

Interview between Paul Wilson and Rosamund Johnston:

Biography: Paul Wilson was born in 1941. He moved to Czechoslovakia to teach English in 1967.

There, Wilson became involved in the underground music scene, through which he came to meet Václav Havel. On account of his activity in alternative musical circles, Wilson was barred from Czechoslovakia in 1977. Back in Canada, he worked to translate and promote documents produced by the individuals involved in Charter 77. He also began to translate Václav Havel's essays and letters.

Wilson returned to Czechoslovakia at the time of the Velvet Revolution in 1989, which occurred while he was recording a series of radio documentaries about the political changes taking place in neighboring Hungary and elsewhere in Central Europe. In Prague, Wilson witnessed events as they unfolded at Civic Forum's headquarters in the Laterna Magika theatre. In this *Havel Conversations* interview, he offers a firsthand account of how Václav Havel's life changed overnight as the Revolution propelled him into political office. Wilson also reflects here on the applicability of Havel's political ideas in different times and places, and on the particular skills that Havel brought from dissident circles to the Czechoslovak presidency.

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Chapter I: Meeting Havel – 00:00:23

Rosamund Johnston (RJ): So thank you very much for speaking to us, Paul Wilson. My first question for you is, quite simply, where and how did you get to know Václav Havel?

Paul Wilson (PW): Well it was kind of a long, drawn-out process. I went to Czechoslovakia in 1967 to teach English, and at the same time there were all kinds of things going on; the Prague Spring was sort of... You could feel it in the air, sort of bubbling up (to mix metaphors) from under the ground – it was in the air and in the ground. There was kind of a shift that was taking place that I didn't really understand. So I decided that I, in order to connect with what was going on, I had to learn Czech, and so I made a great effort. As well as teaching English, I got my students to teach me Czech. And by the Spring of 1968, when the Prague Spring was in full flower, I was able to read (with the help of a dictionary) a lot of the Czech newspapers, and my first encounter with Havel was with this essay that he wrote called "On the Theme of an Opposition."

There were many, many, many interesting articles in the newspapers in those days; the newspapers completely transformed because, I think probably in January or February (I'm not quite sure exactly when) they officially got rid of censorship, and so things really kind of opened up. And what was striking about this essay, and what drew my attention to it was that it was different from all the other essays by people like [Ludvík] Vaculík or the other kind of known [figures] (they would call them 'the usual suspects of the Prague Spring') in that he seemed to understand, or his argument was, that you can't really trust the Communist Party to reform itself without some kind of other, countervailing political force that can hold its feet to the fire. And therefore what you really need is an official opposition, and that means another party, which was something that the constitution didn't allow, or at least made very difficult. So that struck me as... It was almost like a lone voice arguing this, and I didn't really understand the full implications of it because, in fact,

it was not an unusual thing for Havel to have said. But to me it seemed very unusual in the context: it was not unusual in the context of his thinking, but I wasn't aware of that.

I was aware of him as a playwright, but his plays were either not on at the time that I was there, or I didn't know enough Czech to really appreciate them (I went to a lot of mime shows, because that was easy enough, in the theatre where he was the dramaturge, the Theatre on the Balustrade). There was a balance between written plays and mime [at the theatre – known in Czech as Divadlo Na zábradlí], because I think [Ladislav] Fialka, the great Czech mime, had shows there as well. So, that was when he sort of came on my radar. And then during and after the invasion he played a fairly prominent role. He wasn't in Prague, he was up in Liberec, but he was on the radio, and afterwards it was very clear that the regime was going after him.

I remember my girlfriend (and subsequently my wife) at the time Helena Pospíšilová was a photographer, and she took a picture of him in his flat, and it was a picture that was taken from a low angle and it was pointing up at the ceiling, and there was a hole in the plaster in the ceiling. And that was all. It was just a portrait of Havel, but this little hole in the ceiling... And everyone knew that Havel had found a listening device in his flat, and had kind of pried it out of the ceiling. And this was kind of proof that the post-invasion regime was taking an interest in him.

And so you know, for the longest time, Havel was clearly one the major figures in the literary and cultural opposition, but I didn't actually meet him in person until 1973 when, at that point, I had a whole circle of friends in the Czech underground. A lot of my friends were – had been – connected with the magazine called *Tvář* (*Face*) which Havel had been the... I'm not quite sure what he was, whether he had been the editor-in-chief or whether he was like the kind of protector-in-chief, but he was involved with the magazine, and this was a magazine of non-communist writers – young, non-communist writers. It had a very rocky history. It was founded I think in 1965; it immediately

got into trouble with the union of writers, because they had given their blessing to the magazine, but then they found themselves under attack by the magazine they had given their blessing to and they shut it down. And the circle of writers around *Tvář* invited Havel in, because Havel was very adept at cultural politics. He was in the union of writers, but he was not a communist, he was not a Party member, and he fought very hard for their right to publish in the councils of the Writers' Union. So I knew he had been involved on that level as the editor or whatever he was in that magazine; the magazine started up again in '68, it ran until early 1969 and was shut down again. So there was this circle of people; they called themselves '*tvářisté*' ('face people' – not Facebook, but just 'face,' right?), and they stuck together pretty well, and they hung out together, and they probably published their own little samizdat stuff together, and they also had some very curious kind of commercial enterprises which I won't get into. But they invited me, these friends of mine who were in the circle, they invited me to a showing of films by Jan Švankmajer (who was kind of on the index along with everybody else, but he was still making films and he'd made a couple of)... He'd made a documentary about this church in Kutná Hora which is made entirely of bones, you've probably heard about this, and there were a couple of other short films of his. So, there was a kind of an underground showing of these films, and Havel was there, and my friend Nikolaj Stankovič introduced us, and we had a brief conversation and that was really the end of it.

