

Communism gets an urn burial as Czechs and Slovaks take

The High Road to Democracy

by PAUL WILSON

Of all the sights in Prague this spring — its streets and squares pulsing with theatre, rock bands, buskers, folk-dancers, newspaper hawkers, street vendors, open-air exhibitions and store-front videos, a marvellous, dangerous once-in-a-lifetime sensation of subdued jubilation stretched tight over a vale of incertitude — of all those sights, the most vivid was a large, empty construction site near the centre of town reflecting, as so many Czech construction sites do, the antiquity and permanence of the city around it, and occupied by a single worker, listlessly dragging a piece of wood through the confusion of iron rods, bricks, and piles of dirt and scrap lumber. I felt a small thrill, as one does with the sight of something familiar in a world of change. But my eleven-year-old son was puzzled. "Where is everybody?" he asked. It was a good question. Where indeed were the workers in this former workers' state?

This was just one of the questions in my mind this May, when I visited Czechoslovakia with my wife Helena, who is a Czech expatriate, and Jake, who was born in Canada. It was my third trip in six months, after a period of over twelve years when I was banned from entering the country. It was Jake's first trip ever. The Czechoslovak parliament had decided that Czechs and Slovaks living abroad could vote, and Helena was going back to exercise her franchise.

Crossing the border into Czechoslovakia gave us an astonishing foretaste of how much had changed. Earlier in the month, Canada had signed an agreement with Czechoslovakia, and we no longer needed visas. When we drove up to the Zelezna Ruda crossing in southwest Bohemia, we showed the guard our passports, he looked at them, peered into the car, stamped them and returned them with a salute. "That's all?" I asked.

"That's all," he replied with a huge grin. I looked around. Some of the stage props of the Cold War — the concrete barriers, the tank traps, the guard houses — were still there, but they seemed absurdly inert and harmless, like dumb monuments to a time that was long past. I was so overwhelmed that I forgot to buy coupons for gasoline.

Zelezna Ruda is a sleepy

border town rough-edged with neglect, where older, pre-war German buildings blend uneasily with a box-like socialist modern shopping centre. The most outstanding thing, apart from a circular wooden church topped by an enormous onion dome, was a large hand-drawn banner strung between two chimneys over the local hotel. It was the first election banner we saw. "Communists belong in urns, but not in electoral urns," it said, punning on the Czech word *urna*, which means both a ballot-box and a container for human remains.

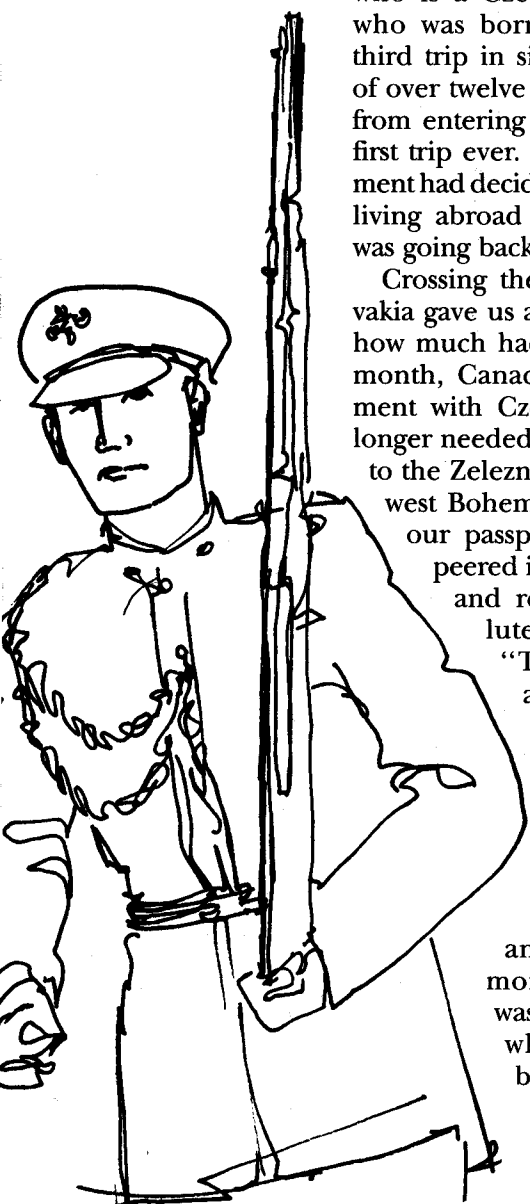
Further down the valley, our tires screaming in the hair-pin curves, we began to see, at bus-stop shelters and on village bulletin boards, regular election posters, most of them far milder than the banner in Zelezna Ruda. "Come back to Europe with us!" Civic Forum invited. "Who fails to vote, votes for Evil," warned the Christian Democratic Union darkly. "Social Security for country folk, a well-laid table for city folk," declared the Co-op Farm Movement, but their phraseology gave them away. These are old Communists talking: Vote for thy stomach's sake, and for thy creature comforts.

Each of the parties seems to have a number, which figures prominently in their ads. Civic Forum's is number seven. One of their signs says: "The 7 Wonders of the World, The Magnificent 7, Seventh Heaven, Seven Days of the Week: Vote for Number 7, Civic Forum." "They forgot to mention the Seven Deadly Sins," says Helena sardonically. I wondered, perhaps somewhat uncharitably, how Civic Forum had arranged to get themselves a lucky number? Later, when I learn that the numbers were assigned by lottery, I feel ashamed of my suspicion.

