

# VACLAV HAVEL

## 1936

Vaclav Havel was born in Prague into a prominent and wealthy family that saw its estate nationalized when the Communists came to power. Because of his bourgeois background, Vaclav was barred from attending secondary high school: first he trained as a carpenter and then as a lab technician while at the same time attending evening classes, completing his secondary education in 1954. With a group of friends he formed "Class '36", which printed a clandestine magazine and organized conferences. Since his background also barred him from studying in an arts faculty, at university he studied economics. After his military service he worked as a stagehand and electrician at the "Na Zbradli" [On the Balustrade] theatre, founded in 1958 and directed by Jan Grossman. At that time Czechoslovakian theatre was enjoying a renaissance, with up-and-coming directors and actors such as Alfred Radok, Ivan Vyskocil, Jaromir Pleskit, Otomar Krejca, Jan Grossman, Pavel Kohout and Milan Kundera. The "Na Zbradli" expressed renewed enthusiasm for experimentation and the search for freedom.

Encouraged by Grossman, Havel staged his own early works: *The Garden Party*, *Memorandum*, *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* while completing his drama studies via a correspondence course. In 1964 he married Olga Splichalova and the following year joined the editorial staff of "Tvar", the monthly magazine of the Czechoslovak Writers Association. After Havel had spoken out on several occasions against the persecution of writers, the Party ordered his name to be removed from the list of candidates for positions of responsibility within the Association. In March 1968 Havel and 150 other writers and men of culture addressed an open letter to the Party's Central Committee demanding a return to democracy. In April he became President of the Independent Writers Club. He also joined the "Club of Committed Non-partisans", the only independent political movement formed during the "Prague Spring", which demanded equal rights for both members and non-members of the Party. In May and June 1968 he presented *Memorandum* in New York and in Western Europe. On his return he resigned from the "Na zbradli" theatre. He took an active part in protests against the Warsaw Pact invasion; his opinion about the Prague Spring of 1968 is lucidly expressed in *The power of the powerless*: "None of the changes that took place, especially in the climate and then in the conception and lastly in the framework were prompted by any parallel structures such as those that are starting to take shape today (...). Then it was simply the combined result of a whole variety of attempts (...) to think more freely, to create and reflect politically in an independent way (...); it was thus a process in which society gradually reawakened, furtively opening its secret spheres"<sup>1</sup>. In the autumn of 1968 Havel returned to "Tvar" magazine as editor in chief and in the spring of 1969 he helped prepare the Czechoslovak Writers Association congress. In September he sent an open letter to Alexander Dubcek; he was one of the authors of the *Ten Points* appeal against the regime's "normalization" policy. In the autumn he was detained along with the other signatories and charged with subverting the State, but their trial was postponed indefinitely. Havel defined this period as the era of the "grey totalitarian-communist" routine in which "Czechoslovakia was becoming an island of silence, injustice, systematic demoralization and criminal exploitation of the future"<sup>2</sup>. Havel, harassed and spied upon by the regime, retreated increasingly frequently to his country cottage in Hradecek, where he liked to meet his friends Kohout, Vaculik, Klíma, Trefulka and numerous others: this was the only free space for the playwright who had chosen to walk the road of dissent. "Nobody – he wrote – becomes a dissident because one fine day they decide to follow this strange career, but because their inner sense of responsibility, combined with the whole complex of external

circumstances, ends up forcing them into this position: they are thrown out of the existing framework and set against it."<sup>3</sup>

In December 1972 Havel and 35 other Czech writers addressed a petition to president Husak demanding an amnesty for political detainees. Then on 8 April 1975, he sent his famous *Letter to the general secretary of the Communist Party Gustav Husak*, in which he depicts Czechoslovakia as a society in which the daily lives of millions of people are conditioned by fear. Exploiting this sense of fear, the regime is pushing people towards a "crisis of human identity" and "spreading the aesthetics of banality"<sup>4</sup> in the world of culture. Czechoslovakians – declared Havel – have the feeling that they are no longer living within history: "the disorder of real history is replaced by the orderliness of pseudo history"<sup>5</sup>. At the end of 1975 he founded the underground magazine "Expedice" which published the works of Czech and foreign authors; between 1975 and 1976 he wrote new plays: *Audience*, *Vernissage* and *Mountain Hotel*.