The next time I saw him, really, was at the trial of Ivan Jirous and the other four members of the Czech musical underground, when Havel managed to get into the trial as a spectator. The police during that trial, which was in the middle of Prague, packed the courtroom with their own people, but each member... Each of the accused was allowed one family member, and Ivan Jirous's wife gave up her seat for Havel so he was able to kind of sit in on that trial. And there were a bunch of us that went to the trial, and were sitting around outside, and there were people who couldn't get

in. This was the first time I'd actually seen these two different scenes come together in one, because in the meantime, Havel had had this, I would call it a fateful meeting, with Ivan Jirous. They had both written essays; Havel had written an essay about – it was an open letter to Dr. Husák, that was his first big shot across the bow of the regime in the 1970s, and a few months before that Ivan Jirous had published his shot across the bow which was the “Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival,” which was an essay on the meaning of the Czech musical underground. And at some point a mutual friend said ‘You guys have to get together, because you’ve got a lot in common.’ And that happened, and I think as a result of that meeting between Havel and Jirous, which went on all night in a hotel which is no longer standing called the Hotel Kriváň up in Vinohrady, and he and Jirous spent the whole night talking together and he was, the person who was facilitating this meeting – not the person who originated it, but the person who kind of kept the hotel open – turned out to be an informer. So my theory is that once the regime got wind that these two sort of forces had come together, they began... It was two weeks after that that they arrested all the musicians from the underground. So the actual trial, I think, was a result of the fact that Havel and Jirous, and therefore the two circles of their friends and acquaintances and people who were involved in different kinds of dissident activity came together.

And to get back to the trial: in the sort of antechamber, the waiting room if you will, outside of the trial, you could see all the dissidents, writers and long-haired hippie types who were involved with the underground. And that was the first inkling... And that was I think where the spark for Charter 77 happened. So I saw Havel then, but only from a distance. And then it wasn’t long after that, it was early, the middle of, 1977 that I was expelled from the country. And then from that point on my association with him was as a translator. So that’s the personal aspect.

Chapter II: Translating Havel – 00:10:30

RJ: Alright, so you said that originally you really knew his writing before you knew him.

PW: Yes.

RJ: Can you maybe talk about the way you think his writing shaped the friendship you went on to have with him?

PW: Well, I don't know whether our relationship... Havel always called it, you know I was his 'friend,' and I was very close to him, but in a way that a translator gets close to the writer that he is translating. Because you get right inside their heads! I mean, you kind of know every nook and cranny of their thinking, because that's what you are trying to convey in another language. And so, in that sense, I think I got to know him very well. But the fact that we were separated by an ocean and a continent, and also the fact that I was *persona non grata*, meant that our communication was very sporadic to say the least.

Just to give you one example: when I was translating *Letters to Olga* in the mid-1980s, there were an awful lot of aspects of that translation that were incredibly difficult, because he was very limited in what he could write about. He could only write about himself; he could only write about his family; he couldn't write about the conditions he was living in, but at the same time he tried to... He tried to kind of use the language of the dissident circles he was in. They were very much into phenomenology, they were into Heidegger, and so they described their reality in this Heideggerian language which in Czech is kind of unnatural, and in English is even more unnatural. And there were a lot of things I just did not understand. And I made a list of, I would estimate, about 300 passages that completely baffled me, or partly baffled me. And so I wrote him a long letter saying 'These are my questions,' and, you know, 'Could you help me?' But the letter had to go through underground channels to get to the country, it couldn't go directly. So it took about a month for the letter to get there, and then it took about another month for the answer to come back, and this

is in the age just before the internet. You know, someone walking, or leading a donkey, could have got the message there faster!

But the answer was very brief, and it said: ‘Dear Paul, I appreciate your problems, to be quite frank, I’m not even sure what I meant at the time. So I’d rather not get involved.’ Basically saying the ball is in your court, and he recommended that I talked to some people who are from his circle who might be able to help. And, as it turned out, Jiří Němec, who was very close to Havel, had emigrated at that point and was living in Vienna. And so I made a point of... I went to Vienna in 1986 and we sat down for a couple of days and went through it and tried to solve these problems. But that turned out to be very typical of the way that he deals with his writing. He writes it, and that’s it. And as far as interpretation goes, he was of very little help to me in trying to explain what he was saying. And he also said that part of the reason that he couldn’t help me was because he had written these letters partly to baffle the police who would read these things and say ‘I don’t know what the hell he is talking about’ [and] just let the letter go through their censorship process. But as it turned out, he probably literally couldn’t remember what he’d meant.

But he was also involved at this point, this was 1986 – you know, a lot was going on in Czechoslovakia at the time, and I just think he didn’t have time to do it. He was not the kind of person to look back, and he’s not... I wouldn’t say he is protective about his writing the way a lot of writers are – they want to make sure the translation is exact. He kind of gave me a free hand. And the only comments I’ve ever had from him about my translations were – I don’t know whether they were compliments or sort of backhanded, subtle, criticisms – but he always said that I made him sound more elegant than he was. That was certainly not deliberate on my part, but there is one aspect of the translations, of my translations of him that may have accounted for that: Havel was always very hesitant to be... To come down with a definite statement, you know, ‘This is what

is...' He would always say 'I think that this is true,' or 'In my opinion this is true.' And he would say that over and over again, and I just started cutting these out, because it kind of undermined the authority of what he was saying. And so I think that my translations of his work make him sound a little more sure of himself, perhaps, than he might have felt himself. I didn't see any reason that he should constantly be saying that. So, I allowed him to say it a couple of times, because that's part of the way he speaks. But I think I made him sound a little more sure of himself than he really was, especially in some of his essays, so...

RJ: Alright. So you've translated some [Bohumil] Hrabal, you've translated some [Josef] Škvorecký, and you said that each time you translate it is about getting into a person's logic or head.

