

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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After the Ball

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Dear Peter,

This letter consists of personal observations on my first Christmas in Czechoslovakia, the Presidential election, the oversized street party that followed it, my first New Year 's Eve in Czechoslovakia, my first, but brief, trip to Bratislava, some observations of the first few weeks of Václav Havel's presidency, and a quick introduction to the plethora of independent groups and organizations that so far have been born.

My brother arrived on Christmas Eve (what the Czechs call "Štědrý den", literally Generous or Bountiful Day). I took him straight from the airport, which was plastered with "Havel Na Hrad" [Havel to the Castle] posters, to the train station. As we left on the evening train for Pilsen, he looked out through the gloomy, inky night at the rusty rolling stock illuminated by a few beams of yellow light and said in a fascinated tone, "This is like stepping back in time to the end of the Second World War." It has only taken six months, I realized at that moment, for me to start taking this decay for granted. I still often think, however, of John Updike's short story in the New Yorker "Beck Goes To Prague." He writes that a visit to Central Europe is like a visit to Mr. Hitler. My Czech friends find this a weird description, and maybe it is only a North American's way of perceiving this place. And, now that the old guard is leaving, maybe Updike's description will be completely without impact. But, as you'll see, one cannot really avoid the ghosts of the past.

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We spent Christmas Eve -- the most important of the Czech Christmas holidays -- and the following day in Pilsen with friends, Ludvík (who is 82 years old), his wife Vlasta, and his daughter Jana. We ate the traditional meal of fish soup, potato salad, and carp. The fish is bought fresh from vendors on the street. For those Czechs who don't have the heart or the stomach to club the carp to death, the vendor in a rubber apron and with greasy hands will do the dirty deed. Cartoons abound about the carp at Christmas, in the way the turkey and its fate are portrayed in America. This year, with Christmas only a little more than a month after the beating of students at the demonstration, the carp-clubbing jokes had a special significance. Nevertheless, breaded and deep fried, it's a delicious tasting fish, and all previous negative reports I'd heard about it ("it's too bony", "it stinks") were dispelled.

After dinner we moved into another room to see what "Ježíšek" (the diminutive of Jesus, i.e., the little Jesus, or the Christ child) brought as gifts. The Communists had tried to wipe out the Christian side of Christmas and introduce the Soviets' "Děda mráz" (Old Man Frost) who looks like Santa Claus, but Ježíšek has never gone away. The presents Ludvík and his family exchanged were modest but useful -- hard to acquire Palmolive hand soap, bedroom slippers, Czech made liqueur -- appreciation^{for them} was obvious and sincere. We retired to the living room to watch the first-ever television broadcast in Czechoslovakia of the midnight mass. Father Václav Malý, whose calming voice helped guide the crowd during the days of the November and December demonstrations, helped in the service but on the whole kept a low profile.

Ludvík and his wife made it clear that it was their happiest Christmas in more than forty years. Their life has been full of long, miserable periods. Ludvík comes from a wealthy Pilsen family. His father was a well known gynecologist who had served as a doctor in the Austrian Army during World War One. Ludvík still has photos of him in the field hospitals. His father had three brothers and two sisters. When the Germans invaded the rump of the dismembered Czechoslovak state, put into effect the Nuremberg laws, and, in 1941 began the full scale transport of Jewish Czechs and Slovaks, Ludvík, his father, his cousins, uncles and aunts, and his eighty-eight year old grandmother were sent to Theresienstadt. Because Vlasta was half Jewish, she didn't have to go to the ghetto.

Theresienstadt is a walled city (coincidentally in the shape of a star of David) about an hour and half north of Prague. It has on its southern side a small fortress, where the Germans kept Communists and other political prisoners. This, therefore, is the part of Theresienstadt that the Communist regime has turned into an "anti-fascist" museum. (It is interesting to note how they have labeled all totalitarianism after one Italian form of it). The rest of

the city, i.e., the former ghetto, silent on its past, except for an inconspicuous sign pointing towards the crematorium, has become just another dumpy small Czech town. Before the war it had a population of 7,000, but the Germans filled it so that more than 70,000 people were living there at any one time; most were there only while waiting for deportation to the death camps in Poland.

Ludvík's grandmother died soon after her arrival in Theresienstadt; his father survived till liberation but was sick with an epidemic that was raging the camps and didn't want to live. So as not to upset Ludvík I never once asked him about his years in prison camps but learned about it from his relatives. Vlasta, too, has her own stories. Out of the blue, on Christmas day, she started to describe how at the end of the war she was called to Gestapo headquarters in Prague. She made the long journey in winter from Ústí nad Orlicí. After waiting in a long line, she finally came to the desk with the seated Gestapo agent. "It would be a shame," he said in a sympathetic voice, "if a pretty young woman like you would have to die in a camp. Why don't you go back home and think about divorcing your husband; that would save you." She left depressed and determined not to leave Ludvík. The end of the war came before she was called back to the Gestapo. I sat quietly and listened. Vlasta was beginning to cry as she told me the story, and Jana came in and tactfully changed the subject. This is just one example of why I think Mr. Updike's comment is to the point.

Ludvík barely had enough time during the short period of relative freedom between the end of the war and the Communist seizure of power, in 1948, to put his life back in order. As a Masaryk supporter and genuine Social Democrat, as a lawyer and son of a bourgeois family, and as a Jew, he was in constant conflict with the Communists. In 1954, even after the death of Stalin and as the show trials here were coming to a close, Ludvík was repeatedly arrested, held, and released. Not until 1962 did the worst persecution against him end. While in jail, because he was neither tried nor sentenced, his wife Vlasta and daughter Jana could not visit or write him. They, in the meantime, lived in poverty and were dependent on the generosity of a few brave people who were not afraid to be seen with such "dangerous elements." Jana was never allowed to attend a university but has since managed as a single mother to raise her daughter Monika. Monika has become a dental surgeon and has married the head of a neurological clinic. She is the mother of a four-year old girl. Ludvík and Vlasta, therefore, have a great-granddaughter. Ludvík, who before the war had been a lawyer for the aristocratic family Colorado-Mansfeld, has just recently decided to cease working as a legal advisor for the Association of Invalids. He calls the new revolution a happy last chapter to his life.

