

VACLAV HAVEL

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. He trained as a carpenter and then as a lab technician while at the same time attending secondary school evening classes. 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 at the "Na Zbradli" [On the Balustrade] theatre, where he staged his first plays, encouraged by the director.

In 1964 he married Olga Splichalova and the following year joined the editorial staff of the monthly magazine of the Czechoslovak Writers Association. After Havel had spoken out on several occasions against the persecution of writers, his name was removed from the list of candidates for positions of responsibility within the Association.

In March 1968 Havel and 150 other intellectuals 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 took an active part in protests against the Warsaw Pact invasion. 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In the Seventies Havel's works were banned and withdrawn from all libraries and he was constantly persecuted by the regime. In December 1972 Havel and 35 other Czech writers addressed a petition to president Husak demanding an amnesty for political detainees.

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 governed by fear. At the end of 1975 he founded the underground magazine "Expedice" which published the works of Czech and foreign authors. In August 1976, with other writers and philosophers 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". On 1 January 1977 the Charter '77 declaration was published. The first spokesmen of the Charter were Vaclav Havel, Jiri Hajek and Jan Patočka, who died on 13 March 1977 after being subjected to extenuating interrogation. The next day, Havel was arrested and charged with crimes against the State. Released in May, he was then subjected to a defamatory campaign that forced him to abandon his post as spokesman of the Charter. In October 1977 he received a 14-month prison sentence and 3 years' probation for having damaged the interests of the State abroad. On 27 April 1978 he and others 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 theatre piece The Signature, and from 6 November he was once again the 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. From the jail 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, neither did he

abandon his vocation for the theatre. On 11 November 1986 he received the Erasmus Prize "for his contribution to European culture". On 16 January 1989, the anniversary of Jan Palach's suicide, Havel was arrested yet again and sentenced to nine months in jail for placing flowers at the foot of the St. Wenceslas statue. On 19 November 1989 he and others founded the Civic Forum, which was to provide the main 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 beloved 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.

FRIDTJOF NANSEN

Fridtjof Nansen, an Arctic explorer, natural science research scholar, academic, diplomat and confirmed pacifist, was one of Norway's most prominent figures in the political, cultural and scientific world. His reputation spread beyond the frontiers of his native land and he was appointed to international posts in some of the direst situations between countries. The outbreak of the First World War appalled him and he openly expressed his desire to try to stop what he defined as "pointless carnage". At the end of the war, he was nominated High Commissioner of the League of Nations and he successfully arranged exchanges of prisoners of war and aid to the Soviet refugees. More than two million Russian exiles, who had fled the revolution and were deprived of their nationality, were able to return home thanks to the "Nansen passport", an internationally recognized identity card. In Turkey, meanwhile, the de-nationalization of the Armenians that had sought refuge in Europe after the 1915 genocide prevented these refugees from returning home. In 1922 Nansen received the Nobel Peace Prize. To the end of his days he felt that he had failed both to help the Armenians, "an extraordinary people with a tragic destiny", and also to touch the conscience of Europe.

Due to his exceptional scientific, humanitarian and pacifist commitments, and to his generosity and dedication to defending peoples' rights, Fridtjof Nansen is remembered among the Righteous. On 23 March 2003, earth from his tomb was laid to rest in Yerevan, in the "Wall of Remembrance" on Dzidzernagapert, the Hill of Swallows, where the Armenian genocide memorial stands.

DIMITAR PESHEV

Thanks to Dimitar Peshev, Bulgaria's entire Jewish community was rescued from deportation to Auschwitz. Some forty-eight thousand men, women and children were able to stay in their own homes and escape the gas chambers! A very different fate awaited the Jews of Thrace and Macedonia, new territories "handed" to Bulgaria by Hitler, on condition that his plans for the "final solution" were not hampered. Peshev was a brilliant lawyer in Sofia, and a native of a small provincial town, Kjustendil, where he had spent his childhood and youth cultivating friendships with play fellows and classmates, who included numerous Jews. Fascinated by politics, engagement in which he considered a duty for every man with skills that could be placed at the service of the Nation, he had joined the right-wing party that supported Hitler's Germany. He had not opposed the introduction of racial laws, which he saw simply as a facade. He had,