PW: Right.

RJ: I mean, would you say there are things that are distinct for you about your experience translating Havel? What are the particularities of Havel as an author to translate?

PW: Okay, I can give you a long answer or a shorter answer. The shorter answer is that I was never in any doubt, except in the cases that I've mentioned, as to what Havel meant. There were problems in conveying the full meaning of some of his standard phrases, like he wrote about this notion of how the system almost seemed to be on autopilot. And I don't remember what exactly the Czech word was, but he called it the "samopohyb systému" (the system that kind of runs by itself). And I found that hard to find an exact equivalent for that that would convey to an English-speaking reader what that meant to a Czech reader. I think that every Czech that read that would know exactly what it meant, because the system did seem to be... To run like a kind of machine that was kind of impossible to disturb or stop or divert somewhere else. And so when, in translating him, the problems that I had were conveying in English the kind of levels of meaning he attributed

to certain words. Whereas when I am translating Škvorecký the problems were a question of... I mean, he wrote a lot of dialogue. I mean, Havel wrote dialogue as well, but only in his plays. And so, in translating Škvorecký, the language that his characters use depends really on the age in which they are living. So you had characters who were, you know, who grew up during the 1930s. And the way they spoke was different – he has a character in *The Engineer of Human Souls* who was a Slovak who speaks in this very bad Slovak. And then towards... And then he moves to Prague and starts writing very bad Czech, and it was very hard to convey that. So there the problems were more linguistic.

With Havel, the problems, such as there were, were with levels of meaning, and once I'd solved them, then it became easier to translate. So I... At a certain point I developed kind of a vocabulary of my own in English that fit his way of thinking. And so, of all the writers that I have translated, maybe with the exception of [Ivan] Klíma who is a very clean, journalistic kind of writer, his writing was pretty easy to translate once I got what he was basically trying to say. And then, you know, once I translated... The first thing I translated was *The Power of the Powerless*, which is the most difficult text that I had to translate, where all these problems I'm talking about came up, then *Letters to Olga*, where the problems were with the way he was trying to decode, or encode, his meaning in a different kind of language, but then... And then the easiest book – it was like cream after a diet of something else – it's called 'The Long-Distance Interrogation' [*Dálkový výslech*] which we translated as *Disturbing the Peace*, which is his kind of Q & A autobiography. Because that was done with him speaking into a tape recorder, and then sending his answers to [Karel] Hvižďala who was then living in Germany. And I translated the same way; I translated it onto a tape recorder and it was very easy, because it was almost like Havel speaking.

And then, finally, the final stage was translating his speeches when he became president. And there again the problems were... I mean, it was clearly Havel writing essays to be spoken out loud. So there were problems having to do with how certain phrases would sound when Havel spoke them or when they were spoken by an interpreter, and whether they would communicate the way... It was like there was a different kind of rhetoric involved in that, and there were also political considerations, because the translations were vetted then by Havel's political team who wanted to make sure he didn't say anything that sounded really awkward diplomatically in English. And so there were several hands that went into those final translations and that was a different set of problems, but I really... And then I started translating his plays, and that's another whole story, so...

RJ: Okay, so there are so many ways we can go with this. I suppose... Well why is translating his plays a whole other story, to pick up on what you just said? Where is the disconnect? Is there a disconnect between his political writing and his plays? Are they of a piece and did you already have that language from his political writings that you could somehow use in the plays?

PW: No. The plays were a completely different set of problems on the one hand, for me. From the point of view of Havel as a writer, the plays are very much of a piece with all of his writing, in a very funny way. And I'll try and explain that. Havel's plays are... He always saw them as tragedies, even though they are very funny, and there is a lot of laughs, and he really kind of skewers how the system works in terms of the mental summersaults his characters have to go through in order to stay in tune with world around them. And so the way his plays work, and I'm looking at a play like, for example, *The Memo* (you know, *Vyrozmění*) which is the one he wrote – I would say his hit play from the 1960s period that is still being played all over the... I get a little, 100 bucks a year from Samuel French because universities are playing it now. And it's a

play that resonates among young people living now who have no idea what communism was, so it's a kind of a... But the point of the play is that the character Gross, who is the head of this strange institution in which they are introducing a new language that nobody can understand, eventually caves into the system and becomes part of it himself, even though he first resists it. So he starts off by resisting, and he ends up by conforming. And he conforms by going through mental summersaults in his mind that justify for him the reason why he is then, now, joining the regime or joining the new world, or whatever it is.

And if you look at his essays; his essays have a kind of dramatic structure, but they are the other way around. So, for example, *The Power of the Powerless*, which I would say is his most important essay, has characters in it. It has characters; the greengrocer, the greengrocer's customers, there was a brew-master in that essay. And they all begin, they start their dramatic arc if you'd like, by conforming. They put their sign in the window saying 'Workers of the world, unite!' And it is worth noting that he leaves off the whole quote. That's only half the quote, the other half is 'You have nothing to lose but your chains!' But that was never part of the communist slogan, because they don't want people to think about that aspect of it, right? So they start off that way and then he imagines that one day the greengrocer says 'Screw this!' And doesn't put the sign in his window, and starts speaking up at public meetings, and lets people know what he thinks, and loses his job, his children no longer go to school. He suffers all the consequences people did in those countries under that system. And it ends up on a very hopeful note, so it isn't tragic at all. There's a positive arc to the drama, if you like, that's built into those essays. But he's still thinking dramatically; he's still thinking about starting points and ending points. He's thinking about conflict, which is the essence of drama, and the question of identity which is also very central to his drama.

