

Politics, Pastors and Poets

By Jamie Buckingham

The first trip I made to Czechoslovakia was 18 years ago. I was there with a Dutch Bible smuggler. Besides distributing Bibles, we attended underground prayer meetings. One of these was held in the basement room of a university in Prague.

Vaclav Havel was there that night. I remember him especially, because he was a poet, a playwright, a writer like me.

There were about 20 people present, sitting in a circle in a semi-dark room with shades drawn. When I mentioned the word "freedom," my interpreter stopped speaking. Her face showed alarm.

She whispered in English, "We can't use that word. There may be a spy present. They will say we are political."

"It's a good word," one man said with determination. "We need to hear that good word—'freedom.' We need to speak it always, for one day we shall be free again."

Dressed in a tattered sweater and old wool cap, he looked like most other Czech men. Only he was different. There was a fire in his bones.

"His name is Vaclav Havel," my Czech host whispered. "He will get us killed—or he will set us free."

The next day I stood in beautiful Wenceslas Square in the heart of Prague. I looked at the old museum, pocked by Russian machine-gun fire just months before when the Red tanks had rolled through the city. I looked at the faces around me. I had never seen such a defeated people.

Yet among the Christians I visited, there was resolution. Determination.

The next week I visited a midweek service at a Baptist church in Levice. The music was stunning, led by a 40-piece orchestra that included 20 stringed balalaikas. That night, as I slept on the back pew, the haunting



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music still rang in the rafters. But it was not the music that kept me awake. It was the memory of the pastor's bold sermon from John 8:36: "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed."

It was the same boldness I had sensed in young Vaclav Havel.

The next morning the pastor showed me the steeple on his church. "The Russians made us take down our cross," he said. "They said it was the symbol of freedom. So we put this up there instead." He grinned, pointing upward to a huge chalice—a five-foot wine cup. "It means nothing to the Russians," he laughed. "But to the Czechs it means everything."

Then I remembered. In the year 1415, Czech theologian Jan Hus had dared proclaim freedom for all. He insisted that all people had the right to drink from the chalice—not just the priests. Infuriated, Pope John XXIII excommunicated him and ordered him burned at the stake. Ever since, among the Czechs, the chalice has been a symbol of freedom.

Now, 585 years later, another Jan Hus has appeared. Scholarly and articulate, Vaclav Havel has for the last 18 years written about freedom.

Havel's most influential essay, "The Power of the Powerless," is the story of

the little grocery merchant in Czechoslovakia. In it, he tells how the communists demanded the greengrocer put a sign in his window with the Marxist slogan "Workers of the World Unite!" If the merchant refused, he lost the managership of his store. So he and all the greengrocers displayed the sign.

Havel wrote that for communism to be beaten at least one greengrocer would have to take down the poster and begin "living in truth." Once all the greengrocers stood up, he predicted, the seemingly invincible regime would be an "emperor without clothes."

In November 1989, it happened. The Czechs stood up. They took down the stupid posters. "Communism is a lie," they said. "We are going to live in truth."

Then they elected Vaclav Havel president. In his New Year's message, the new poet-president proclaimed, "People, your government has returned to you!"

Havel embodies an ideal that has become virtually obsolete—the citizen-politician. In times of crisis and regeneration, governing is too important to be done by professional politicians. And in Czechoslovakia, as in all Eastern Europe, untainted leaders are emerging with a yearning for freedom and truth-telling.

U.S. News and World Report was right when it reminded its readers in January: "During the long night of imperialism and repression in Eastern Europe, it was the religious institutions that especially struggled to preserve these democratic values."

The credit goes to the Bible smugglers. The brave pastors. The bold Christians. The poets. To all who stood firm, preaching—and some dying—as Jan Hus did. "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed."

In all Eastern Europe this is the time for poets, pastors and playwrights. ■