

“Hatikva Returns to the Vltava”: Václav Havel (1936–2011)

Yoel Sher

Yoel Sher was Israel's first ambassador to Czechoslovakia after the Velvet Revolution and the resumption of diplomatic relations with that country in 1990. After the dissolution of the Federal State, he served as ambassador to the Czech and Slovak Republics. A former member of Kibbutz Mahanayim in the Upper Galilee, he joined the foreign service in 1960. Among his postings, Ambassador Sher served as deputy director-general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in charge of Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States. At the time of his retirement in 1998 he was ambassador to Austria, non-resident ambassador to Slovakia (for the second time) and Slovenia.

“There was no one like Václav Havel. He was a lonely voice of freedom and a voice of unity for the suffering people of the world. He was many things at once: writer, philosopher, and president, but in all situations he remained a free man. Chains could not bind him nor keep him silent. He was the most outstanding, honest spokesperson for freedom in our time, and perhaps of all Western civilization. A determined but pleasant man, he spoke almost in a whisper, but with internal conviction and unusual honesty that penetrated and unified hearts. His death is a loss not just for his fellow Czechs, but also for the entire world—for Western civilization and for human freedom.”

That eulogy, delivered by President Shimon Peres, encapsulates the feelings evoked in Israel by Václav Havel—fighter and literary-political icon who set in motion waves of social and political revolution, and who was carried by them to the summit of society almost against his will. It is still difficult to gauge Havel's personal contribution to the process that led to the collapse of the Soviet bloc, and then of the Soviet Union itself, but there is no question that he led his country from the depths of totalitarianism to democracy. Czechoslovakia vied with East Germany for the dubious honor of being the darkest of the satellite member states of the Warsaw Pact. Much to the credit of Havel's morality and humanity, a witch hunt against members of the Communist regime and their collaborators did not take place in Czechoslovakia, and it was especially due to him that the revolution in that country was truly a “velvet” one. Even the traumatic process that stirred emotions and marred Czechoslovakia's first months of freedom—Slovakia's disengagement from the Federal Union—took place without violence largely because of Havel, even though he strenuously opposed the deconstruction of the state.

Havel saw himself as a student of the founder of the Czechoslovak Republic, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, and as the custodian of his legacy, of which pluralism was a foundation. The dissolution of the federation seemed to him a betrayal and a misappropriation of the trust placed in his generation. However, he was able to accept reality and to acknowledge the aspirations of his Slovak brothers and sisters for full self-determination, out of the deeply held belief that coercion borders on absolute evil.

The birth pangs of a new society, awakening after a nightmarish five decades — six years of Nazi occupation and another forty-one years of Stalinist rule — led Havel to the gradual realization that not all problems stem from the totalitarianism/democracy dichotomy, but that simply, as Jan Masaryk, son of the founding president said, “It is hard to be a Czech.”¹ Havel himself was devoid of any political ambitions. He was a stranger to power and at the beginning of his political career took on the burden of presidential office as a transitional step out of temporary necessity—a curious task that fate had assigned him and from which he could not escape due to his past as a freedom fighter. He described these doubts clearly in a speech he delivered in Jerusalem on April 26, 1990, just four months after having been elected president, on the occasion of receiving an honorary doctorate at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The following portions from his speech, which he chose to dedicate to Franz Kafka, both as a bridge between the Czechs and Jews, and as his own anchor in both cultures, reflect the strength and depth of the self-criticism with which dissident playwright Havel looked at the new Czechoslovak president, both of whom a surreal fate had united into one man:

I want to confess my long and intimate affinity with one of the great sons of the Jewish people, the Prague writer Franz Kafka. I sometimes feel I’m the only one who really understands Kafka. I’m even secretly persuaded that if Kafka did not exist, and if I were a better writer than I am, I would have written his works myself.

All I’m really saying is that in Kafka I have found a large portion of my own experience of the world, of myself, and of my way of being in the world. I will try to name some of the more easily defined forms of this experience.