So this is one of the paradoxes of this guy, that as a playwright, he appears to be very pessimistic. There is no other way that his plays could end, because in the given circumstances, you can't imagine, it is really literally impossible to imagine somebody winning – an individual winning out – over that system, which was so huge and so automatic, right? Whereas in his essays he imagines a totally different solution which is that eventually all these different individual rebellions add up to a large collective rebellion which undermines the essence of the system which has to be unified. Everyone has to agree, and one dissident voice is enough to upset the whole system or rather to, you know... So that's the connection between his plays, or disconnect if you like, between his plays and his essays.

But in terms of translating: the problem for me in translating his plays was simply to make it playable, make it possible for actors to actually speak these lines. And the question then becomes, are these plays meant to be performed almost like... Are the characters not important as individuals, are they merely sort of carriers of ideas, or are they real people? And this is something that directors who are directing Havel have to deal with, because they don't... It's a choice they have to make; is this going to be a realistic play or some strange, avant-garde, weird thing? And I've seen some productions of *The Memo* that have both aspects, and I've seen productions in Prague of *Vyrozumění* where it is all mechanical, and where the characters don't matter. But when I was translating it, the dialogue had to sound real.

And so I would translate it, I would do a first draft, and then luckily, I was always able to find a theatre company that was willing to do a reading with me. So they would sit down around a table and they would read the script, and I would listen and whenever they had questions about 'What does this line mean? What is this actor's intention in this scene?' We tried to... I tried to clarify it

in the dialogue. So the process of translating his plays became, at a certain level, a collective process.

Chapter III: Dissident Havel – 00:28:20

RJ: Well, so I suppose to change tack a little bit, you mentioned right back at the beginning Charter 77, and again this being a sort of collaborative effort: it takes these sort of different worlds to come together, and these groups of people, to sound out ideas. Retrospectively, this is so often seen as quite synonymous with Václav Havel. Do you think it is almost an abuse to boil these collective ideas down to a few great names, and specifically the name of Václav Havel? What was his authorial role in these more collective texts, most famously Charter 77?

PW: Well, that's a good question. He would probably say that he was only one of many, and it's certainly true. There were many, many streams that came together in Charter 77. There were the old leftists and former Communists and Catholics and libertarians and people with no political axe to grind at all. And then there was the underground which was almost... Which was very apolitical, even though it was, it wasn't their intention, but they did become a political force. So I think that his role was one of a coordinator. I mean, I've heard people describe how he worked in those meetings, and his technique would be to listen to all the different points of view on a certain question, and then he had this ability to kind of summarize it in a way that everyone could agree with. And this is an ability – it's not a consensus-building operation the way you would if you were in politics and you were trying to decide on a course of action. You would have to get people to compromise, to give up some of their demands in order to fulfill the main demand. In politics, in party politics and governance politics if you like, the ability to create consensus is important. Havel wasn't a consensus-builder. He was someone who could formulate a point of view that everyone could agree with, which is not the same, because you're not talking about action, you are

talking about a position that you are taking. And I think that was... He would probably admit that he was pretty good at that.

But I'm just reading right now... A lot of new texts by Havel are coming out of the woodwork. And there's an interesting document, it is about 50 pages long (maybe a bit longer), a typewritten script that Zdeněk Urbánek's grandson found in Urbánek's literary remains, or whatever they are called in English ("pozustalky"). Anyway he wrote, this was a description of his very first intensive encounters with the secret police, with a lot of interrogation. He was called in for about a week almost every day to be interrogated and then he was finally charged with a crime and then locked up and spent four months in prison, where he had a lot of time to think. And he kept a diary, which was more or less sort of like an aide-memoire thing, which has been published, and this essay which has been published in facsimile form. And in that, he talks about the inevitability of Charter 77 in terms of 'This wasn't my idea, this was an idea whose time had come.' And he was clearly, I mean he was one of the three spokesmen, but he was also one of the instigators. But he never characterizes himself in this particular piece of writing as a main figure. He simply says 'People came to my house and we had a meeting and we thrashed out things and we...' And as one of the spokesmen he was constantly being interviewed. And so he was the voice of Charter 77 for a lot of the foreign media which is, you know, how his name got attached to it. But I think he saw it very much as a collective effort. But he was *primus inter pares* – the first among equals – in that group.

RJ: Okay, several times in the course of this interview so far you have mentioned his politics, in the sense that perhaps his grounding in the theatre helped him as president, and then also that he was very adept at cultural politics in the '60s, before he becomes a president. So do Havel's politics in the run-up to him assuming office mean that he was actually a particularly qualified and good

politician when he assumed office, or were some of these skills that you mentioned there (about him being able to formulate something that everyone can more or less agree on) not as helpful as they might have been? Given that we have been discussing throughout the interview that these are kind of amazing skills that this man had, were they actually helpful for the gritty work of politics, when it came down to it?

PW: I think they were helpful. Certainly in the kind of peak period when the Civic Forum was created just after November 17, when there was this encounter, you know, with the police and students. And then the ball began to roll, and the snowball got bigger and bigger, and a couple of days later Civic Forum was founded. And that was where all these skills kind of came together; both his dramatic skills, because he had a very good sense of timing, [and] his skills as a negotiator, because he led the negotiations with the Communist Party, or at least with [Ladislav] Adamec, who was then the kind of first secretary or the acting first secretary. And that was where his skills were incredibly useful.

To just give you one example: Havel developed a kind of political credo when he was dealing with *Tvář*, the magazine – this was back in the 1960s – when he was arguing with the politburo of the Writers' Union to save the magazine, to keep it publishing. And he said, you know, it didn't make any sense at all to talk to these people about broad issues. You don't talk about big things like the meaning of magazines and the world and so on, you talk about... You have one goal, which is to keep that magazine going, and that's what you focus on. You focus on the small, doable, thing that will make a huge difference in the long-run. And the communist negotiators liked nothing better than to bring in the Great Russian Revolution and to bring in all these large concepts, and to derail the argument by saying 'Well, you know, if you believe that this magazine should come out, then in fact this is an attack on the Soviet Union.' No. It's not. You focus on what you can do.