Chris and I left on Christmas day by train for Prague. A young Indian fellow came into our compartment and wanted to

chat in English. He was a Tamil studying genetic engineering in Czechoslovakia. The young woman with him was from Bengal and was studying medicine. He spoke enthusiastically about the unification of the Indian nations. When I asked him his opinion of the revolution in Czechoslovakia and got such a lukewarm response, I had asked him if he had been in any of the demonstrations. "As foreigners here, it is not our place to participate, only to watch." "What do you think," I asked, "about the opinion expressed by a Communist professor to foreign students in Prague, that one should be free to decide whether to participate or not; that one may sympathize with Czechoslovakia or feel solidarity with students, or alternatively one should be allowed to stay at home, if one is so inclined." The Indian met this remark with a shrug. He was a Marxist-Leninist, it turned out, who felt that Marxism-Leninism was the only way to save mankind -- also through developments in genetic engineering, although he didn't explicitly link the two panaceas. Now, he was off and running. "What we had seen as Communism here was only a deformation." "Yes, also in all of Eastern Europe, only a deformation," he continued. The Czech who was with us in the compartment occasionally looked up from his book and glared. My brother didn't have to participate because he had wisely fallen asleep. Eventually, the zealot realized he was losing his audience and left for his own compartment.

On 28 December, the day before the Presidential elections I received an offer from two young students. "If you're going to the Castle tomorrow to have a look, how would you like to be part of the group of students who will be Havel's bodyguards? We're taking the part of the police!" I accepted and we made arrangements to meet on the next day at 8:45 a.m. As a result of disorganization on the side of the school officials, however, none of us, including the students whom I was with, got the little blue pass to indicate he was part of the student guard. Instead, we stood for three cold hours in the crowd in front the Castle gates that are decorated with the large baroque sculpture, "Clash of the Titans", whose club and dagger wielding figures seem in such contradiction to the popular student chant "We Don't Want Violence!" that had so often been heard here in the previous weeks. The crowd left open a path wide enough for vehicles, so that dignitaries and their entourages could make their way to the Ladislav Hall. ^{inside the castle} When the bus with the military band was leaving from another direction, it looked like a bulky ship on the water, as the crowd calmly edged back just far enough to let it through. We listened (again over a bad sound system) to the Fanfare from Libuše, the opera by Bedřich Smetana about the myth of the founding of Prague, and then to the election going on inside. When Alexander Dubček, as Chairman of the National Assembly, asked the delegates inside for a show of hands of those in favor of, and those opposed to, Havel's nomination, and whether there were any abstentions, everyone outside raised his hand spontaneously in favor as if he, too, had a vote that day. The process was repeated for the actual

election and was finished with loud cheering from those of us outside.

When the gates to the Castle were opened at 12:15 p.m., the crowd poured into the first courtyard -- this time without the civility I'd observed at the demonstrations -- and charged towards the main courtyard inside the Castle proper. My friends and I took advantage of the fact that the crowd was, for the time being, ignoring St. Vitus Cathedral (which is also within the Castle) and we went inside it. Nevertheless, it didn't take long before the cathedral was also full. The congregation sang the Czech hymn "St. Wenceslas" whose thundering organ accompaniment and minor mode continue to make it mystical and remind one of how ancient it is, namely from the end of the thirteen century:

"St. Wenceslas, Prince of the Czech Land, Our King, ask God for us, ask the Holy Ghost, Kriste leison [Christ have mercy on us]. (repeats before every verse)

(2) We ask your help, have mercy on us, console the sad, deliver us from all evil, St. Wenceslas, Kriste leison.

(3) You are the heir of the Czech Land, our King, remember your race, don't let us or those of us yet to come perish, St. Wenceslas, Kriste leison."

This was sung repeatedly for at least fifteen minutes. Then we heard Antonín Dvořák's stirring, and modern sounding, "Te Deum" (1852), which is based on a medieval composition.

Despite the solemnity of the occasion, it was hard not to laugh sometimes. Perhaps it was a lack of oxygen: the congregation was packed shoulder to shoulder, and two enthusiastic photographers climbed over us and each other in order to get that "special" shot. The man in front of me was literally nodding off (but backwards into my face) because he was exhausted. He was clutching his Civic Forum posters so hard that they were bound to be good for nothing when he finally got them home. Beside me a woman had to squeeze her way into a pew because she felt faint. It was actually painful to stand in one place for so long, and many people looked forward to getting back outside. So when the service ended, there was a mild crush at the doors whose wrought-iron decorations threatened to hook onto, and shred, the people passing through them. On our walk back down the Old Castle Stairs towards the Lesser Quarter, I noticed one of the "Havel Na Hrad" posters had been neatly brought up to date; the addition of one letter -- é -- reflected the new political state of affairs: "Havel Na Hradě" [Havel is at the Castle]. Similarly, people have changed their (English) "Havel for President" buttons by whitening out "the".