One of them is a profound, basal, and therefore utterly vague sensation of culpability, as though my very existence were a kind of sin. A need constantly to explain myself to someone, to defend myself, a longing for an unattainable order of things. I feel as though I am constantly lagging behind powerful, self-confident men whom I can never overtake, let alone emulate. I find myself essentially hateful, deserving only mockery.

I can already hear your objections that I style myself in these kafkaesque outlines only because in reality I'm entirely different: someone who quietly and persistently fights for something, someone whose idealism has carried him to the head of his nation.

I would say that it's precisely my desperate longing for order that keeps plunging me into the most improbable adventures. I would even venture to say that everything worthwhile I've ever accomplished I have done to conceal my almost metaphysical feeling of guilt. The real reason I am always creating something, organizing something, it would seem, is to defend my permanently questionable right to exist.

You may well ask how someone who thinks of himself this way can be the president of a country. It's a paradox, but I must admit that if I am a better president than many others would be in my place, then it is precisely because somewhere in the deepest substratum of my work lies this constant doubt about myself and my right to hold office. I would not be in the least surprised if, in the very middle of my presidency, I were to be summoned and led off to stand trial before some shadowy tribunal, or taken straight to a quarry to break rocks. Nor would I be surprised if I were to suddenly hear the reveille and wake up in my prison cell, and then, with great bemusement, proceed to tell my fellow prisoners everything that had happened to me in the past six months.

The visits of four distinguished Czechs were watershed moments in the twentieth-century history of Israel and milestones marking the friendship between the people of Czechoslovakia and the people of Israel. Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the legendary first president of Czechoslovakia, came to the Land of Israel in 1927 and was the first head of state to visit the *yishuv* [Jewish community of pre-state Palestine]. Kfar Masaryk and streets and squares in many cities around Israel today commemorate the visit and Masaryk's support of the Zionist enterprise.

The second significant Czech visitor was diplomat Karel Lisický, who was a member of UNSCOP, the United Nations investigation committee that visited in the summer of 1947 and recommended that the UN General Assembly adopt the partition plan, which it did on November 29. The third visitor, in the winter of 1948, was World War II "Hero of the Soviet Union" Major Antonín Sochor (soon afterward promoted to the rank of general). He spent time in the country exploring the needs of the future state and set out a plan for the military training of soldiers and the supply of arms and other military equipment. That plan served as a basis for Czech-Israeli cooperation and made a decisive contribution to the defense of the fledgling Jewish State during its War of Independence. The Czechs

supplied badly needed munitions—including Škoda-manufactured Messerschmitt fighter planes and famous Czech rifles. They trained pilots, gunners, paratroopers, and aircraft maintenance technicians.²

The fourth significant Czech visitor was President Václav Havel, in April 1990. The purpose of Havel's visit to Jerusalem—the first of its kind by any leader of a post-Communist country—was not, of course, just to receive the honorary doctorate. Havel and his administration had to face major political, economic, and social problems. Still, they viewed the renewal of diplomatic relations with Israel as symbolic of the end of the totalitarian era, during which the Soviet Union forced its satellites, the Warsaw Pact countries, to sever ties with Israel following the 1967 Six-Day War. It was also probably a kind of salute to the Prague Spring in 1968. Israel's sweeping victory over the Soviets' Middle East proxy states, Egypt and Syria, served as a source of inspiration to the movement that sought to liberate Czechoslovakia from the yoke of Soviet domination. Many of the dissidents of the 1970s and '80s—the signatories of Charter 77, of which Havel was one of the initiators—were students of the '60s.