As we near Prague, the variety increases. There is a party, or coalition, called the Free Bloc, another called the Republican Union, a third called the Movement for Civic Freedom. The Green Party, its logo four green hearts arranged like a cloverleaf, has signs everywhere. I don't see any for the Communist Party, but some of the old, pre-Communist parties appear to have revived. "If there's going to be democracy, make it social," say the Social Democrats. "Modern women vote for a modern party" (the Social Democrats again). But Civic Forum has the best slogan: "Parties are for party members," they say. "Civic Forum is for everybody."

When I was last in Prague, in February, I began to believe what I had long suspected, that there is a manic-depressive side to the collective nature of Czechs. The euphoria of the previous November and December had given way to uncertainty, doubts, and even fear about the future. So deep was the malaise that what in December had seemed so inevitable — that the Communists would be swept away in a free election — now no longer seemed inevitable at all.

There were several reasons that I could see for this



depression. In the first place, the Communist Party had not simply collapsed the way it had in Poland, or Hungary, or East Germany; it had regrouped and, without so much as an apology for the physical and moral devastation it had left behind, was busy reshaping its image, refining its new vocabulary, and consolidating its power base in the countryside and regions of heavy industry, where fears about the future were strongest.

Another reason was simple exhaustion. People had been working with little sleep for three months, and the mysterious stimulant the revolution had released into the bloodstream of society was beginning to wear off. Dissident author Milan Simecka compared it to the third day of skiing in the mountains, when people were tired and therefore most accident-prone.

A third obvious reason for the sense of drift was that most of the leading figures in the revolution, from Vaclav Havel on down, had left the Civic Forum and its sister organization in Slovakia, the Public Against Violence, to take up positions in the government and parliament. Add to this the growing pains of an organization that had ballooned overnight from a small steering committee to a mass movement with independent branches in practically every town, village, and workplace in the country, not all of which were behaving in ways that brought credit to Civic Forum as a whole. The Forum, in fact, was going through an identity crisis: by its own definition, it was a movement that stood above partisan politics, but by design, it was preparing to compete in the elections as a political party. In fact there was a joke going round, barely translatable, that the initials OF (Civic Forum is *Obcanske Forum* in Czech) really stood for *ocekavam funkci* (I'm expecting an appointment), which says a lot about how deep public cynicism is on the subject of patronage. Many Czechs find it hard to imagine that anyone would join a political organization, even one so obviously on the side of the angels, for altruistic reasons. As of mid-February, scarcely twenty-five per cent of the electorate supported Civic Forum.

I'm convinced the new electoral system had something to do with the general confusion as well. In backroom discussions, and then at closed sessions of a national round-table, a system of almost pure proportional representation had been designed in which people would vote for parties rather than for individual members of parliament. Proponents may claim many advantages for PR over the single-member constituency system, but simplicity of voting or ballot counting is not one of them. When the new electoral law was finally released in late February, I heard that forty per cent of those polled said they were probably not going to vote at all. This created a situation in which the Communist Party could, according to several worst-case scenarios in the press, end up with the strongest showing of any single party, as it had in 1946. No wonder the Czechs were depressed.

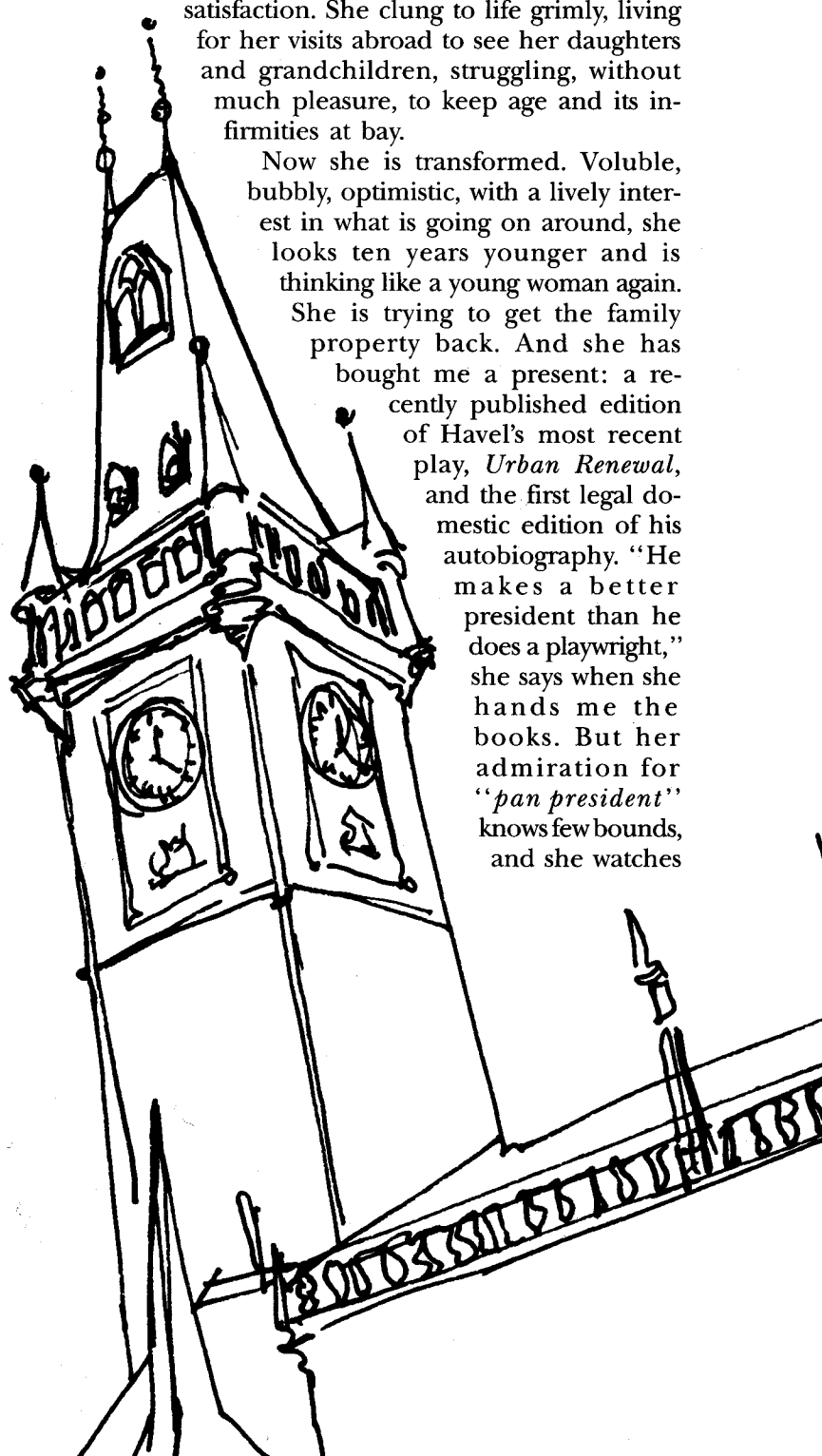
We arrive in Prague late at night, but the people we arranged to rent the flat from are still up waiting for us. We unload the luggage, put Jake to bed, then take a bottle of Southern Comfort up into the kitchen and talk to the landlord and his wife, she a schoolteacher, he a researcher in an environmental institute. He is also a member of his local electoral committee and will be a scrutineer for the Civic Forum. The question I'm dying to ask him, and do, is whether things