And so when he was negotiating with the Communist Party in '68, sorry, in '89, and there's this document called – what's it called? Ten days... Not "Ten Days that Shook the World," but something like that – it was published like a transcript of these negotiations, and when you read them, there is a certain dramatic arc to them, because it is all dialogue, the way his plays are. But at a certain point, he would negotiate about very particular things. For example, the turning point for me in that whole period, when no one knew how they were going to go, whether you know the Russians were going to come in, or whether or not the Communist Party were going to try to clamp down, or whether they would... Because the negotiations started with the Communist Party thinking 'We're in the driver's seat, and tell us what you want, maybe we can work out a compromise?' And by the time the negotiations were over, it was Civic Forum driving the negotiations and the Communist Party that was backing down and down and down until finally, they just collapsed. So... The Party didn't collapse, but the regime collapsed.

But the turning point for me was when they argued about taking two tiny articles out of the constitution, one of them saying that the leading ideology of the country was Marxism-Leninism, and the other one was that the Communist Party plays the leading role in the country. And once those two articles were removed from the constitution, the whole *raison d'être* of the regime, as it was, collapsed. And so arguing about that one particular thing was something – this is my theory anyway – that he learned back in the '60s, when he was negotiating in favor of this magazine.

RJ: Okay, well I suppose you reenter the frame – you reenter Czechoslovakia – in 1989; you had this sort of bottom-up experience of the Velvet Revolution. Were you in contact with Havel at that time, and what was that like personally?

PW: Okay. That was funny because here... I was expelled in 1977 and I spent a lot of my time trying to help the Plastic People and translating a lot of Czech stuff. And then in 1989 I was given

an assignment by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to do a series of documentaries with another friend of mine who was the sort of lead documentarist. And we were going to do – it was going to be called “The Gorbachev Revolution,” that was the title of, it was a seven-hour radio doc series. And I was to do three of those docs, one of them on Poland, one on Czechoslovakia, and one on Hungary. And so I went over there in October, late October of 1989, when things were falling apart, but it still wasn’t clear which way they were going. So, the Berlin Wall was still up, East Germans were leaking out through Prague and through the Hungarian border, like rats leaving a ship. And Poland had already had its first kind of semi-free election in June, and they had a parliament that had a majority of Solidarity members in it, and so it looked as if things were sort of heading in that direction. And Hungary was Hungary, I mean I have no idea how the Hungarians managed things, but they were also on the way. And Czechoslovakia was still sitting there, no changes, so it was, you know, frozen in time.

And so I went first of all to East Germany and did some interviews there, and was fascinated to find that the dissidents that I interviewed a few years before were now thinking of running for parliament. Then I went – I had a car and I drove to Wroclaw where there was a meeting of Czechs and Poles, this famous meeting, where young people were tearing their hair out saying... There was one particular moment in a church basement, we were watching a TV and there was this huge demonstration in Dresden and 30,000 people in the streets of Dresden – or not Dresden, but where else would it have been? It was another city in East Germany and not Berlin, and these Czech, young Czech women were crying, were weeping, and saying ‘Look at this! The East Germans are doing it and we’re not!’

And a lot of those people who went back to Prague with that sense of shame were very active in creating this kind of student movement that eventually started things moving in Czechoslovakia.

So I went from Wroclaw, then I went to Warsaw, and I went to Gdansk, and I was in Southern Poland on November 9, when the Wall came down. And I was supposed to interview the bishop of Opole, but he reneged on the... He said ‘The Wall’s just come down, I have other things to do!’ Fair enough! So, I got in my car and I drove as fast as I could back to Berlin. I got there, I mean I went via Warsaw where I did some more interviews, and I got to Berlin I think on the 15th, or 14th of November or something, just a few days after... And I went around the Wall and got a chunk of the Wall and then, you know, did an interview through a crack in the wall with an East German soldier and, you know, it was very exciting.

And then, I was staying with a Czech guy, Jiří Boreš, and he monitored Czech radio every night and he said ‘There’s a big demonstration in Prague on the 17th and things are rolling there.’ So I get in the car and I drive to the first border crossing I can find. And they said ‘Sorry, Mr. Wilson, we can’t let you in. You’re on the index, you’re *persona non grata*.’ And I tried at various points all around the border and nothing. They wouldn’t let me in. So I went to Hungary instead, did my interviews there, and then in Hungary I got a phone call from a friend of mine who said that they were letting people like [Jaroslav] Hutka or Karel Kryl back in the country. And I said ‘How are they doing it?’ And they said ‘They just show up at the airport and they don’t know what to do with them and so they let them in.’ So that’s what I did, I bought a plane ticket and flew to Prague. I let the Canadian Embassy in Hungary know that I was doing this and when I got to Prague, the Canadian ambassador was there at the airport, and he got me through customs, and he put me in his limousine with the Canadian flag on it and they drove me straight to Laterna Magika where the whole thing was being coordinated. And that’s where I met Havel again for the first time, in that kind of flurry of activity.

And in addition to doing this program I was also wrapping up my translation of *Disturbing the Peace*. And the publisher in New York, Knopf, wanted some more stuff in the book, because they said ‘Now this book is about to come out, Havel is a famous guy and there’s all kinds of things happening, so we want his comments on what’s going on.’ So I tried to get to talk to him, but he was in constant motion all the time. He was very visible but almost impossible to grab a hold of. And so Ivan Havel, his brother, said ‘I’ll try and help you,’ and he took me to the Theatre on the Balustrade, his old theatre where he was having a quick meeting. And it was just crowds of people around him all the time. At that point he had this voluntary bodyguard set up by John Bok who were, you know, keeping the crowds away. And I barely managed to grab him there, but somebody whisked him off and it was just really hard.