A "ball" on Old Town Square was planned for eight o'clock that evening, as plain blue and white posters around Prague made known. My brother, myself, and a very tall friend named Luděk made our way from the street Můstek, through the tangle of narrow streets, towards the astronomical clock on

Old Town Square. "If we get separated in the crowd," said Luděk, "you look for me, because I'm the tallest." I bumped into three other friends, who deftly wove their way at a fast clip towards the House of the Stone Bell on the square. Luděk, despite his height, disappeared into the masses of people. We were able to get inside and all the way to the top of the House of the Stone Bell. From the ramparts of this recently renovated medieval building we looked out over the square. On the right, by the white baroque St. Nicholas Church a hot air balloon remained hovering about twenty feet above the ground. Directly below us, a stage had been set up. A Romany (gypsy) dance troupe, all women except for one man, was swirling and stomping; they were followed by Moravian and then Slovak dancers. The Portuguese President, Mario Soares, mounted the stage for a few words of congratulation. We could see little circles of dancing celebrators in the crowd. I imagined that this is what the street celebrations after World War Two looked like, not only here, but in every liberated European city; it was the kind of thing I'd seen so many times in films, and I also felt that I would never again see anything like it in real life. I also thought of Milan Kundera's description in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, where he describes how he and his young Communist friends danced in circles in revolutionary fervor until they seemed to be floating off the ground in one big circle. Sometimes, the devil's advocate in my head tries to imagine this revolution going wrong: Havel in military fatigues and sunglasses on a baroque balcony, making demagogic speeches and gestures; the happy-face OF (Civic Forum) symbol gaining the connotations that the swastika as well as the hammer and sickle now have; a tyranny of happy faces. But, I can't really imagine this as anything more than a twisted caricature.

We back went down to street level and stood thirty minutes in line for frankfurters and mulled wine. People were exuberant, but there was very little drunkenness. We went back with our friends to Civic Forum at Jungmann Square, and because they work there, they got us inside. Two minutes later, without expecting it, I was standing in a small room with about twenty people. Among them was a tired but very happy looking President Havel, signing autographs and shaking hands.

Silvestr (New Year's Eve) was touted for days before the event as something not to be missed. I'd avoided the crowds at, for example, Times Square New Year's celebrations in the past, but I was quite tempted to be on Wenceslas Square for this night. I was invited to dinner at some friends, five people who've known each other for a long time. It was a quiet evening, ^(especially) because the hostess was several months pregnant, but they all knew it was a special New Year's. They tuned into a television broadcast that alternated between censored gems of the past forty years of Czechoslovak film and TV and then live coverage of the crowd on Wenceslas Square. Our New Year's toast was, of course, to freedom.

Rather than head over to the Square we went across the street from the apartment to the embankment at Smichov and watched fireworks over the river. I walked home the next morning through the shards of broken champagne bottles, bits of clothing, and streamers that the street cleaners (including women in high heels and fur coats?!) were shoveling onto little carts on St. Wenceslas Square.

Prague has been comparatively calm since then, except that two days ago and last night demonstrations have resumed, this time calling for the disbandment of the StB (the State security forces). Only a couple of days ago President Havel (the title still strikes me as a pleasant surprise) and the Minister of the Interior, Brother Richard Sacher, assured Czechs and Slovaks that there would be no putsch. It is hardly surprising that in a state where the security forces were probably the main holders of power, that their complete disbandment (i.e., including units that the present State does not know about) will not be easy and that rumors abound about their preparing a putsch to regain that power. Meanwhile, Havel and members of the new Government are doing a splendid job of reestablishing contacts in their back-to-Europe campaign. Back to Europe has been Charter 77 policy for years, but it was announced as official policy in Havel's New Year's Day speech. (See also the enclosed speech to the Polish Sejm). The more international contacts Czechoslovakia reestablishes, the less feasible a putsch ought to seem to anyone contemplating it.

At noon that day, I walked up to Hradčany (the Castle) with some friends on their annual New Year's day walk. I stood in the small crowd on the courtyard outside the St. Vitus Cathedral and listened to the hypnotic droning of the many overtones ringing from four sixteenth century bells, including the newly renovated, eighteen-ton bell named Sigmund. (The others are Wenceslas, St. John the Baptist, and Joseph). People were lined up at the doors of the offices of the President and his advisors. We were let into a side room to write congratulations and greetings to the President. On my way home, as I walked by the Černín Palace (the home of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), I was surprised to see President Havel in his black jeans and leather jacket walking casually in my direction on his way to the Castle. A few yards in front of him were a couple of his bodyguards (the non-State Security bodyguards from a karate club), behind him was his dark green Renault (the gift of Portuguese President Soares) and behind it were three small, light blue Daewoos (South Korean cars) with very large drivers, probably his official body guards. The streets were almost empty that day, but a woman near me with her children did a quick double take. "Isn't that something! The President goes to the office on foot!"

I made it back to the dormitory in time for the TV broadcast of President Havel's New Year's Day Speech. The

content was excellent. Havel, atypically for him, in a suit and tie as well as his large reading glasses, made it clear from the beginning that Czechs and Slovaks were not going to be hearing a rosy report about the state of the nation. Rather, he stressed the hard work that lay ahead. He also said that he would be glad if the Pope and the Dalai Lama (East meets West yet again) would pay a visit to Czechoslovakia. There were only a dozen students in the room, and a few chuckled when Havel, in that well known gesture of public speakers, removed his glasses as if to emphasize the point but then left them dangling for a moment awkwardly beside his head. Some people I spoke with found the unpolished delivery charming because they saw it as a sign of someone who is not a politician and, therefore, free of jadedness and insincerity. It is the sincerity, common sense, clarity, and civility of Havel's speeches and press conferences that set him apart from other politicians, especially those who have ruled this country for the last forty-one years. It will be interesting to watch if there will be attempts to make him more "telegenic" although my guess is that he would resist this. On the other hand, once the real election campaigns get underway, personal approaches may change. But is Havel even going to run? One recalls the failure of the intellectual candidates, e.g. Adlai Stevenson. But, this is not America. Professor Masaryk was the President-Liberator, and the idea of Havel as a continuation of Masarykian democracy is sometimes seen in small xeroxed posters: a collage of Havel and Masaryk reaching out over the skyline of Prague and shaking hands; a smaller Havel in the foreground, with a large Masaryk behind him. The emphasis on morality and social justice is a continuation of Masaryk, and one can rightly see the invitation to the Pope and the Dalai Lama as, among other things, a gesture in support of spiritual faith regardless of denomination.