have improved since last February. Absolutely, he says. Civic Forum now stands to get about forty per cent of the vote. And they are running their best-known people at the top of every list in every electoral district. That explained why we had seen so many Civic Forum posters with large colour photos of popular government ministers, each one with the slogan: "Who, if not us? When, if not now? How, if not with Civic Forum?"

Next morning we visit Helena's mother. In the past, a strained politeness was the hallmark of our relationship, and I'm sure there was reason enough for it on both sides. Her life has not been an easy one. She left her first husband (Helena's father) and lost a second husband to cancer. She raised her three daughters alone in the 1950's, after her family had lost virtually everything, including a large tract of woods and a small chateau in North Bohemia, to the Communists. Thanks to her mildly left-wing views, she persuaded herself that there was some justice in this, but it never brought her any satisfaction. She clung to life grimly, living for her visits abroad to see her daughters and grandchildren, struggling, without much pleasure, to keep age and its infirmities at bay.

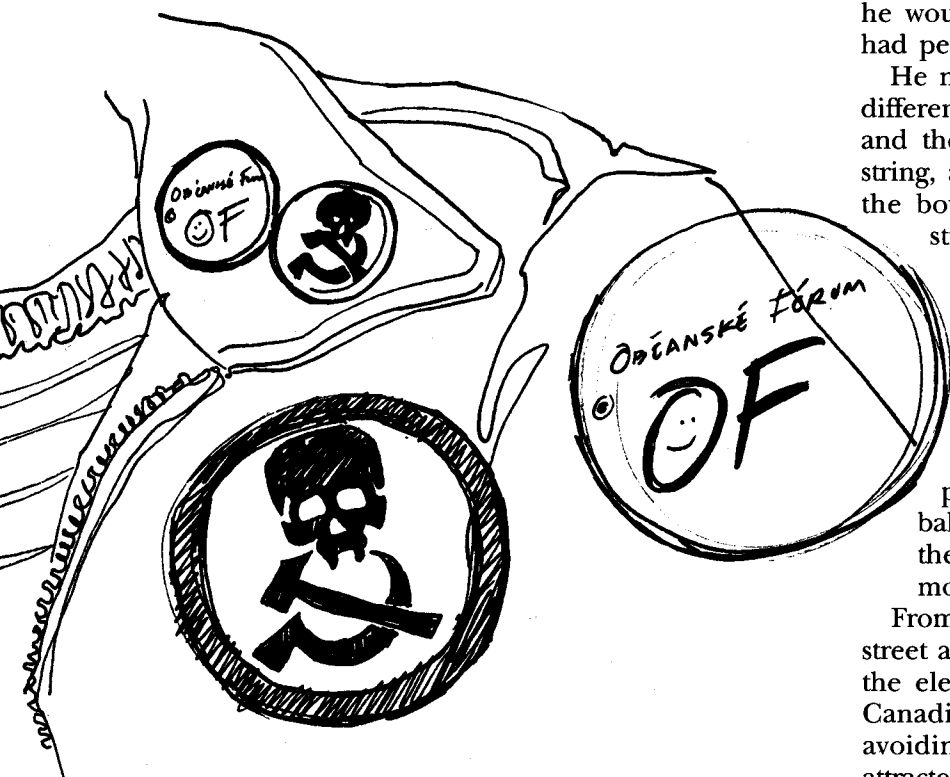
Now she is transformed. Voluble, bubbly, optimistic, with a lively interest in what is going on around, she looks ten years younger and is thinking like a young woman again.