Three days after his election as president, Havel announced in a 1990 New Year's address to the nation that he would like to renew relations with Israel (and the Vatican) even before the first free elections, which were slated for June of that year. This message was transmitted entirely on his own initiative, without having had any discussion, let alone decision, in any government forum. An agreement on the renewal of diplomatic relations was, indeed, signed in Prague by Foreign Minister Moshe Arens on February 9, 1990, thus putting an end to twenty-three years of separation and alienation.³

President Havel's visit to Israel two months later was one of his first visits outside Czechoslovakia. He met with hundreds of Israelis of Czechoslovak origin, who held a reception in his honor and received him with enormous enthusiasm. In the presence of 4,000 people, Havel inaugurated an impressive exhibit on the history of the Jews of Czechoslovakia in Beit Hatfutsot, the Nachum Goldmann Museum of the Jewish Diaspora, entitled "Meeting of Cultures—The Story of the Jews of Czechoslovakia." The exhibit was curated by Natalia Berger for three years.⁴ In a speech at the opening ceremony, Havel described the centrality of the Jews in shaping culture in Czechoslovakia, and the disaster that overtook Jewish communities during the Holocaust. He quoted Masaryk, who denounced antisemitism as a self-inflicted wound on those who are hostile to Jews. "It destroys our country, closes our hearts and degenerates us," he said. On that occasion, he also declared:

I often think of the similarities between the history of the Czechs and the history of the Jews. We are both small peoples whose existence was never taken for granted. The constant struggle for survival and the sense that our very existence is always in doubt have left their mark on the cultural and behavioral patterns of the two peoples. Both peoples revered the written word and the works that ensured the continuation of their language and traditions. Czechs and Jews have always looked to the past, seeking in it a source of strength and comfort ... our sense of humor was sharpened and allowed us not to take ourselves too seriously....

A Czechoslovak embassy was opened in Israel and an Israeli embassy in Prague simultaneously. On November 27, two days after I had arrived in Prague on a Soviet-made Tupolev airplane—my first encounter with the remains of the Communist era—I submitted my credentials to President Havel in the presidential palace in the Prague castle. After reviewing the Presidential Guard in the very same court through which Hitler had strode fifty-one years earlier, passing through the monumental gate and reviewing a Wehrmacht honor guard, both national anthems were played. Despite the inclement weather, dozens of onlookers gathered at the fence surrounding the castle and watched the scene. The Presidential Guard's rendition of our anthem, *Hatikva* [The Hope], was a very emotional moment for those of us in the Israeli embassy staff. Next, the Czechoslovak anthem was played. It was composed of two parts: the Czech anthem *Kde domov můj?* [Where is My Home?] and the Slovak one, *Naď Tatrou sa blýska* [Lightning over the Tatras], connected to one another by an artificial bridge. The telegram in which I reported on the event to our ministry in Jerusalem bore the fitting headline "*Hatikva* [hope] has returned to the banks of the Vltava," referring to the end of the era of severance of relations and hinting at the source from which Naphtali Herz Imber drew his inspiration—the work of the Czech composer Bedřich Smetana.

After the official portion of the event (the presentation of the letter of credence), we sat with the president and his aides—mostly former dissidents who had signed Charter 77—for a leisurely chat. Havel expressed his satisfaction at the completion of the process that began when, without consulting anyone, he had announced his decision to resume relations. He spoke of the warm welcome he had received on his visit to Israel in April. We agreed that now was the time to invest efforts in bridging the long years of isolation and in making up for lost time. The president then asked for our evaluation of developments in the Persian Gulf against the backdrop of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. It became clear to me that in Prague there was no need to explain the significance of holding firm against aggression and resistance to any kind of appeasement. We also talked about literature, and when I mentioned that I had read all the novels of Milan Kundera, he responded dismissively that Kundera

was a one-time Communist and that his later criticism of the regime was voiced from his safe haven in France, without having to experience the persecution and arrests that were par for the course for dissidents at home.

A few days later, under heavy snow, we inaugurated the new building of the Israeli Embassy. How very symbolic that we did this by the kindling of the second light of the Hanukkah menorah, and in the presence of some 200 invited guests—ministers, senior officials, intellectuals, foreign ambassadors, including the American ambassador, Shirley Temple Black, and the chargé d'affaires of the Soviet Embassy, Alexander Lebedev, although we had not yet resumed diplomatic relations with Moscow.