In August 1976, with Jiri Nemec, Jaroslav Seifert and five other intellectuals he addressed a letter to Nobel prizewinner Heinrich Böll asking for solidarity for the imprisoned "Plastic People" rock group. Their trial and the ratification of the Final Document of the Helsinki talks led to new cooperation between the dissidents of the "Prague Spring" and Christian circles. These relations resulted in Charter '77: "a free informal and open community of people of various persuasions, religions and professions, linked by the will to work individually and jointly for compliance with civil and human rights"<sup>6</sup>. On 1 January 1977 the *Charter '77 declaration*, written by Vaclav Havel, Pavel Kohout, Zdenek Mlynar and Jan Patočka, was published. The first spokesmen of the Charter were Vaclav Havel, Jiri Hajek and Jan Patočka, who was to die on 13 March 1977 after being subjected to extenuating interrogation. The day after Patočka's death, Havel was arrested and charged with subverting the Republic due to his Letter to Husak and the formation of Charter '77. He was to remain in jail until May and meanwhile the regime orchestrated a defamatory campaign against him. This led him to abandon his post as spokesman to safeguard the good name of the Charter. On 1 October 1977 he organized the third underground cultural Festival in his summer cottage; he received a 14-month prison sentence, suspended for 3 years, for having damaged the interests of the State abroad. On 27 April 1978 he set up the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Persecuted (VONS); in October he wrote his most famous essay: *The power of the powerless* and the show *The Signature*, and from 6 November he was once again the spokesman for Charter '77.

In his essay *Power of the powerless* he describes man's decay in a post totalitarian system, corruption, hypocrisy, fear, subjugation, he asks who the dissidents are and where they find their strength; according to Havel dissidents find their strength in love of truth, which "in a post totalitarian system does not only have an existential dimension (that restores man to himself), a noetic dimension (that reveals reality as it is) and a moral dimension (it is an example), but also has a clear *political dimension*"<sup>7</sup>. The dissident's task is to try to reach "beneath the calm surface of *living within the lie*" to the "secret sphere of life's real intentions, its secret opening up to truth"<sup>8</sup>. These two opposing forces clash above all on the level of human conscience, on an existential level, and only afterwards can become a visible gesture.

From November 1978 to February 1979, along with Hejdanek, Havel was again a spokesman for Charter '77; on 29 April he was arrested along with 15 members of the VONS, charged with subversion and sentenced to 4 and a half years' imprisonment, to be served in the Hermanice jail. At his trial he declared: "I know all the collaborators of the VONS. You could say that the main reason for the way they act is their love for mankind. I am proud to have had the chance to work with people like them"<sup>9</sup>. In prison he wrote 144 letters to his wife, collected in *Letters to Olga*. He was released from prison in January 1983 due to ill health.

In the following years Havel never gave up fighting for the persecuted, despite constant police harassment and strict surveillance; neither did he abandon his vocation for the theatre. In fact, he wrote: *Largo desolato* in 1984, *Temptation* in 1985, *Redevelopment* in 1987. On 11 November 1986 he received the Erasmus Prize "for his contribution to European culture", which he considered an "acknowledgement of Charter '77", for "all those who in the part of Europe in which I happen to live, are struggling, despite all the difficulties, to live within truth, who even here try to say what they think, who try to stay human despite all the dehumanizing pressures"<sup>10</sup> and who have the "courage to be mad: [...] or in other words to try with all possible seriousness to change what is defined as unchangeable"<sup>11</sup>.

On 16 January 1989, the anniversary of Jan Palach's suicide, Havel was arrested yet again for placing flowers at the foot of the St. Wenceslas statue and sentenced to nine months in jail; on 19 November 1989 he founded the Civic Forum, which was to provide the main political framework for the "Velvet Revolution"; on 29 December he was elected President of the Czechoslovak Federation, an office from which he resigned on 20 July 1992, after the split from Slovakia. On 26 January 1993, the Czech Parliament elected him the first President of the Czech Republic. In January 1996, his much loved and highly popular wife Olga died after a long illness. On 20 January 1998, Parliament again elected Vaclav Havel President of the Republic and he remained in office until 2003.

The above is based on works published in Italian.

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