Havel has, however, already carried out two measures that the Czechs have responded to with far less than unanimous approval. The first was a wide amnesty for 22,000 Czechoslovak prison inmates (i.e., more than two-thirds of the country's prison population). Naturally, some people (e.g., the concierge at the student dormitory upon hearing the news) were immediately afraid and condemned the decision as unwise. The just released prisoners who rioted on a train from Pilsen gave added support to those nervous people, as did the idea that police, after the revolution, were now afraid to go on the streets and do their normal job, i.e., to protect the citizenry. A general amnesty was not Havel's original idea, it has happened in Czechoslovakia whenever there was a new president, although Havel's was the most far reaching amnesty. The released prisoners have not contributed to the rise in the crime rate; rather a rise in crime here is the result of the revolution and the fear that some police have had to go out in public.

Havel's second political statement that is still being echoed today, but not in the way he formulated it, is the suggestion of a formal State apology to the surviving Sudeten Germans who were expelled after World War Two. This seems to meet with opposition from almost every one I have spoken to who is old enough to recall the war. Radoslav Luža wrote a well-documented book (in English) on the subject back in the 1960s, which was in favor of the expulsion of 2.5 million Germans. (Today 3 million is the number circulating). Many of these people had family roots in Bohemia and Moravia that went back centuries. Ronald Smelser also wrote a book and several articles on the Sudeten Germans and especially on the rise of Konrad Henlein's Nazi Party here in Bohemia and Moravia. He has made it clear that the vast majority (around 1938 it was almost unanimous) voted for the Henleinists. There is misunderstanding about exactly what Havel has suggested. He has not, in fact, suggested an apology for the expulsion but for the fast and violent manner in which it was carried out. An article here claims that a quarter of a million Sudeten Germans perished during the expulsion. It is amazing that old problems never go away and that the Germans have resurfaced as a central issue here -- although as former Foreign Minister Jiří Hájek reminds us, it was also a principle issue in 1968. (See the enclosed translation of the interview with Hájek).

On January 7, I went to Bratislava to visit Slovak friends who had returned to Czechoslovakia for the first time in ten years. The four-and-a-half hour bus ride is the fastest means of public transport to the Slovak capital. The journey included a thirty minute pause on the outskirts of Brno and a two-minute, hair-raising nighttime drag race with a large transport truck. Most of the initial revolutionary fervor has quieted down in Bratislava, but as I strolled the streets of its old town (the only part worth seeing, my hosts and others have told me), I saw many excellent, colorful hand-painted murals and posters on walls and corrugated metal barriers around construction sights.

Only in Bratislava did it occur to me that my attention and the focus of most foreign news stories have been diverted from Slovakia in favor of events in Prague. I was able to speak with a journalist who had lost her job in 1969 and with a young professor at Komenský University. These two women expressed certain reservations. The first was about the sincerity of the representatives of Civic Forum and uncertainty about who the real power is behind the group. One speculation was Dienstbier. The other reservation was that they felt that the Czechs have been subtly pushing their ideas on to the Slovaks. This point was met by derision from the professor's sister, who claimed it was just Slovak narrow-mindedness and suspicion that I was hearing. A Slovak woman in her sixties and, as she stressed, a Protestant (Havel is a Catholic), said that all these opinions were only slander against the first fine person

they've had in years and a revolution with honorable motives.

With my Slovak friend Samuel, I also made a trip to a cottage about forty minutes north of Bratislava. The man there had all his political bases covered, although there was a certain playful irony in this. On his front door he had a foot-and-a-half high crucifix; inside he had two eight-by-ten photos: one of Milan Rastislav Štefánik (the Slovak leader who died in 1919 in a plane crash on his first return to the new Czechoslovak Republic after his exile in France), and the second was of a much younger Alexander Dubček. On his book-shelf he had a small bust of Thomas Garrigue Masaryk, and, for good measure, a small white plaster Lenin stood beside it. Most of this fellow's time is spent puttering around his cottage, preparing smoked pork, pickles, sauerkraut, and wine. In his basement he had, near the hanging pieces of smoked pork, the dusty collected works of V.I. Lenin. His son explained this artifact: "Once Dad bought a table and the owner insisted that part of the deal was to take Lenin off his hands. He couldn't sell the books, because there are no customers for that sort of thing; he couldn't throw them out, because that would get him into trouble; forcing Dad to take them as part of the reduced price on the table was the only way he could get rid of the books." As we sat through a lunch of three courses (each one a surprise) and increasingly larger glasses of wine, I tried in vain to turn the conversation to politics. As I tried to follow the Slovak, which for a non-native speaker of Czech is really quite a different language, it was hard to recall that I was only an hour and a half from Vienna. I was reminded of that fact back in Bratislava, where one frequently sees taxis from Austria carrying passengers for a day's excursion to Slovakia.

I visited the offices of The Public Against Violence (Slovakia's own version of Civic Forum), but because it was Sunday there was no one to speak with. Just as Civic Forum has taken over the building of the former Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship Society, the Slovak Public Against Violence has taken over the beautiful old palace where night classes in Marxism-Leninism used to be held. I noticed that the Hungarian minority in Slovakia (there^{are} at least a half million Czechoslovak citizens of Hungarian ethnicity in Slovakia) had their Public Against Violence sign written in Hungarian on a door. The Slovak side of this revolution is something that needs further examination. The entire issue of Slovakia's acceptance of the idea of a Czechoslovak state is close to resurfacing, as well the old tendency of strong clerical influence in government affairs. I asked one friend what he thought about Ján Čarnogurský*. He said many Slovaks did not support this man because his father was in the clerico-fascist government in the Slovak State during World War Two.

*Deputy Prime Minister

I left my two friends at the railway station and took the midnight train back to Prague. They treated me to a berth that they got with a bribe, of course, to the porter. Before we parted company I asked them if they would consider moving back to Czechoslovakia. "No way," said Sonia. "This place is completely primitive. It's many times worse than when I left it. The regime has turned the people into absolute idiots. It's like living in the dark ages." My other friend, who is more easy going, remained silent. I heard a similar comment last night from a Czech who was so well-dressed it was obvious he was from the West. As he left the café Slavia on Národní třída (National Avenue) three minutes after entering, he said to his two local hosts, "Things here have plunged at least three-fold for the worse." This may be just an attitude of Czechs and Slovaks who are returning to their native land after living abroad and are just not used to it, but these kind of remarks are in accord with the statistics, e.g., the ones I sent in the last letter, which point to a general decline.