For the next three years, I was a keen eyewitness to the difficulties of the transition from a totalitarian regime to a democracy; from a centralized and bureaucratic economy to a free system that allows for private enterprise; and from a federal state struggling, pathetically, to preserve its unity to one that eventually agreed to a divorce and the establishment of two separate sovereign states. A particularly dramatic and emotional dimension of my mission was the encounter with the remnants of the glorious and tragic past of Jewish communities, ravaged by the Nazis and their collaborators. The material heritage of those communities had been subjected to a policy of neglect and wanton destruction by the Communist authorities more severe than that of the German occupants. As it turned out, the Jewish issue, as well as the nature of relations with Israel in light of the Middle East conflict and the specific economic problems of Slovakia, became points of friction and internal debate, exposing the erosion in Havel's status. Indeed, in the first two years, Havel and his colleagues strove to implement their views, but in the third year they found themselves stymied and frustrated in the Czech Republic that emerged from Czechoslovakia.

To be sure, the reality with which they had to cope was difficult and complex. The euphoria that had prevailed in the first few months had faded, as did the rather naïve belief that freedom would bring a magical solution to the country's deep-seated social and economic problems. It became increasingly clear that the transition from a centralized and bureaucratic economy to a free market one would be a long and tiring process. The collapse of the barter arrangements that were customary in the COMECON states left a void that could not be immediately filled by alternative trading mechanisms. Above all, a psychological revolution was needed to change the mentality of people born and raised during the old regime, in order to adapt their thinking to one that could understand such concepts as market research and the calculation of production costs, ideas that were completely alien to them.

In addition to all of this, there was the crippling structural problem. As we later saw with the collapse of Yugoslavia, the multiethnic countries born out of the ashes of World War I remained consolidated only so long as they were subjected to totalitarian coercion. With the collapse of those regimes, and the establishment of democratic governments, the centrifugal forces pulling them apart increased, causing the breakdown of the federal model. Lamentably, in the case of Yugoslavia, it led to horrific violence. In Czechoslovakia, it soon became clear that the political structure established in the wake of the Velvet Revolution—which was designed to satisfy the aspirations of Slovak autonomy within a federal state—was unworkable in terms of decision making and implementation. The president of the Federation personified a unified governing entity, but one with limited powers. Beneath him were no fewer than three governments (the Federal, Czech, and Slovak) and their heads and three parliaments, each with its own chairman. As an affirmative action to compensate for the election of a Czech to the federal presidency, the prime minister and the head of the federal parliament were Slovaks.

Thus, the political pendulum brought the country from one extreme—totalitarianism and centralization—to another: a crippling decentralization of powers coupled with formal federalism that became an alibi for lack of action. Slovak demands resulted in even greater power being granted to the governments of the republics, all at the expense of the federal government, which was divested of its authority.

Obviously, the dissidents who came to power following the Velvet Revolution lacked managerial and administrative experience. They were also remarkably naïve concerning human behavior, and all the more so when it came to running a country. It often seemed that they were convinced that with the fall of Communism—the source of all evil—the people would naturally “love their neighbors as themselves.” Therefore from the government, bureaucracy, security services, and the police they ejected everyone associated too closely with the previous regime. They did so as pleasantly as possible, without threats or persecution; they simply left the door open and let those people go away quietly. However, in the absence of experienced professionals in the police, for example, the crime rate rose steeply. Consequently, they were forced to re-hire professionals.