So finally, I think it was [his wife] Olga who took pity on me and said ‘Look, why don’t you come over to our place and we’ll have breakfast.’ And this was well into the... This was probably mid-to late-December; I spent a lot of time in Prague and I traveled a lot around the countryside doing stuff. And I had a very good sense of what was happening. But I still had this one mission, to kind of get a hold of Havel and say ‘Can you add something to your book?’ So I went to his place, and he got whisked away again. And Olga felt sorry for me, so she said ‘Well, you can interview me.’ And I interviewed her, but I interviewed her about her. She said ‘Don’t you want to talk about Vašek?’ And I said, ‘No! I want to talk about you! Because I mean you are a very important figure in this whole thing! You’ve kept the home fires burning when he was in jail, and you were very active in Videojournal’ (the sort of underground thing that they started up in the late-1980s). And so we had this great interview and then she said ‘Why don’t you come back tomorrow for breakfast and for sure he has to have breakfast, so you can have breakfast with him?’

So I came back the next day and we sat down. And I asked him the question that the publisher wanted me to ask him which was ‘Can you add something to the book?’ And he said ‘No, I’m not going to.’ End of story. He said ‘Look, this is like the...’ There’s a Czech fairytale about the pot that keeps producing porridge, as long as it is on the stove, there is this great mountain of porridge that keeps pouring out, and he said ‘This book would be like that, because there’s so much going on now that there’s no end to it.’ So the book is done; it is finished, leave it that way. And so we had this very interesting conversation about what was going on, and then the interview was interrupted by a phone call from Alexander Dubček, who was angling to become a candidate for president and nobody wanted that. And so Havel went to answer the phone, and that was the end of that. And that was the last time I saw him.

But there was one moment that I remember, because actually it was a very gracious moment for me, when there was a meeting of the Civic Forum coordinating committee down in the bowels of Laterna Magika, and they broke out the champagne because it was clear that the regime was going to collapse and that they were faced with a whole new set of problems. And so Havel gave a toast to all the people who had contributed, and he named me in this toast as like a special thanks, and I was absolutely gobsmacked by that, because there is no reason why he should have done that! But that indicated to me that he was a very gracious guy; he was very kind of generous. And a lot of that generosity got lost when he – or at least it got lost from sight – when he became president, because a lot of his old friends felt that they had been frozen out, because he was just too busy, and he had taken on a whole new set of responsibilities as president. But that’s a whole other chapter of his life. And one in which, I think the jury is still out about whether or not it was a good idea for him. Maybe not to become president in that first period, but to have stayed on for so long. Because I think towards the end, and I think you get this from Žantovský’s book as well, towards

the end of his presidency, he was pretty tired, pretty sick, and pretty discouraged by a lot of what was going on, and wasn't as effective as he had been at the beginning.

Because at the beginning, I don't know – it is really hard for me to tell how well known he was inside of Czechoslovakia. I mean we knew that he was... Everyone in the diplomatic world knew that he was, already knew that he was... Like when I was in Warsaw just after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, I talked to a Canadian diplomat who said 'Within two years, Havel's going to be president!' Alright? How he knew that I had no idea. But I also know that the Canadian professor Gordon Skilling with whom I collaborated on a lot of translations of Charter 77 documents was summoned in 1988 to Washington where there was a meeting of CIA analysts. And so he was on a panel, and the audience was full of these CIA analysts who would ask him questions about Havel and would say 'What's he like? Is he presidential material? Can you trust him?' All kinds of personal questions – so the CIA was obviously already thinking about the possibility of what was going to happen, not just in Czechoslovakia but in the whole of Eastern Europe. Because I think it was pretty clear by then that things were falling apart. I mean, Gorbachev and Reagan had this nice, kind of friendly relationship. And Gorbachev was clearly not interested in continuing in the same way. Gorbachev was... There was this joke going around Prague 'What's the difference between Gorbachev and Dubček?' And the answer is... What is the answer? The answer is 'There's no difference, except Gorbachev doesn't know it yet.' Meaning that Gorbachev's Dubček moment is going to come, and they're going to come down and get rid of him, right? That he was playing with fire by loosening up the system, which is what happened to Dubček.

But there were all kinds of people who had their eye on Havel as a possible leader. And probably the person who was most skeptical about that was Havel himself because... I mean, even when I was talking with Olga; this was a few days before the decision had been made, or before he had

accepted the mandate from Civic Forum for him to run, she said ‘I don’t want him to be president – I think this is a really bad idea.’ And she kept saying ‘Maybe [Jaroslav] Šabata would make a good president?’ She kept pulling names out of the hat saying ‘Anybody but Vašek!’ You know... Because I think she recognized that there was a certain danger in him moving from the position of being a writer/dissident to being someone actually involved in the political system.

Chapter IV: Political Beliefs – 50:50

RJ: On the topic of his politics, is it too simple to call Havel an anticommunist? What was his relationship with communism? Was communism the problem, and is he a cold warrior in the traditional sense? And then how can we think about his relationship to communism circa 1989, and then 1990?

PW: This is a really complicated question, especially now that anticommunism is called into question. I mean, people like Adam Michnik who was a former member of the Communist Party, a very close friend of Havel’s, you know, says ‘I’m not an anticommunist, I’m an anti-totalitarian person,’ right? And anticommunism sometimes seems very, almost like a kind of religious fundamentalism. It has the same kind of qualities to it.

But Havel’s... I mean, *The Power of the Powerless* is such a great essay because he puts his finger on the problem, which is that under communism, under the style of totalitarianism that existed in Eastern Europe at that time, everybody was implicated in keeping the regime going. I mean the film by [Jan] Hřebejk *The Teacher* shows exactly that happening – it shows you exactly the dynamics of [how] even people who are clearly hurt by the regime end up supporting it by their silence or somehow by this sort of silent collaboration. And so he said that the problem of getting rid of this is not like... You can’t put a barricade in the middle of the street and say ‘We’re on this side and they’re on that side,’ because the lines go right through your own head.