She is trying to get the family property back. And she has bought me a present: a recently published edition of Havel's most recent play, *Urban Renewal*, and the first legal domestic edition of his autobiography. "He makes a better president than he does a playwright," she says when she hands me the books. But her admiration for "pan president" knows few bounds, and she watches



his weekly broadcasts — his fireside chats — from Lany faithfully every Sunday afternoon.

Over the next two weeks, I notice that many people of my mother-in-law's generation have undergone a similar change. None of them ever expected to live to see the return of freedom, and now that it is here, they are delighted. An old colleague of mine from Brno, who is seventy and certainly deserves his rest, has been working sixteen hours a day for the Civic Forum and looks as young as ever. This kind of commitment, of course, is



not limited to older people, but the joy of the elderly has a special flavour to it: they remember what it was like when the country was still a democracy; they know what they have lost and are determined not to lose it again. And then, their joy is tinged with the sadness they feel for wives and husbands and friends who did not live to see this, the miracle that only hard work can save.

The injection of unexpected energy and ability that sudden democratic political change can release in people is a phenomenon worth studying in greater detail. I attended public meetings last November and December at which people would stand up and apologize to the audience because they'd never spoken in public before, and then they would begin to speak with a simplicity and directness and power and eloquence that would leave me gasping. Civic Forum leaders, when they had a moment to stop and reflect, would express wonder at the number of intelligent, capable, and hardworking people who suddenly appeared to help. And this was not a phenomenon of age or experience; young people too found untapped reserves of ability within themselves. Maria Divisova, a nervy young woman who manned the telephones at the Independent Press Centre and now works for a new investigative weekly called *Respekt*, went for a month last fall without sleep. "What's interesting about it," she said later, "was that the more exhausted I was, the better my brain worked. I felt that suddenly, there was more room in my head for everything. For the first time in my life, I lived entirely in the present, every

second. It was a magnificent feeling, it was real life, and it was the happiest month of my life."

Travelling with Jake added a dimension to the trip I would never have experienced alone. Children see things differently, without the benefit of even the brief historical perspective that adulthood confers. The glorious confusion of narrow lanes and ancient buildings in Prague could not help but making some impression on the mind of a child whose idea of a city has been formed — once and for all — by Toronto. But he would only look twice at a building if Helena or I had personal memories attached to it, with stories.

He noticed other things, though. The toilets were so different: they had them in separate rooms, like closets, and the tank was away up on the wall; you pulled a string, and this great rush of water came shooting into the bowl and swept everything down the pipes. The streetcars were different too. You had to punch your own ticket at special machines, and if they caught you not doing that you had to pay a fine. The subway had no ads and humungous escalators that made you dizzy. The pizzas were terrible but the wienerschnitzel was truly great. And they had Coke, and Pepsi. The bathrooms in the restaurants were gross, though. Too many people smoked. And when the kids played baseball, they knew all the rules, but when they played, they moved funny, like they didn't know the right moves.

From the young Czechs his own age, and from the street activity around him, Jake picked up an interest in the election. The official election campaign took what Canadian politicians like to call "the high road" by avoiding direct attacks on the Communists. But what attracted Jake was the unofficial, popular campaign which was openly anti-Communist. Because it was direct and clear and passionate, this "people's campaign" produced the wittiest and most memorable slogans and images. It cast the struggle in the classic mold, familiar to all children, of the good guys versus the bad guys. It was easy to get into the spirit of things. Jake took to wearing a button that summed it up: it showed a human skull with a hammer and sickle. As far as I could tell, people were very much in two minds about the Civic Forum policy of soft-peddalling the sins of Communism. "It's a velvet revolution, all right," a friend chuckled, "but it's the Communists they're being velvet towards, not us."

There were controversies, of course. One of them — minor but typical — was whether President Vaclav Havel, as one of the founding members and *primus inter pares* of the original Civic Forum last November, should now support the Civic Forum in the election, or whether, as president, he should remain above the fray. There were arguments on both sides, and Havel's own position, which he maintained to the end, was that he would refrain from telling people how to vote, since the choice was private and personal.

Havel's stature has grown enormously since he was first dragged reluctantly into the presidential office last December. His first formal television appearance, to announce his candidacy, was awkward and stiff, but engaging for all that. He read his speech from a typescript in front of him after condemning the teleprompter as a

"mendacious" device. When called upon to speak impromptu, he would sometimes appear uncomfortable. You felt that if it weren't for all this damned history going on, he'd far rather be doing something sensible like writing plays or essays, or drinking with his friends.

By February, when I saw him next, he had become a master of the podium simply by relaxing. You could see that he'd accepted his fate, and was even beginning to enjoy it. He cultivated surprise. He had a way of suddenly showing up on huge housing estates, or in badly polluted villages, or at the door of former secret police officers who were under curfew, inquiring, probing, observing, taking note. When he spoke with ordinary people he spoke in colloquial Czech. When asked what it was like talking to great statesmen, he would reply that they were human like everyone else, so he spoke to them accordingly. One photograph I treasure shows Havel talking to General Jaruzelski; Havel is relaxed and laughing, probably having made a joke, while Jaruzelski sits ramrod stiff beside him in an empire chair, with the barest trace of a shit-eating smile on his face.