however, objected to joining the war in favour of the Axis due to Bulgaria's historic alliance with Great Britain and to the Anglo-Saxon tradition that he respected. The events of March 1943 and the alarm launched by his Jewish friends in Kjustendil about the imminent deportations, organized in stealth by the Nazis with the connivance of the highest offices of State, undermined his confidence in the party and prompted him to react: his defiant intervention at the Ministry of the Interior, his authoritative and political integrity, which encouraged other deputies to back his demand for the convoys to be stopped, the scandal that he caused in Parliament with his letter of protest, were decisive in saving the Jewish community and with it – as Peshev himself underlined – the Nation's honour. Excluded from government circles and marginalized from political life, Peshev was subjected to the ultimate outrage on the part of the new Communist power: an indictment for high treason for having supported the pro-Nazi policies of the Monarchist government during the war. Having miraculously avoided the death penalty and after a period of harsh detention, Peshev spent the rest of his life alone and in poverty, forgotten in his own country and only rehabilitated by Gabriele Nissim's research into his story, published in his book *L'uomo che fermò Hitler* [The man who stopped Hitler] (1998).

SAMIR KASSIR

Samir Kassir (5 May 1960 – Beirut, 2 June 2005) was a Lebanese teacher, journalist and activist. From a leftwing point of view, he passionately supported the end of the Syrian guardianship over Lebanon, the democratization of Syria and the Palestinian cause. Samir Kassir was born on 5 May 1960 into a family of Greek Orthodox faith formed by a Palestinian father and a Syrian mother. He grew up in Beirut, where he attended the Lycée Français. At age 17 he started to write anonymously for *al-Nidā'*, the newspaper of the Lebanese Communist Party, and to contribute to the French-language Lebanese daily *L'Orient-Le Jour*.

In 1981, Kassir started working with *Le Monde Diplomatique*, for which he would go on publishing his articles until 2000. In 1984 he attained his DEA (degree) in Philosophy and Political Philosophy from Université Paris I. In 1990 he completed his research doctorate in Modern History at Université Paris IV, with a thesis on the Lebanese civil war. At that time Kassir contributed to weekly paper *al-Yawm al-Sābi'*, to the *Revue des Études Palestiniennes* and to *Panarab* daily *al-Hayāt*.

After going back to Lebanon, in 1995 Samir Kassir founded magazine *L'Orient-L'Express*, which represented a major overturn as it was the first time that a French-language newspaper spoke up for Arab identity and culture rather than Lebanese nationalism.

After the closure of the magazine in 1998, Samir Kassir started teaching at the Institut des sciences politiques of Université Saint-Joseph in Beirut. In the same year, Samir Kassir started contributing with a series of editorials to daily paper *al-Nahār*. His weekly columns, in which he frankly expressed his opposition to the filo-Syrian regime and demanded the withdrawal of the Syrian troops from Lebanon, became very popular and Kassir started being invited as a political pundit in numerous tv shows.

Despite his support to Lebanese sovereignty, Kassir kept a very strong interest in Syrian affairs, maintaining close ties with the intellectuals involved in the so-called “Damascus Spring” of 2001. Kassir also always defended the rights of the Palestinian people.

In 2004, together with other intellectuals and exponents of the Lebanese civil society, Samir Kassir founded the movement Democratic Left (*al-Yasār ad-Dīmuqrāfi*), opposing

the neo-capitalist economic model as much as the clashing religious and ideological extremist movements and views. Samir Kassir, together with the Democratic Left and daily al-Nahār, was one of the prominent figures in the political mobilization that led to the big anti-Syrian mass demonstrations that followed the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq al-Ḥarīrī. Samir Kassir himself was assassinated by a car-bombing explosion in Beirut on 2 June 2005. The investigation following his murder is still ongoing and no master mind nor killer of his has been identified, yet. Given that Samir Kassir had received threats from agents of the Lebanese secret services and the Lebanese and Syrian security forces, many people in Lebanon believe that some elements of these apparatuses may have been responsible for his murder. The Syrian government has denied any form of involvement.