There are people who... In fact, in my experience the majority of people I met hated the regime, but didn't know what to do about it. And so he realized that if you are going to heal the country, you can't condemn one political party. You have to actually persuade people that they are all kind of responsible for what happened at different levels. I mean obviously there's a criminal responsibility level, and hopefully those people will get put on trial. But then everybody somehow shares a little bit of the guilt, and people didn't like that idea. It was a very unpopular idea, even among friends of mine you know, who said that 'The Velvet Revolution was velvet towards the wrong people – there should have been a little bit more of the iron first,' you know? And so those are people who would normally be on Havel's side but are critical of his so-called "softness" on communism. And I think that was one of the liabilities, because it allowed [Václav] Klaus to come out as a strong anticommunist but, in fact, his techniques and his methods of governing had a lot more in common with communism than they did with democracy. So it's a very complicated problem. And I think that Havel for the best of reasons sort of erred on the side of justice, if you like. But it was not necessarily a good political move.

RJ: Do you think there are lessons from the Velvet Revolution that are transferrable to other parts of the world or that have been transferred since to other parts of the world successfully?

PW: I don't know. Because I know that one of the fondest wishes of people like Havel and certainly, I know Martin Palouš is doing a great deal in terms of his connections with Cuba, which had very strong connections with Czechoslovakia during the communist period... And there are lessons to be learned, but I'm not sure whether they can be transferred in a classroom. I mean Cuba is very similar to Czechoslovakia in the structural sense, in the way it was governed and so on, but it's also a very different place, the character of the people is different, and so on. The history of the country is different, its relationship with the United States is very different, and so when things

do change there, as they are now, they are not going to change in the way they changed in Eastern Europe. It's going to be a different scenario.

But I think, you know, you can't sort of teach flying blind, or winging it, and in every one of these transitions there is an element of spontaneity that is really hard to predict and therefore hard to control, and therefore hard to advise people about. So these efforts that the Czechs have made to kind of prepare the Cubans for whatever happens (you know, we used to say 'When Castro died,' but he's dead, and things are still inching along) is partly wishful thinking. Well-intended, certainly.

But it's something that Havel had always thought, and in his first address to Congress he said, you know, 'Don't dismiss the experience we have had of totalitarian regimes, because we may have something to... You know, our experience of the world is very different from yours, but we may have something to teach you.' And for many, many years, I thought this was just wishful thinking too, but now I'm looking at what's happening in the United States, and I'm looking at Havel and looking at Eastern Europe and looking at the history of Czechoslovakia and thinking 'Okay, so Czechoslovakia had the experience of – they had a democracy for 20 years. And they had fascism for six years, and then they had an interim for three years, and they had 40 years of communism.' And that's a lot of experience to have. But the thing that we are looking at now in the West, I'm not just saying in the United States, is that there is a danger of losing democracy. And the Czechs lost democracy twice. And it's that experience of losing and analyzing how that happened that is something that I think makes the Czech experience worth looking at. Because it is easier than you think just to suddenly wake up one morning and you're not a democracy anymore. But there's not a lot of thinking going on that way.

A lot of the academic work on Czechoslovakia now has to do with something that I find quite disturbing, actually, which is kind of normalizing totalitarianism. Thinking that, there are studies to show – trying to show that normal life went on even under communism, which is true. But it completely leaves out the kind of mental aspect of it, and that's why a film like *The Teacher* is such a great film, because it shows that the system affected everybody. Everybody. There's no escaping from it. And people who say 'Yeah, our lives were pretty normal, you know, we married, we argued, we got sick, we had children, we died, just like anywhere else in the world,' which is true, but it leaves out that whole component of sort of total control that the regime tried to effect on people's lives, and the impact that that had on how people felt about life. But these academics – a lot of academics – don't see that. They look at oral histories, and the oral histories leave an awful lot of that stuff out. People say 'Yeah, life was fine! We had enough to eat, we had refrigerators, we had hot water, we had central heating, all that stuff.' But that leaves out the atmosphere of it. And the atmosphere was pretty bad. Except among the people who resisted, and then it was pretty good! Because you get a lot of nostalgia coming from the former dissident crowd because they had a good time. I mean, it was an awful time, but at least they had the human solidarity that was lacking in a lot of other societies where people were pretty isolated and unhappy in a way that they couldn't even articulate.

RJ: Okay – penultimate question: to flip what I just asked you before, there's a political scientist Barbara Falk who has talked about the way that *The Power of the Powerless* has subsequently been taken by Tea Party groups to be read as an anti-government tract. We've discussed the applicability of Havel's ideas. Are there some ways in which his ideas are not universal, actually, or that is a bad understanding of what Havel is trying to say? Where is the line when it comes to taking Havel's ideas as universal and applicable in every situation? Are there times we just shouldn't try?

PW: Oh my god, that's a really good question, and I don't know where to start with that! First of all, can you tell me what the Tea Party took from...

RJ: That it's an anti-government treatise, and an anti big-government treatise...

PW: Okay, well, but it's anti a particular form of government. I mean, to me, that would be a complete misreading of the text, because he's not talking about democracies. What he does say in it, and this is something that a lot of people lose sight of because it is late in the essay and it's a long essay, they might never get to it, where he does call parliamentary democracy into doubt, because he says that 'Governments can't save us, without there first being some sort of existential revolution within each individual.' And that's where I would kind of disagree with him, because in any kind of democracy which I would define, where there's a free, uncorrupted, vote – an un-interfered with vote – you know it produces, democracy is always imperfect...