Havel's more serious mistakes seem to derive from an excess of generosity and good will. A former political prisoner himself, he granted amnesty to thousands of prisoners early in the new year. They were to have been released gradually, but the guards, claiming they couldn't keep order inside the prisons once the first of the amnestees had left, let them all go at once. Thousands of prisoners flooded into the cold January cities, without money or proper clothing or jobs. It put an enormous strain on people's good will, and even now, in May, people still attribute the dramatic rise in the crime rate to Havel's kind but ill-considered gesture. Many of those prisoners are back behind bars.

Havel also drew criticism for backing the Minister of the Interior, Richard Sacher, who was felt to be dragging his heels in dismantling the hated secret police. People grumble that his closest advisors are personal friends, and not professionals. Havel is not a Teflon president: he confronts these criticisms directly, and answers them, but persists in his own course, and so far, it has not cost him serious political points.

Nowhere is Havel's popularity higher than inside the prisons. In a maximum security prison called Valdice, sometimes referred to with grim humour as the Czech Sing Sing, a member of the Prison Forum told me how Havel had come to see them and, leaving his otherwise omnipresent bodyguard in the warden's office, had descended alone into the courtyard where several hundred murderers, armed robbers, rapists and child-molesters were assembled, waiting to meet him. In a cell that also served as the headquarters for the new Gypsy Prison Forum, there was a pencil sketch of Havel on the wall. His features were decidedly Romany.

One day, one of Havel's people handed me a list with a schedule of his swing through the South Bohemian region next day. One of Havel's stops was Tabor, a beautiful old town of mediaeval antiquity about sixty kilometers south of Prague.

By the time I arrived in Tabor the next afternoon and found a parking spot, people were streaming into Zizka Square, a large open space sloping away from a baroque church cradling a bower of tall chestnut trees in the angle formed by chancel and transept. The buildings on

the square presented facades from every period in Czech history, from Renaissance houses with high, ornate gables, to the blank, socialist functionalism of the town hall. The square was dominated by an old fountain and further up the gentle slope, by a large statue of Jan Zizka, a fifteenth century Czech warrior who had fought in the cause of Jan Hus, the reforming Catholic priest who was burned at the stake in Constance in 1415, and whose motto was, "The truth shall prevail." Communist historians had turned the Hussite wars into a precursor of revolution, and Tabor itself into the first real communist community in Bohemia.

The Museum of the Hussite Revolutionary Movement in one corner of the square had a balcony with the two-tailed Czechoslovak lion and crown (the red star that once replaced the crown has been officially removed) on it and a Civic Forum banner with the happy-face logo draped above it. A military band played bouncy martial music while the square filled rapidly with people. Children were perched on their parents' shoulders, cameras and umbrellas were out (it was overcast and beginning to drizzle) and groups of high-school students were holding banners aloft identifying their school and class and welcoming the president. About four o'clock, a fanfare sounded from across the square, and someone appeared on the balcony to announce that the presidential entourage had been delayed and would arrive shortly.

And so we endured, for the next half hour, a procession of local politicians who tried their best to keep the crowd primed for the president. But there was a sameness to their speeches, and it was a great relief when the presidential motorcade, with its white BMW (Havel refuses to use the black Tatra 613 limos that are so closely associated with the ancien regime) pulled up in a passageway beside the museum. There were more speeches, then Havel squeezed his way to the front of the balcony, and the square erupted in cries of "Long live Havel!" Tieless, wearing a casual blue windbreaker open at the neck, he still looked slightly awkward, and waved with one hand, as much to settle people as to acknowledge their cheers.

His speech was brief, and made no mention of Civic Forum. Instead, he told a story about how, last August (another world, another time!) he had come, by himself, to Tabor, just to think. He wandered through the streets, contemplating the beauty of the town with one eye over his shoulder to see if he were being followed and meditating on the strange way Communist ideologists had tried to link Zizka to Communism. Today, he said, a free historiography will tell students how it really was. But we mustn't go to the other extreme and reject the Hussite period altogether just because the Communists misused it. It was the last time in our history, he said, that we Czechs, or most of us, fought for our truth to the end. "And it wouldn't hurt if we were to promise ourselves, right here on this square, that this time we will really defend what we've won so far."

When the speeches were over, the balcony emptied and so, gradually, did the square. The band played a few more numbers, and young draftees who had been brought in to see the president slowly assembled under the chestnut trees for the march back to the barracks. People lined up for hot sausages and cold beer at several *ad hoc* concession booths, but soon the lines were gone, and the concessionaires struck their tents and left.

An ambulance parked outside the town hall had a sign in its windshield: "The Communists have never lied, never stolen, and the world isn't round."

I sat down on a bench near Zizka and watched the square return to its normal late afternoon life. Two elderly people, a man and a woman, strolled by, arguing about religion. "None of this makes any sense," I heard her say to him, "unless you believe in a living God." A woman with enormous swollen legs bound in elastic bandages hobbled across the cobblestones on two crutches and sank down on one of the benches to rest. A grey-haired man who looked too frail, too old and too stooped to be doing this for pay, began sweeping the square in front of Zizka. A young soldier sat on the edge of the fountain reading a book. The platoon of recruits suddenly fell into place under the chestnut trees and then marched off into a side street.

As I sat there, I reflected on something Havel once mentioned, that forum really means square, agora, a marketplace of ideas. Yet no matter what transpires in a square, it always returns to itself, passively containing, like a riverbed, the life that passes through it. Havel and the thousands who had turned out to see him had come and gone, and here was the square, itself again, as though nothing had happened. Yet everything had happened, and the world was utterly different. The difference was all in the people.