When it comes to the birth of new clubs and associations, let alone new parties, one cannot speak of a general decline. On the contrary, as the Czech cliché goes, they are sprouting like mushrooms after a rainfall. Here is a list of the many new clubs and organizations that have sprung up: The Club of Christian Women; The Club of Marxist Intelligentsia; The Masaryk Democratic Movement; Reawakening -- The Club for Socialist Restructuring; Socialist Forum; The Association of Moravian-Silesian Entrepreneurs; The Democratic Forum of Communists; Czechoslovak Independent Youth; The Czechoslovak Pacifists League; The Citizens' Democratic Alliance; For A European House; The Green Circle; The Czechoslovak Society of Vegetarians; The Association of Retirees; The Peace Club of John Lennon; Economic Forum; The Club of Friends of Thomas Bata; The Buddhist Society; The Society for a Merrier Present; The Czechoslovak-Israeli Society; The Free Association of Creative Technicians; The Czechoslovak Association for Historical Conservation; The Party of Jan Werich (which when declined in Czech is the lovely "Strana pana Jana Werichá"); The Armenian Club; The Association of Managers; The Society of Josef Škvorecký; The Association for the Aid of Sick Children; The Czechoslovak-Polish Club; The Free Association of Independent Entrepreneurs; The Christian Missionary Society; The Czech Association of Men; The Association for a European Home; The AIDS Society; The Union of Czech Free-Thinkers; The Democratic Union of Workers; The Czechoslovak Skateboard Association; The Independent Union of Apprentice Youth; The Masaryk Society; The Young People's Scientific-Technical Association; The Club of the Friends of the Work of C.G. Jung; The Youth of the Czechoslovak Hussite Church; The Historic Club of Prague; Prague Mothers -- Civic Forum; The Agricultural Economic Forum; The Society for Social Research; The Czechoslovak Association for Mental Health; The Union of Pilots; Christian Democratic Youth; A Video Course for You; Consultation for Private Owners; The Union

of Agricultural Youth; The Union of Czech Lawyers; The Association of Agricultural Specialists; and the Society for Brass Band Music.

All the best,



p.s. Erratum: In Slovakia, I learned that my translation of the Czechoslovak national anthem should have been done with the help of a Slovak. The correct translation of the Slovak part is as follows: "Above the Tatras it's lightening, it's thundering wildly [sung twice]. Let's stop, brothers, You know, they will disappear, the Slovaks will be born again [sung twice]. My Slovak friend explained that new research has shown that the anthem has been changed slightly and the original was more aggressive: rather than "Let's stop [i.e., ourselves]" it was "Let's stop them."

p.p.s. The following are two translations I did with the help of Honza Kerner: Havel's speech and an interview with Hájek.

**The Speech of the President of the ČSSR
to the Polish Sejm and Senate
January 21, 1990**

Mr. President,
Marshals,
Dear Friends,

I am very glad that the first foreign parliament in which I have the honour of speaking is the Polish Sejm. It is not merely a coincidence. It means something, and I assume you know what that is.

Allow me a short personal introduction: This is my second visit to Poland. I was first here on a student excursion in 1957. It was after your październik [Polish for October, i.e., their attempt at revolution in 1956], your country at that time was experiencing joyful hope, which later was so often and heavily dashed, and at that time I was fascinated with everything Polish. I was reading Hlasek, Milosz, Herbert, Kolakowski, Brandys, and Adolf Rudnicki who was writing about the holocaust, anti-semitism, and the curse of our part of Europe; I saw Wajda's film The Sewer, I admired the free-thinking Polish spirit and the special heroism that was radiated by Polish culture and which deep in my soul was dearer to me than the eternal skepticism and sometimes even the cult of the mediocre and downtrodden, which so often appears in Czech literature. I myself at that time began to write so-called absurdist plays, full of skepticism, ridiculous horror, and with inconspicuously unhappy endings,

Today I am here -- after thirty-three years -- for the second time and, in addition, as President of Czechoslovakia.

Inevitably, I ask myself the question, what has changed in your country, in our country, and in our part of Europe in general.

A lot has changed. The most important change is that the time of the periodic raising and frustrating of hopes, the circle of eternal illusions and disillusion, and the hellish dance of freedom and death has ended. It appears to be certain for the first time that democracy and freedom, justice and national autonomy are triumphing and that the process that leads us to that is irreversible. This certainty arises above all from the fact that our endeavours for self-liberation are not solitary attempts in the realm of misunderstanding that surrounds us, but that they are flowing together in one common stream. The changes that were fought for and won by the Polish nation despite all temporary failures, the important changes in the Soviet Union, the strengthening of democratic conditions in Hungary and the German Democratic Republic, followed by our peaceful revolution in Czechoslovakia, the heroic and heavily paid for victory of Rumanians over Dracula's autocracy, as well as the movement in Bulgaria that we are witnessing -- all of that is flowing together into one river, whose flow cannot be held back by any dam.

Paradise on earth was not victorious and can hardly win in the future. The notion that it would win could console only the vain mind of those who were persuaded that they understand everything, that there is no higher mysterious institution above them, and that they are in charge of history. Paradise on earth has not been victorious and there are many difficult moments ahead. Only the real hope that we will return to Europe as free, independent, and democratic states and nations has triumphed.

But even this is good. Who among us was able to imagine something like this a mere twelve years ago?