This naïveté was problematic in the political realm as well. The Civic Forum movement in Czechoslovakia and its sister organization in Slovakia, Citizens against Violence, allowed their members to simultaneously belong to other parties because they were created to fight any form of coercion. Another fatal mistake was the decision during the first elections to set the duration of the tenure period at only two years. This was done so as not to empower untested individuals beyond a period of apprenticeship, and also because the political parties had not

yet been fully established. The result was that the leadership was seen as being responsible for the enormous difficulties caused by the collapse of the previous economic system and the slowness of creating the new tools and frameworks required in a market economy, without being able, for lack of time, to demonstrate the achievements the privatization policy was supposed to bring about. Moreover, members of the Civic Forum continued to talk about freedom and human rights, when in fact these had already been achieved, and neglected the economic issue that competing political parties placed at the top of their agendas.

The paralysis resulting from the structural triangle of the legislative and executive branches had direct bearing on the three issues that were at the core of Israeli concerns: restitution of Jewish public and private property that had been stolen during the war and nationalized under the Communist regime; the strict enforcement and enhancement of legislation against antisemitism; and a ban on the sale of arms to countries that sought the destruction of Israel. Not only was the solution to these problems stuck in circular proceedings between the federal and national parliaments, but they also became controversial issues and exacerbated tensions between the federal government, including the presidency and national authorities, both Czech and Slovak.

Immediately after the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and Czechoslovakia, Zevulun Hammer, then minister of religious affairs, traveled to Prague and signed an agreement with the then Deputy Federal Prime Minister, Josef Hromádka. That document stipulated that religious artifacts from the Jewish Museum in Prague would be returned to the Jewish community and some would be transferred to Israel for use in synagogues. The Jewish Museum was not an antiquities museum in the classical sense, but a huge warehouse in which the Nazis had gathered all the items of Judaica they had plundered from synagogues and private homes throughout Bohemia and Moravia. When I arrived in Prague and sought to implement the agreement, it turned out that the Czech Ministry of Culture claimed that the artifacts were Czech cultural property, and that the Federal government had no authority to commit to the agreement. Legislative attempts went back and forth between the parliaments, but in the meantime hundreds of Holy Ark curtains and Torah scroll covers lay in damp basements and rotted for two more years.

The arguments continued even after the dissolution of the federation, and they also touched upon bills proposing the restitution of confiscated and nationalized Church property. Soon after his inauguration as president, Havel saw fit to publicly relate to the question of restitution of Jewish communal property on his weekly radio address. He described as scandalous the fact that the synagogues, cemeteries, and other communal properties that were confiscated by the Germans

after 1939 had not been returned to Jewish communities. The restitution of assets, he said, would constitute the repayment of a debt remaining from the period of the World War II, and it was up to the lawyers to find the appropriate formula that would allow for this to happen. His was, as usual, the voice of morality and conscience speaking out against the technocrat majority in the government.

Only in late 1994 were the Jewish Museum, the historic cemetery and synagogues of Prague transferred from government ownership to that of the Jewish community. This was a courageous decision by the minister of culture, Pavel Tigrid, an émigré supporter of dissident activity who returned to Prague after long years of exile in the West. President Havel himself took part in the ceremony, held in the Jewish community center (adjacent to the iconic Altneu Synagogue) in which the ownership of the museum was transferred.

Back in December 1990 the Slovak government and parliament had published a declaration of their country's responsibility in persecuting its Jewish population during the war, and to its credit, it preceded many other states in doing so. However, along with the freedom of expression and freedom of the press that had returned and flourished, weeds of extreme nationalism, racism and antisemitism also sprouted. The new Czechoslovak leadership, which so thoroughly rejected the coercion of the previous era, advocated the slogan that it was "forbidden to forbid." It took many weeks and endless appeals and interventions to prevent the dissemination of new editions of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in the news. Extreme nationalist Slovaks expressed nostalgia for the period in which a puppet government ruled in Slovakia, headed by Roman Catholic priest Jozef Tiso, under the umbrella of Nazi Germany. Pro-fascist Slovak newspapers did not hesitate to write that the Czechs were a Jewish tribe trying to control them. In early 1992, for reasons that had nothing to do with Jews, Havel dismissed the federal prosecutor, Slovak Ivan Gašparovič. Martin Šavel, editor of the antisemitic newspaper *Hlas Slovenska*, ran an article in which it was rhetorically asked, "Who rules Slovakia?" His answer, which was intended primarily to discredit Havel, was that it was the writer of these lines who caused the dismissal of the federal prosecutor on the instructions of "the Mossad in Tel Aviv."⁵