The morning of election day, June 8, Helena got stuck between floors in the elevator in her mother's apartment building, and it took them an hour to rescue her. We were late for lunch, and it was two o'clock, when the polls opened, by the time we picked up Helena's mother to walk up the street and vote.

When we arrived at the polling station, in a public school, voters were already streaming in and out the front door. Just inside the entrance, a young policeman was sitting behind a bare table, looking bored. Helena's mother responded without thinking: she walked over and presented him with her ID booklet and her voter's registration card. The cop looked at her with a puzzled smile and said, "I'm not in charge here. You have to go upstairs," and she retreated with a sheepish grin, embarrassed at her atavistic, conditioned response to the uniform.

We found the right room on the second floor at the end of a long corridor covered with children's artwork and got in line. Those who had already voted were standing around in little groups, chatting, smiling self-consciously. The line was long, but moved forward quickly. When Helena and her mother were finally ushered in by a student, Jake and I stayed outside and watched them through the door. This was their moment; we were only spectators.

It was a strange and moving moment. Everything they were doing was utterly ordinary, and yet it was utterly extraordinary too. I felt my eyes fill with tears, and I realized that this was not just my cheap-date sentimentality getting the better of me, as it sometimes does in movies, or when I hear certain songs, nor was it the thought of how much hard work had gone before: no, I was suddenly remembering the other elections I had seen in this country in the 1970's, Communist elections, where there was never any choice, but you were required anyway — under pain of nasty retaliation — to cast your envelope of ballots, each with a single name on it for a


single position, into the urn. ("Communists belong in urns!") Failing to show up was a serious matter, but such elections were so meaningless, so degrading, so humiliating, that people would go to enormous lengths to get out of it. I remember one year driving Helena frantically all over Southern Bohemia in a Deux Chevaux pickup, scattering excuses behind us like tacks on the highway, just so she wouldn't have to vote. There was an underground folklore of escapades about feigning illness, insanity, and even death. And now people were coming happily, voluntarily, casting their ballots for the future.

It wasn't just me who felt the momentousness of the occasion. For days afterwards, people told stories about how they had gone to vote, or how they helped out, how they had decorated the polling station, or baked a cake for the scrutineers, or gone off in the pouring rain with the portable ballot box — a Communist, a Social Democrat, and a Civic Forum member all huddled under one umbrella — to bring in the hospital vote, or about how they slept on the floor overnight so that no one could tamper with the ballot box, or about the Gypsy woman who asked if there was one of those "eyes" behind the screen that could see how you voted, or about the parents who let their children put the envelopes in the ballot box because, they said, "This is for you."

There was nothing remarkable about any of these stories, but people told them to each other as though they held the key to life itself. And it was not as though there weren't grander things to talk about: the pipe-bomb explosion on the Old Town Square in Prague a week before that had almost killed a West German woman, Havel's surprise visit to Moscow to talk about the Warsaw pact, the gang warfare between Czech skinheads and Vietnamese *gastarbeiters*. But on that election weekend, people talked about the simple things, as though the mere fact that they had pulled off free elections was so vast that it could only be contained and cherished and understood through small, concrete details.

Saturday evening, after the polls had closed but before the official results were in, Czechoslovak Television offered its viewers a post-election round-up. Major figures from each party, a few political science professors of Czech background from the U.S.A., and some members of an international observers team (one of whom was a Canadian member of Parliament) were jammed into the big television studio on Kavci Hory in Prague, while two roving reporters with mikes picked their way among the crowd, trying to let everyone have their moment of glory.

To say that the result was "great television," would be both misleading and an understatement. It was chaotic, jumbled, spontaneous, and magnificent. The election results were not due in for almost another twenty-four hours, but exit polls taken by a West German firm indicated that Civic Forum and the Public Against Violence would probably walk away a majority of the popular vote, and everyone was treating their victory as assured. The atmosphere was one of celebration mixed with bitterness. The animosity among political factions, the hidden frustrations and enmities and misunderstandings all gushed to the surface as the professors pontificated, the politicians grandstanded, and the losers yapped and snarled at each other, shedding their dignity in the very act of trying to salvage it. It was riveting, and completely out of



tune with the simple joy that, I expect, most viewers felt. When the Canadian M.P. was asked what he thought of the elections, he said in the chipper voice of one trying to be witty, that he'd found them boring. When he saw the announcer's surprise, he hastened to add that this was, in fact, a good thing, because it showed how smoothly the Czechs and Slovaks had brought it off.

Next morning, I went to a special event called "The Prague Symposium on Democracy." It was held in the *Laterna Magika*, the Magic Lantern Theatre, which for several days in the midst of last November's revolution, had served as the Civic Forum nerve centre. It is an unremarkable theatre, with an elegant sweep of marble stairs taking you into an underground lobby, and then, further down, into an auditorium that was the site of so many crucial events last November. This morning, Sunday, June 10th, it was about half full.

The symposium seemed oddly out of sync with the reality around it. It was chaired by a suave and easygoing Pierre Salinger, who had once upon a time been President Kennedy's press secretary. Mike in hand, he introduced the panel, some of whom were members of the international observers team; the rest were Czechs. When introducing the Canadian M.P., who was sitting in the audience, Salinger congratulated him on the news that the Meech Lake thing had apparently been settled, and Canada was still in one piece. I felt a jarring and, in retrospect, misplaced sense of relief.