Do you remember Adam Michnik, Jacek Kuron, and Jan Litynski at our first secret meeting on the Czechoslovak-Polish border? At that time we were all so-called dissidents, that is, people persecuted by the police, locked up, and laughed at. We may have laughed at our guards and been cheered up by how we escaped them, but if someone at that time were to say to us that in twenty years we will be members of parliament, ministers, and presidents, we probably would have laughed at him even more.

And despite all of that, it happened.

The totalitarian systems of the Soviet bloc are breaking down, and we who did nothing more than say aloud what we thought and ended up in prison for it, suddenly found ourselves in important state offices, and we can laugh only when the television cameras are not pointed directly at us.

Our main task -- and I am no longer talking merely about my Polish and Czechoslovak friends, but about both our entire nations -- is to think jointly now about what to do with that freshly gained freedom. Before I try to say a few words about that, I have to make a small digression.

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Our Czechoslovak revolution that began with the November massacre of students, but otherwise took a surprising peaceful and rapid course, is called gentle, kind, peaceful, and full of love. Obviously we are happy that in our country there were so few victims, but we will not forget the nations that had to pay for their freedom in blood and without whose victims we ourselves perhaps hardly would have been able to wake up to our freedom so quickly and almost painlessly. I already emphasized in my New Year's speech, and I would like to repeat it again, that the Hungarians and Poles also spilled their blood for us; we know it and will not forget it. In a certain sense the Rumanians have also paid for us, although their revolution came after ours. Who knows whether the dark forces in our country would not have been able to come together for a counterattack, if they had not been paralyzed by the Rumanian example that has shown that the inhabitants have been able to defend themselves so bravely.

To cut a long story short: although no one has helped our revolution directly, which is really a historic novelty in our country, we are well aware that without the Polish fight of many years, without the self-liberating attempts of the nations of the Soviet Union, without the memento that is the German uprising of 1953 and the Hungarian uprising of 1956, we could hardly be pleased with our freshly gained freedom and with the fact that everything actually went so smoothly.

Obviously, we also know that it was Polish Solidarity led by Lech Walesa, which first found a peaceful and at the same time effective way to a lasting resistance against a totalitarian system. We will not forget that it was you, the Polish Senate and Sejm, who first -- already last summer -- condemned the shameful attack against Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Allow me at this point to thank you and the entire Polish nation.

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I promised that I would take time to consider the tasks that the new situation has placed before us.

There are many of them.

Above all, it is necessary to take advantage of the fact that after many long years and decades the perspective of a genuine and authentic friendship has unfolded before our nations. Long standing disputes, rivalries, and animosities were hidden by the common reality of totalitarianism. So-called "friendship" ("družba") -- that formal play at friendship, directed from above, in the framework of the Warsaw Pact and COMECON -- stems from the totalitarian system. Also stemming from it is the inconspicuous, quiet, and maliciously joyful instigation of a nationalistically selfish mood, which was skillfully called forth in harmony with the slogan "Divide and Conquer".

Years of an analogous fate and a similar battle for similar ideals ought, therefore, to be improved in real friendship and mutual respect. Precisely, therefore, in that which characterized years of the secret carrying of backpacks full of independent literature across our shared mountains and what ultimately resulted in the autumn festival of Czechoslovak independent culture in Wroclaw, which turned out so excellently, thanks mainly to the indefatigable members of Polish-Czechoslovak Solidarity, Zbyszek Janas and Mirek Jasinski, and which unwittingly became one of the preludes to the Czechoslovak revolution.

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A truly good coordination of our policy during the process that we both call the return to Europe ultimately ought to grow out of that really authentic friendship, which is based on a good understanding of the destinies into which we have been jointly forced, on the common guidance which it gave us, and mainly on the common ideals that unite us. On that point we ought to coordinate our efforts as well as possible also with Hungary (where, as a matter of fact, I am going tomorrow with my associates -- again in no way a coincidence) and with other nations in our part of Europe.

We should not mutually compete with each other about who is surpassing whom and who first wins his way into this or that European institution, but on the contrary we ought to help each other in the spirit of the same solidarity with which you during the worst periods protested against our persecution and we against yours.

It is difficult at this moment to foresee the kinds of institutional forms that our east European or central European coordination will create. Western Europe is substantially further in the process of integration, and if

we ought to return to Europe each on our own, it would be substantially more complicated than if we enter into a mutual agreement. It is not only a matter of economics, it is actually a matter of everything, including disarmament negotiations.

I would be glad in the coming days to invite various representatives of your state, Hungary, and the public, and even observers from other central European countries to the Bratislava Castle, where in peace we could one day discuss all those matters. Maybe then we shall again be a little wiser.

One way or another, one thing is certain: there is before us the real historic chance that we will fill with something meaningful the great political vacuum that arose in central Europe after the breakup of the Habsburg Empire. We have the chance to transform central Europe from a phenomenon that has so far been historical and spiritual into a phenomenon that is political. We have the chance to take a string of European countries that until recently were colonized by the Soviets and that today are attempting the kind of friendship with the nations of the Soviet Union, which would be founded on equality of rights, and transform them into a definite special body that would approach richer western Europe not as a poor dissident or helpless, searching, amnestied prisoner, but as someone who also brings something with him: namely spiritual and moral incentives, bold peace initiatives, untapped creative potential, the ethos of freshly gained freedom, and the inspiration for brave and fast solutions.

We have awakened and we must awaken those in the West who have slept through our awakening. That is a task that we shall fulfil better, the more united we set ourselves to it.

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If we want to think about the synchronization or coordination of our steps on the path to Europe, we obviously have to be clear on what actually ought to be at the end of that path, that is, what kind of Europe we are actually aiming for.

The general ideal is probably clear to us all. We want to be part of Europe as a friendly comity of independent nations and democratic states, a Europe that is stabilized, not divided into blocs and pacts, a Europe that does not need the protection of superpowers, because it is capable of defending itself, that is, of building its own security system.

There exists the hope that the Soviet Union -- in the interests of good relations with its former satellites --

will gradually withdraw its army from them. Relevant negotiations are already taking place and sooner or later shall meet with success.