The most serious episode concerning Israel—one that muddied the relationship between President Havel and the Slovaks—related to the sale of tanks to Syria. The Soviets had built several factories in Slovakia for the construction of heavy weapons. After the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union itself, Slovak warehouses contained dozens of tanks for which there was no demand. Unlike Czech industry, which was more diversified and could more easily adapt to Western markets, Slovakia's heavy military industry could not be readapted to civilian use. Slovaks demanded that the federal government find markets for their surplus production. When this demand was not met, they took it upon themselves

to find a buyer. In a move not coordinated with the Czechs, they found Syria a most enthusiastic potential customer. The deal was contrary to government policy and violated solemn promises given by the president, including those presented at a joint press conference he held with President Chaim Herzog during his visit in October 1991. On that occasion, Havel promised that there would be no sales of weapons to countries at war with Israel.

The federal prime minister, Marián Čalfa, himself a Slovak, and one of the few Communists who became part of the new leadership, tried to bridge the gap and decided on his own to go to Israel—without ever being invited—to meet Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir to discuss the matter. Despite Shamir's busy agenda, he found the time to meet Čalfa who presented the problem as an existential economic necessity devoid of any political or strategic considerations. "If you do not want the tanks to be delivered to the Syrians," he said, "then buy them yourselves. And if you do not want them, we will be prepared to bury them—provided you compensate us for the cost, whether out of your own budget or from donations from American Jews."

Once Shamir declined Čalfa's offer, the Slovaks decided to go ahead with the Syrian deal directly, not through the authorities in Prague. The tanks were shipped via Poland and were loaded, with the greatest of secrecy, onto a German freighter. Somehow, the affair was leaked—perhaps by the Poles, who refrained from selling military equipment to Syria. Whatever the source of the leak, this revelation was most embarrassing, for President Havel especially, but also for the Foreign Ministry, whose impotence was glaringly revealed. In the wake of reports that there would be no further transactions, but that existing contracts would be respected, I protested to Foreign Minister Jiří Dienstbier. We must understand the intense pressures in Slovakia, he told me. There were the 80,000 inhabitants of the city of Martin whose livelihood was dependent on the manufacture of heavy weapons—and on the eve of elections, no one could afford to oppose this deal.

The results of the general elections held in early June 1992 for both Federal Parliament and the Czech and Slovak parliaments reflected an extreme turnaround compared with the elections held only two years earlier, following the Velvet Revolution. The Slovak Citizens Against Violence did not pass the threshold (which had been fixed at 5 percent) and was deleted from the political map. On the Czech side, Civic Forum was already dead—split into the Civic Democratic Party (led by Václav Klaus) and the Civic Movement (led by Dienstbier). The latter, considered the true heir of the Civic Forum, did not pass the electoral threshold. Slovak nationalist radicalization put in doubt the possibility of establishing a federal government with any real authority. In light of Slovakia's announcement that it intended to initiate a new constitution for itself, Václav Havel announced

that he would not submit his candidacy if no agreement was reached to ensure the continued integrity of the federation.

For its part, the Slovak majority party made clear that it would not vote for Havel. Consequently, he could not obtain the necessary majority in both houses of the Federal Parliament. The head of the Movement for Democratic Slovakia, Vladimír Mečiar, generously suggested that Havel run for the presidency of the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic, just as Slovakia did, would have its own president, with the possibility of a rotating federal presidency between them.