On the American side, the discussion contained high-grade rhetoric tinged with low-grade paternalism. Senator Christopher Dodd, a distinguished-looking Democrat from Connecticut, called the Magic Lantern "your Faneuil Hall," and told the audience, "We are present at the creation; the page is blank, Czechoslovakia's history can now be written." (In print, his statement looks more evangelical than it sounded.) He offered advice worthy of Ben Franklin: "One of the beauties of serving the democratic system is that the work is never done," and concluded with what sounded like a toast: "Welcome to the family of democracy."

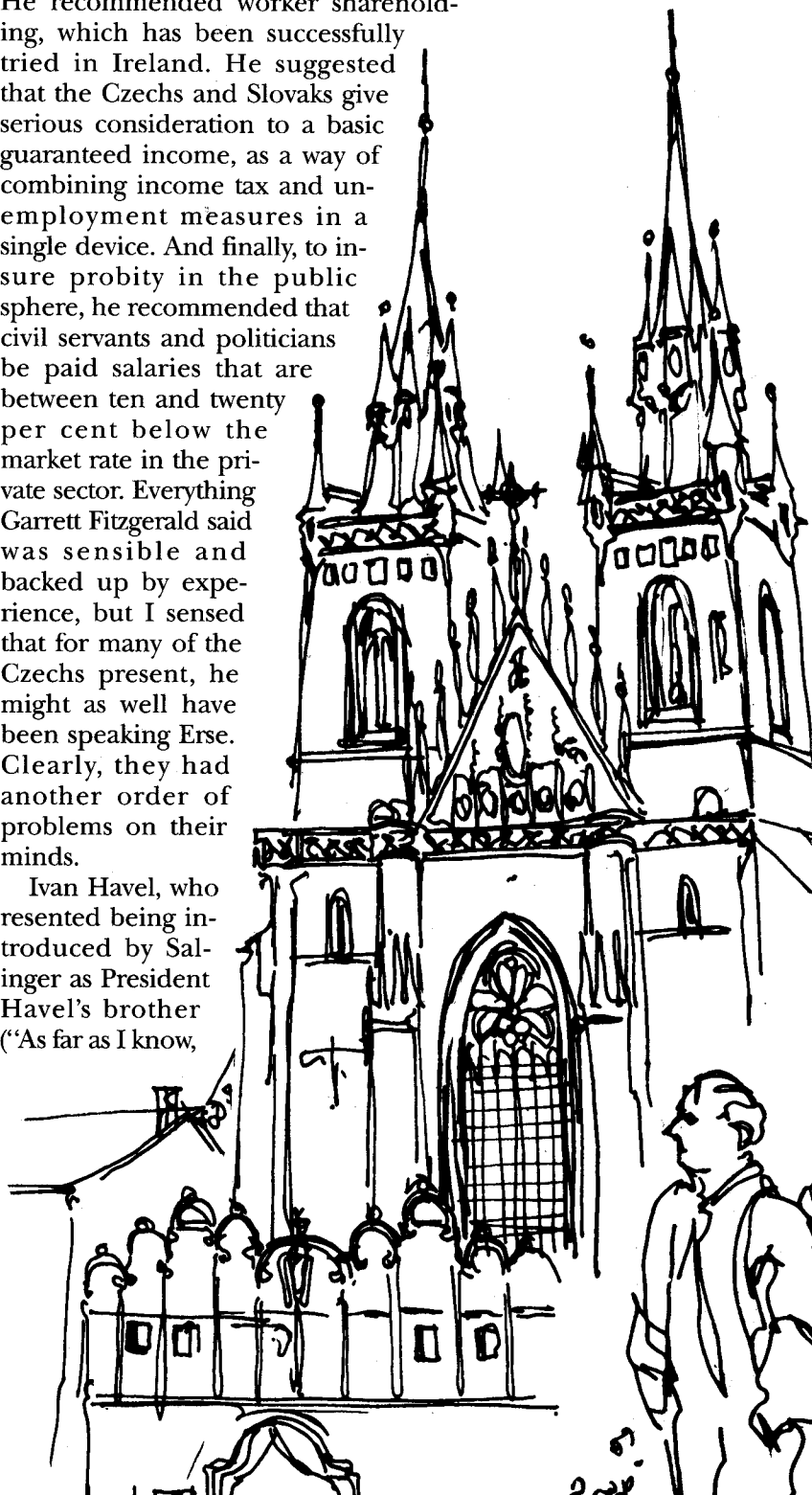
Beside him sat white-haired Senator John McCain of Arizona. Like a good Republican, he stressed the importance of United States foreign policy in bringing down Communism: their steadfast defence of human rights and freedoms, Radio Free Europe, the strategy of deterrence, the sacrifices of American men and women. "I am proud to be not only an American," he concluded, "I'm proud to be a citizen of the world."

The only challenge to his statement came from another American, the activist actor Mike Farrell, who said he wasn't so sure that America had been all that steadfast in its defence of human rights. The Czechs, however, did not seem inclined to discuss the matter, and Salinger, eager for some kind of statement from them, had to ask Havel's spokesman, Michael Zantovsky, point blank whether he thought American foreign policy had made a difference. Zantovsky replied that one of the best things the Americans had done for Eastern Europe was to push for the Helsinki Accords, insist on a human rights package to go along with it, and then keep pressuring the

Communist governments to live up to their commitment to honour it. This had given the dissidents a powerful tool, one that had eventually pried the regime apart.