It seems to me that we have quite a good starting point in the Helsinki process. If it were to speed up and intensify, it could -- parallel to the various disarmament talks and unilateral disarmament initiatives -- in the course of time grow into something that could serve the function of a peace conference or peace treaty like a definite punctuation point after the Second World War, the Cold War, and the artificially divided Europe, which resulted from those world wars. Then both military pacts could be dissolved, and with that the process of an all-European integration could be started.

For the time being, Europe is divided.

Divided, too, is Germany.

Those are two sides of a difficult coin: it is difficult to imagine an undivided Europe with a divided Germany, but at the same time it is difficult to imagine a unified Germany in a divided Europe. Both unifying processes obviously ought to be carried out together -- and as quickly as possible.

One of the keys to a peaceful Europe lies, therefore, in its very centre, namely, in Germany. The Germans did a lot for all of us: they themselves began to tear down the wall that divides us from the ideal we long for, that is, the ideal of a Europe without any kind of walls, iron curtains, and barbed wire fences.

Aware of the actual significance that the German question has for us all, aware at the same time that without peace in Germany not one of us will live in peace, I went to both German states for several hours not long after my election to the Presidency, so that I could ascertain how the Germans themselves see the European situation, and so that I could at the same time stress how closely the future fates of us all are bound with the future fate of Germany.

I came back with good impressions.

Reasonable people in both the German states want the same thing we all want: a peaceful path to a democratic and peaceful Europe.

I believe that this good impression of mine is also good news for you who during the Second World War had to sacrifice many more human lives than we did, and who, consequently, when it comes to the Germans -- be they the majority or only the descendent generation of your murderers -- have the right to be more mistrustful than I.

For that matter, I will not hide the fact, that many of my fellow Czechoslovak citizens are more mistrustful than I. It was also because of them that I went first to Germany: I resolved therefore that in today's mistrustful world I will try to be -- within my modest means -- a kind of promoter of trust.

And when I speak in this place about Germany, it is my pleasant duty to assure you that Czechoslovakia, too, considers the Oder-Neisse boundary as final and inviolate.

For that matter, I suppose that borders ought to have less significance in a future Europe, that people ought to flow freely from one country to another and that above all this should apply to our present common borders.

On the contrary, what should no longer flow across our borders is poisonous smoke, sulphur, and clouds with acid rain, be they from Stonava or from

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There are of course still more dangerous walls than those that divide Europe. Those are the walls that mutually divide individual people and that divide our own soul. I would above all like to speak out against those walls. This concerns mainly my native land.

The most dangerous enemy of good things today are no longer the dark forces of totalitarianism, the various hostile and plotting mafias, but our own bad characteristics. My presidential programme is, therefore, to bring spirituality, moral responsibility, humaneness, and humility into politics and, with respect to that, make clear that there is something higher above us, that our deeds do not disappear into the black hole of time but are written somewhere and evaluated, that we have neither a right nor a reason to think that we understand everything and that we can do everything.

I think that the Poles, with their strong religiousness, embodied in the excellent personality of the Pope who they gave to the world, can have understanding for my modest presidential intentions.

Thirty-three years ago I spent a fortnight on the Baltic coast.

Today, I find myself right in Warsaw, in the brave heart of Poland

I would be glad if it meant that not only I personally, but especially the movements and ideas that I represent are commensurately closer to the Polish heart.

Thank-you for your attention and in conclusion I call out the famous:

JESZCZE POLSKA NIE ZGINIEŁA!

[Poland is Not Yet Dead! -- the beginning of the Polish national anthem]

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What Kind of Europe Do We Want?

Milan Syruček interviews Jiří Hájek in Tvorba, 17 January 1990

Professor Jiří Hájek was one of the representatives of the Prague Spring and its official diplomat. After that he had to leave his office of Minister of Foreign Affairs. He was expelled from the Communist Party, he became a member of Charter 77 and was under police surveillance. To be sure, he received several foreign visitors, as well as important people, but he was only able to travel abroad for the first time in twenty years to a conference in Steyr Graz, then last year to visit his son in Norway; he stopped in Sweden, visited Austria for a short while, and he took part in the birthday celebration for the Chairman of the SPD (German Social Democratic Party), Willy Brandt. With him at this celebration were Jiří Menzel, Pavel Kohout, A.J. Liehm, and others.

Professor Hájek described his impressions of the discussion with Brandt and of the SPD Congress that was then in progress at the first meeting of the Association for a European House. It was there that we agreed to speak in greater detail about German and European problems in general. It happened the day after the President of Czechoslovakia visited the two Germanies.

Certainly there will be more detailed analysis of why Václav Havel, on his first official presidential visit abroad, travelled to our German neighbors. From the point of view of our traditions it is unusual, but I think that it could get a positive response -- and not only in the countries that were visited, Mr. Hájek told me. Our conversation covered a lot of topics, so we went back several weeks to the topic of Willy Brandt and the SPD Congress.

I wasn't able to be present for the entire negotiations, but I participated in the part of the meeting, in which the problems of German unity and Europe in general were

discussed. It intrigued me how Brandt -- and the entire Congress -- stressed that the question of German reunification shouldn't be taken out of the European context. After all, it's a serious political problem for all neighbors of the Germanies -- and it's frequently connected with anxiety. I noticed how even the Congress expressed itself very carefully when discussing this problem.

Obviously, if we ourselves are for self-determination, we have no right to deny it to others. But, what Willy Brandt said fully corresponds to our interests, at least in my opinion: self-determination yes, negotiations yes, but with the awareness that reunification would upset the present balance. Therefore, it should be realized in the framework of a whole European process, a complete weakening of the meaning of borders and a strengthening of cooperation. The rapprochement of the Germanies has to have a European framework as a guarantee that it will not lead to what it led to in the past.

The German question was crucial in Europe's entire post-war history. I would like to return at least to the year 1968, when you were Foreign Minister and Willy Brandt was your colleague in West Germany even though he wasn't yet Chancellor. That was the first time there appeared the possibility to normalize our relations with West Germany.