In late June, the new federal parliament, with its two houses, was convened for a joint session that was opened with an impassioned speech by President Havel. If it were decided to dissolve the federation, he said, he would not be the tool to carry out the liquidation. Although Havel believed in the healthy attitude of Czechs and Slovaks toward their common home country, no state, he maintained, is a supreme value in itself; the highest value is the individual and the community, and he will always be eager to serve them.

The internal crisis in Czechoslovakia worried Havel so much that he considered it a bad omen for the health of the democratization process of the other countries just released from the grip of a totalitarian nightmare. In a speech in Helsinki in mid-July 1992, as the rotating president of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), Havel compared the post-Communist world to a giant crucible in which the fate of nations was melted, creating complex chemical reactions. The rapid collapse of the totalitarian system surprised the world, he added, but we are surprised even more at the depth and multitude of the issues that were dormant under the surface of Communist unity, and are now erupting with tremendous force. This situation, warned Havel, provided fertile ground for national fanaticism, intolerance and xenophobia.

A few days later, the Slovak Parliament declared the right of the Slovak nation to self-determination, as the basis for a sovereign state. Even though this statement was not yet legally binding, Havel read it literally and on July 20 announced his resignation. At a farewell meeting of the diplomatic corps in which a very somber, even funereal, atmosphere prevailed, he said that retaining his position would make it harder for the Slovaks to fulfill their aspirations. And so, for half a year Czechoslovakia was left without a federal president.

At midnight on December 31, 1992, Czechoslovakia was relegated to history. Instead of the traditional champagne toasts to celebrate the new year, the Czechoslovak flag fluttered as usual on television and in the background the national anthem was played. It had contained both a Czech and a Slovak component. This time, however, it was cut short after the Czech part. Suddenly,

there was silence and the dramatic feeling that a limb had been amputated. The Czech Republic stood alone, containing two-thirds of the citizens of the former Czechoslovakia, and less than 62 percent of its territory.

The official birth of the new Czech Republic occurred the next day, at a special festive session of parliament held in the stately Gothic hall built by King Vladislav II Jagiello (Ladislaus Jagiellon) in the late-fifteenth century in Prague Castle—the same hall in which Václav Havel was sworn in as the first president of a free Czechoslovakia in 1989, and in which tens of thousands of Czech citizens would years later pay their last respects to him.

The event was held in the presence of the diplomatic corps, representatives of academia and local government, and many public figures. Citizen Havel received tumultuous applause when he entered, and sat in the front row. He did not deliver a speech. That evening in the Dvořák Hall of the Rudolfinum, a gala concert was held at which the Czech Symphony Orchestra played Smetana's *Má vlast* (one movement of which, "the Moldau," or, in Czech, "the Vltava," was actually the stepmother of *Hatikva*). However, a forced holiday atmosphere enveloped the day's events, as if it were a party without a good reason.

The next day all the ambassadors, who were automatically also accredited to Slovakia, had to set out on the icy road to Bratislava to take part in a similar ceremony organized by the newly independent Slovakia. What a symbolic illustration of the cold winter that had descended on the two organs of what was once a federal republic.

Meanwhile, the Czech Republic was still without a president. According to the new constitution, accepted by parliament two weeks before the dismantling of the federation, a senate of eighty-one members, elected for six years, had to be established, but it had not yet been agreed whether and how some Czech members of the disbanded Federal Parliament would be transferred to it. The delay in establishing the Senate also delayed the election of the first Czech president, who was supposed to be elected by both houses of parliament.

Although the constitution stated that the president appoints the prime minister and cabinet ministers and can dismiss them, the same paragraph also stated that the government is the supreme body of executive authority. It is no wonder, then, that henceforth Czech political life focused on the practical content that would be given to that paragraph and the power struggle between the prime minister who was already entrenched in his position, and the person who would be elected president.