The star of the Western side was Garrett Fitzgerald, a former prime minister of the Irish Republic. Eschewing rhetoric, Fitzgerald got down and told the Czechs a few home truths. "Your biggest single political problem now," he said, "is that you have no credible opposition. A credible opposition has to be prepared to form a government. The Communist Party is not a credible opposition." He warned that the market system has a power to corrupt too, though not as absolutely as the former system. The market must not be seen as an end in itself, he said, but as a means of enabling a "society of social justice to emerge." For that to happen, the pricing system would have to be free of the distortions of subsidies, and there would have to be plenty of room for free enterprise, though not everything should be in private hands. He recommended worker shareholding, which has been successfully tried in Ireland. He suggested that the Czechs and Slovaks give serious consideration to a basic guaranteed income, as a way of combining income tax and unemployment measures in a single device. And finally, to insure probity in the public sphere, he recommended that civil servants and politicians be paid salaries that are between ten and twenty per cent below the market rate in the private sector. Everything Garrett Fitzgerald said was sensible and backed up by experience, but I sensed that for many of the Czechs present, he might as well have been speaking Erse. Clearly, they had another order of problems on their minds.

Ivan Havel, who resented being introduced by Salinger as President Havel's brother ("As far as I know,



'brother' is not a profession; I am a mathematician," he said), talked about the most delicate ethical problem of what to do about the old sinners. On what grounds should they be judged, and what should be done about them? And a Czech philosopher, Ladislav Kohout, said of his country's failure to stop Communism in the 1940's: "We were at fault for depending too heavily on the health of our democratic institutions. From 1945 until 1948, we believed that nothing like what happened in Germany could happen here. Well, we were wrong."

I left early to go to a Communist party press conference. When I walked into the *Rude Pravo* building with a reporter from the Voice of America, two smiling women in identical drab blue uniforms and red armbands came up to us and one of them said, "You're reporters, aren't you. The press conference is on the sixth floor." I asked her how she had guessed. "Oh, I can always tell; you westerners all dress exactly alike." I am wearing blue jeans and a windbreaker; my colleague has on a bright yellow sweater and brown slacks. Czechs used to pride themselves on their ability to spot Communists a mile away, by the dead rhetoric they use, their pasty, expressionless faces, the way they combed their hair, and the inept cut of their suits. But of course, non-conformists must have been equally visible to "them."

Feeling conspicuous, I went to the sixth floor where the conference is already in progress. The Communists came in a distant second at thirteen per cent of the popular vote, and while everyone else interpreted this as a defeat, they called it a confirmation of their legitimacy

in the new social order. As the only "left-wing force" represented in parliament, they promised to play a constructive role in "defending the interests of working people." Given the party's historical record, such platitudes seem sinister and obscene.

That evening, the election results are officially announced. In Western terms it is a victory for the centre, represented by the Civic Forum and the Public Against Violence. The far-right parties, and some of the older, traditional leftist parties, come in well below the five per cent base line. The Green Party, which looked popular in the polls, doesn't make it either, much to everyone's disappointment. Most disconcerting of all is the success of separatist-tinged parties in Slovakia and Moravia. And the Communist Party, with its thirteen per cent, is stronger than the polls predicted. But as someone said, the real victor is democracy: the turnout, entirely voluntary, was over ninety-six per cent.

Later the same evening, there is a Civic Forum victory party in the Magic Lantern Theatre. After a raucous and very unfunny drag show on stage people escape to the lobbies to do what they really came for, to socialize and celebrate. Alexandr Dubcek is there, greying and courtly. Havel puts in brief appearance, rushed through the crowd and onto the stage by his handlers and bodyguards to say a few words before being swept off again. An old friend of our, Jirina Siklova, is relaxing after six months of hard work. She's a grandmother too, but she looks about thirty-five. "It was like one long orgasm, you know?" she says, delighted at the gasp of shock from her listeners. "It was wonderful while it lasted, but six months is enough. I'm looking forward to a little post-coitus peace and quiet." Out in the lobby, I see the stocky, curlyhaired John Bok, once the head of Havel's personal bodyguard, now an unsuccessful independent candidate. He has buttonholed Jiri Kanturek, the recently appointed head of Czechoslovak Television, and is saying: "Look, would you please tell your bloody announcers that it's not the Turks who are looking for asylum here, it's the Kurds. The Kurds, got it?" Kanturek nods furiously and promises to look into it.

Welcome, indeed, to the family of democracies.

The last thing I do before we leave for Canada is to show Jake one of the enduring sights of Prague. We go into a large beerhall near the old town square. It's ten thirty in the morning on Day Three of the new dispensation. The place is jammed with workers in blue coveralls, the air thick with smoke and loud with the din of conversation. Waiters carry heavy trays laden with half-litre mugs of beer dripping with froth, plop them down loudly on the tables and mark each customer's beermat with a pencil to keep the tally. There is scarcely room to stand. "So what was it you wanted to show me?" Jake asks. "This," I reply. I remind him of the empty construction site we saw on the second day of our visit, and his question about where everyone was. "This is where everyone is," I say. "It was like this before you were born, day in and day out, year after year. Some things never change." I am beginning to sound like the beer ads back home. I had wanted him to see this before it was too late, because in its own way, this is one of the wonders of the world, and it won't be here much longer. ☹