It wasn't a tract against government. It was a tract against political politics, yes it was – we discussed that – where he doesn't believe, he didn't believe in party politics and he believes in anti-political politics or sort of non-political politics. But to use that as an anti-government tract is just a misuse of it. I don't know, the only other way is to try and have a debate with them and point it out. But there are ways in which I suppose any good ideas can be misused, especially by populists. But I was once approached by a Canadian politician who was trying to start a new political party. It was a grassroots party and he invited me to breakfast, and he sort of picked my brains about Havel, and he was very taken by Havel's ideas. And this is a guy – he would be classified as right-wing, but not a fanatic – and what he got from Havel's writings was the idea that politics starts with individuals and with groups, and that it is something that you build on. But his idea was to use that power to build a political movement that would, and it almost did, take

over for a while, I mean, it became a very powerful movement until it morphed into something else, as things happen in politics.

So, his ideas appeal to a wide spectrum of people, there's no question about it. But if you take him as a whole... I mean the whole idea of human rights, the importance of human rights, is something that can be obviously misused as well, because you can say that 'This country is abusing its people, therefore we should invade.' You know? And there is an area of Havel's thinking where you bring the idea of human rights as an oppositional thing, as a power to help focus an oppositional movement inside a totalitarian country – it's a very powerful set of ideas. But if you use it as an instrument of diplomacy, it can become quite dangerous. And I think a lot of what happened in the Middle East happened as a result of what happened in Yugoslavia when the rationale for bombing Serbia was an abuse of human rights in Kosovo. And it seemed to work. And so, if it worked there, then why can't it work in Iraq? You know? Why can't it work in Tunisia? In Syria, right? And so I think a lot of mistakes were made by following a logic that had kind of run its time out, you know, run the clock down.

And so yeah, I think there's definitely a way in which his ideas can be abused, but then you open up the Washington Post yesterday, and you find an article which excoriates Trump for a speech that he made, and then using Havel as an antidote to that. And what he is appealing to there is Havel's appeal to civility, which is something that democracy cannot do without. You have to be able to be civil to your opponents. You have to be able to disagree with people on a rational basis and not hate them as individuals, but maybe hate their ideas. And that is an idea, I'm discovering, that people are still struggling with in the former Soviet bloc, where there was so much either-or politics. It is very difficult to understand how you can actually disagree with someone and so, for example, I was in Prague this last week. And I got some kind of an award, I don't even want to

mention it, from a magazine. And one of the things that they said in this kind of citation was that I had been able to write articles about Havel in which I was critical of him at the same time as I praised his ideas. And they found this bizarre – or not bizarre, but a little hard to find. And afterwards when I was talking to them they said ‘Well, how do you do this?’ And I said ‘It’s very simple! You can just disagree with a person’s ideas, and still kind of respect them as human beings.’ And Havel was such a... There was so much to him! He’s not a simple guy. But even Havel himself had trouble with that.

And I’ll tell you one final anecdote, which was when I was asked by the Canadian governor general in the mid-‘90s who was going on a state visit to Prague... He invited me up to Ottawa to talk to him, because he was very nervous about meeting Havel. Havel was a world-class intellectual, and Havel had just lost Olga, and so he was grieving, and he’d read his books and thought that he must be a very sophisticated guy and he was very... The governor general was a former journalist, member of parliament, Francophone guy from New Brunswick. And so I reassured him that Havel is very... ‘You’re going to find it easy to get along with him, he’s not a snob, he’s not going to make you feel small,’ you know? So, the upshot of that visit was that he invited me to come along on the state visit as his “cultural advisor.” So that was very funny.

So we went to Prague. I flew on a big government plane, first and last time in my life. And the kind of cherry on the cake was a private meeting between Havel and his translator Saša (whose last name I forget) and the governor general, his wife, and me. And one of the questions that Havel asked the governor general was, he said ‘You’re Francophone.’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Which side of the debate were you on?’ Because the country almost broke up in 1995, it was a very, very close vote – Canada almost broke up, I should say. And he said ‘Well of course I’m a federalist.’ And then Havel said ‘How do you get along with the people that are not federalists? These are people that

you deal with as governor general, but how do you deal with the people who disagree with you?" And the governor general was sort of taken aback. And he said 'I'm not quite sure what you mean. This is part of politics. You know? You disagree with people, you have debates, you have arguments. But we're all in the same game. We all have to be elected. We all have to go before the public and say "vote for me or don't vote for me." We're sitting in parliament where there is a decorum of debate. And it's just part of the... Disagreement is just part of the business!' And I could tell that Havel was kind of... He wasn't baffled by it, I mean, obviously he'd written this essay "On the Theme of an Opposition." He understood very well how that worked. But he was still kind of... It was almost as if he was saying 'Oh my god! I wish I could transfer this attitude to this country! Because this is what we need! We need more civility, and more ability to argue in a civil way, and not hate each other's guts because we disagree.'

RJ: Alright – final question: what do you think is Václav Havel's legacy? What is his most important legacy in North America today, or the Czech Republic?

PW: Well, I think that the writer for the Washington Post kind of nailed it; the idea of morality and civility in politics is still an important thing. What makes democracy work is not the structure of it (although it helps), but it's a very easy system to pervert, as many people are finding. And so what makes it work is the attitude that the people who are involved in it bring to it, which is, you know, you have to be civil to each other, and you can't behave as though politics were a way to get rich. You know, it's a way to serve the country. So it's a service of others. And that example really shines through in all his writings and, in a negative way, it kind of shines through in his plays, because his plays are all about the failure of civility and the failure of intelligence and the failure of courage. And so I think that is his legacy, that as long as his writings are around, as long as his plays are performed... And I am hoping that his plays will take on a new life, because they

do in a funny way convey the same message as his essays do – and that he'll be remembered as someone who never let people forget that about democracy.

RJ: Alright, thank you very much!

PW: You're welcome!