Even though the USSR itself recognized FRG and established relations, its allies -- with the exception of Rumania -- tied the normalization of their relations with the FRG to West Germany's recognition of the GDR. We were trying from our side for the kind of normalization that would help the recognition of East Germany without presenting it as a condition -- especially after the election of the Brandt-Kiesinger Government, which expressed greater understanding for the Prague Spring than the GDR's leadership. I assume that it was the first ever turn-around in the positions of some of our political actors and our public towards the two German states. Until that time, we considered the GDR a reliable partner. But the GDR took different approaches to us -- from hesitating and uninformed to obvious animosity. Ulbricht together with Zhivkov were the staunchest advocates of intervention against us. That strengthened the awareness in Czechoslovakia of the necessity to differentiate the ways of looking at each German state and also strengthened the understanding for Brandt's politics, in which the attempt for rapprochement with the East (Ostpolitik) was evident from the beginning.

I remember one humorous episode from June 1968. I was talking with my partner in Berlin and afterwards he took me to Walter Ulbricht. At the round table were seated ten or twelve politicians from the GDR who criticized us for, among other things, our positive appraisal of Brandt, which had been expressed in our press. When we left the room after the

negotiations, newspapermen swamped us with questions. At the same time someone asked us what we think about the Soviet Ambassador to the GDR, Abrasimov, just at that moment receiving Willy Brandt. I didn't know about it, and what I read from the face of my colleague from the GDR, even he didn't know about it and was clearly taken by surprise.

It was clear that the USSR realized there were new elements in the policy of the Federal Republic, which were rejected by the leadership of the GDR.

Do you also think [sic -- that about?] the secret negotiations, sometime around 1974, with the representatives of the SPD about whether the USSR would agree with German reunification in the event of an announcement of German neutrality?

Obviously, various possibilities were offered, even though it was necessary to take into account the specific interests of the FRG towards its allies, so that the balance of power wouldn't be upset. But what was essential was what Andrei Gromyko said to the other foreign ministers of the Warsaw Pact states during the autumn of 1967 and what remained hidden: that the USSR does not allow any allied country to start negotiations with the FRG independently. Ceausescu violated this rule and therefore fell out of favor.

Today, of course, there are completely different conditions in this respect?

Of course, and what we indicated in the Action Program in 1968 became a reality a long time ago. Today the German question has a completely different place in the European context.

Just as bloc politics do. After all, it seems that we would reach a dissolution of the Warsaw Pact more quickly than Western Europe is prepared to liquidate NATO?

I think that the revision of the Warsaw pact is not in question. It is an immeasurably important basis of interbloc negotiations, and, therefore, loyalty to the Warsaw Pact is expressly mentioned in the new declaration of the Government. Everyone understands that point so well that they realize the necessity of this instrument for negotiations on European security. Its fate depends precisely on how the entire question of European security and cooperation is solved. When all is said and done, the Warsaw Treaty has in its own provisions the possibility for its own dissolution -- if the North-Atlantic Alliance is dissolved.

How do you judge, in the context of entire European development, the fact that today -- it seems -- the

position of left-wing power is stronger in Western Europe than in Eastern Europe?

There is really a certain danger here of a definite disruption of the political balance. At the moment, I can't imagine how left-wing tendencies could assert themselves, for example, in Poland, but maybe even in Hungary, not to speak of contemporary Rumania. Maybe the best prospects are right here in Czechoslovakia. We have an advantage in that here left-wing tendencies were a definite force even in the past. We are also the only ones who had -- after 1968 -- leftists in exile, when the other East European countries had only right-wingers in exile. That is also one of the effects of the Prague Spring, and, for example, there is no equivalent of the journal Listy [published in Rome].

But I think, nevertheless, that it would be good if new concepts of Western leftists were put forth. After all, who else can be responsible for a progressive European development? It can be only the leftists. The conservative forces are not even capable of forming the concept of a united Europe, they are too concentrated on their national egoism. We see it, for example, in the positions of the British Conservatives, of Thatcher, towards the West German Christian Democrats, towards Kohl. If Mitterand remains the representative of a united continent, the right-wingers in the decisive countries don't have a clear and encouraging concept of such a Europe.

It is, of course, necessary to be engaged in the process of unification, to work out more profound studies, for example, on the various aspects of the Helsinki process, which is close to the concepts of European leftists.

And coming back to the German question?

It is important that European development precede the tendency of German reunification, otherwise it will meet with resistance both in the West and in the East. There exists here a narrower concept of several circles in the West: individual socialist states could be gradually integrated into the European Community, which would create the economic union of Europe from the Atlantic to Brest [on the Polish-Soviet border]. The Helsinki process, however, conceives it more widely. In that, it embraces both superpowers, it in fact creates a Europe from the Bering Straits to the Bering Straits -- the entire western hemisphere. Today it is hard to imagine De Gaulle's Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals, which would exclude part of the Soviet Union, if it is a single state.

Do you suppose that socialism in Eastern Europe has been buried, as it is claimed by some Western commentators and politicians.

It is obviously a matter of defining the concept of socialism, which isn't possible to identify with its Stalinist deformation. Certainly there will be the implementation of market economy, but I suppose that for the new content of the term socialism, as the new leftists also understand it, what's important are three fundamental conditions:

First, the regulation of macroeconomies, naturally by a democratic state and not by a totalitarian regime or some kind of committee of capitalist enterprises.

Second, consistently applied self-management of workers and also in the economy.

Third, guarantees against exploitation, be it by the entrepreneur or by a powerful apparatus, or as a result of shortages and mistakes of management.

Economic, social, and cultural rights ought to be equally respected and applied just as civil and political rights, as they are formulated in both international pacts. In the West, for the time being, that doesn't exist. There must be a firm guarantee against any of the harm done to the interests and rights of man. There are even ecological aspects that are becoming increasingly urgent.

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