In the end, a month later, Havel was elected first president of the Czech Republic, after it was decided that in the absence of the Senate, which had not yet been established, a decision by parliament would suffice. Havel's inaugural ceremony was attended, quite unusually, by the four presidents of neighboring countries — Poland, Germany, Austria, and Hungary (even though the latter was not a real neighbor any more), and by the deputy prime minister of Slovakia, which had not yet elected a president. Parliament speaker Milan Uhde praised Havel's struggle against the Communist regime, but noted delicately that the heady days of the Velvet Revolution, when they had all been united in a party that was really a broad umbrella movement, had passed. Democratically elected parties were now in power. It was evident that the movement that had carried Havel to the federal presidency three years earlier no longer existed, and he would have to function with limited means and in accordance with new rules.

After the ceremony, Havel inspected an honor guard. Here the playwright in him helped the politician, and to demonstrate that he was still the supreme commander of the armed forces, he personally roared the commands, "Present arms" and "at ease." In a speech from the balcony of the palace to the large crowd who cheered him in the courtyard, Havel expressed hope that the Czech Republic would recover and get to work. He wished his people and the Slovaks both democracy and prosperity.

During the official visit of President Herzog to Czechoslovakia in October 1991, the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the Terezín Ghetto (Theresienstadt) was marked. After a ceremony held in the Jewish cemetery of Terezín, a memorial event was held in the Obecní dům hall in Prague at which Verdi's Requiem was performed. Havel delivered a spiritually uplifting speech. It had taken him the whole of the previous night to write it, he told us. In his remarks, Havel did not hide the obligation of his countrymen, Czechs and Slovaks alike, to remember the destruction of their Jewish fellow citizens.

Whenever I am faced with documents about the Holocaust, the concentration camps, the mass extermination of Jews by Hitler, the racial laws, and the endless suffering of the Jewish people during World War II, I feel strangely paralyzed. I know I should say something, do something, yet I feel that any words I could say would be false, inadequate, inept or deficient. I know that one must not remain silent, yet I am desperately speechless.

I am ashamed of the human race. I feel that this is man's crime and man's disgrace, and therefore it is my crime and my disgrace too. As a human being, I feel suddenly responsible for humanity as such and, staring

uncomprehendingly at this cruelty, I cease to understand myself, for I, too, am human.

The senseless suffering of the Jews has acquired a tragic meaning and become a lasting challenge to each and every member of the human race to awaken to his humanity.

When I was a little boy I envied some other children the yellow, six-pointed stars they wore on their breasts. I thought they were some kind of a badge of honor.

If children are never again to be compelled to wear a brand on their clothes designed to warn others against them and to indicate that they are inferior, we need to remind ourselves over and over again of the horrors that befell the Jewish people, who were chosen to arouse the conscience of humanity through their suffering.

We need to talk about the suffering of the Jewish people, even though it is so difficult to do so.

Such was the man Václav Havel—and this was the essence of the light he radiated in his unique humility.

Notes

- ¹ From the book by my dear friend, the late Avigdor Dagan, on Jan Masaryk, the foreign minister in the Czechoslovak government-in-exile in London during World War II. See *Conversations with Jan Masaryk: "It is hard to be a Czech"* [Hebrew], trans. Ruth Bondy (Tel Aviv, 2000).
- ² Sochor was later killed in a mysterious accident. At a memorial ceremony in 1992, I presented his widow and his son the insignia of the Haganah and the Aleh Fighters for the State decoration.
- ³ On the resumption of relations between Israel and Czechoslovakia, see the detailed article of Dr. Yosef Govrin, "From Deep Freeze to Thaw: Relations between Israel and Czechoslovakia 1967–1990," *The Jerusalem Review (The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs)* I:1 (2006–07).
- ⁴ This exhibit later traveled to Prague, Brno and Olomouc.
- ⁵ Gašparovič did not harbor any ill will toward me. After the dissolution of the federation, he was elected speaker of the Slovak parliament and we became good friends. I hosted him in Israel when he made an official visit in the summer of 1995. Since 2004, he has been serving as the third president of Slovakia.