state began to emerge. Václav Havel was a determined supporter of a common Federation of Czechs and Slovaks, and always used his political influence to promote it. After parliamentary elections in July 1992, the strongest contingents failed to agree on a functional model of the Federation and, as a direct result of this, the rift between Czech and Slovak political factions widened and failed to provide Havel with the required number of votes in the presidential elections of 3 July 1992. According to Czechoslovak law, he was able to remain President for a period of time, which stretched to 20 July, when, due to his inability to fulfil his oath of loyalty to the Republic in such a manner to be in line with his conviction, disposition, and conscience, he resigned the Presidency.

After leaving office, Havel retired from public life for a while. In mid-November 1992, during a time when the onset of an independent Czech state was imminent, he confirmed that he would be seeking the Presidency. The official nomination of his candidacy was submitted on 18 January 1993 by four political parties of the ruling coalition government. On 26 January the Chamber of Deputies elected Václav Havel to be the first President of the independent Czech Republic.

**Olga Havlova** dedicated her time primarily to charitable activities. Inspired by the work of the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted, she founded the Goodwill Foundation in 1990, whose activities were directed at helping the mentally and physically handicapped. She died in 1996 after a severe, prolonged illness.

The end of 1996 dealt Havel another blow - a serious medical condition in his lungs. Early detection and quick, radical action on the part of his physicians were decisive in a successful

recovery. His source of support in this time of trouble took the form of his friend **Dagmar Veskrnova**, whom the President married shortly after his release from hospital in January 1997.

Under difficult political circumstances, he was re-elected to the Presidency by both Chambers of Parliament on 20 January 1998.

Since leaving office as President of the Czech Republic on 2 February 2003 he focused his activities on the respect of human rights worldwide, particularly in Cuba, Belarus and Burma, as well as on his literary work. As co-founder of the Dagmar and Václav Havel Foundation Vize 97, he supported humanitarian, health and educational projects.

He also returned to writing and in 2007 he finished his play **Leaving** which he had started to write before 1989. It was performed one year later in Archa Theater, Prague, directed by David Radok. **Leaving**, a film based upon his play, was premiered in 2011 and Václav Havel was not just an author of the screenplay, but also a director. One of his lifelong dreams came true.

For his **literary and dramatic works**, as well as for his lifelong efforts and opinions and his position on the upholding of human rights, Václav Havel was the recipient of a number of state decorations, international awards and honorary doctorates.

*Source: [www.vaclavhavel.cz](http://www.vaclavhavel.cz)*