

## GROWING UP AND GROWING DOWN

BY NIGHTFALL, THE CROWDS GATHERED. In the central squares of the city, the mourners lit votive candles, whose small flames seemed like fragile witnesses under the darkened sky. Václav Havel, the conscience of the republic, had died that morning, December 18, 2011, two months after his seventy-fifth birthday. Many of the mourners stood at the foot of the statue of St. Wenceslas, the good king of ancient Bohemia, the *rex justus*, who was remembered by all as a medieval philosopher king.<sup>1</sup> There in front of St. Wenceslas, the crowd laid down wreaths and candles and placards painted with large red hearts. Many wept.

In the dark years, Havel had come to the statue of St. Wenceslas many times. As a dissident, he had laid many a wreath here and ended many a demonstration, usually paying homage to one of the martyrs of communism. He had been here at the time of magic, in 1989, when a half million people came to Wenceslas Square to demand an end to “communism.”<sup>2</sup> And to hear Havel call for a free Czechoslovakia, for democratic elections, and for a return to Europe. The crowd of five hundred thousand demonstrators roared when Havel spoke.

“Havel to the castle,” they chanted—which meant Havel for president. And sure enough, a few weeks later the thugs and dictators were chased from their positions of power, and Havel (dissident, ex-con, playwright) became a most unusual president. He was sometimes misunderstood and not always popular, but by the time of his death everyone understood he had already passed into legend.

Havel was full of enigmas. To one faction, he appeared childlike and innocent, even angelic; to another, shrewd, worldly, and calculating. At times, he appeared dry and pedantic, hopelessly rational. And yet even when reciting the long lists of dry facts that became a hallmark of his personal communication, his bent was always toward the unseen and unsaid, toward some dear principle or humanistic idea that he was willing to defend at all costs. He was, in short, an idealist, perhaps even a romantic, but he was an idealist embarrassed by his own idealism, as if this side of himself were best kept under wraps, like a dark mole one keeps hidden under a buttoned shirt.

References to light and to hearts were everywhere the week of Havel’s death. Madeleine Albright, the former American secretary of state, told a crowd in Prague that Havel had been one of the true heroes of the twentieth century, a man who “injected light in places of deepest darkness.” Nor was this simply a metaphor used by diplomats. In the funeral procession, as thousands followed a horse-drawn carriage that bore his corpse to Prague Castle, a simple midwife from Kladno, tears welling in her eyes, cried out that a great light had fallen from the sky.<sup>3</sup>

Those who had known Havel, or who had followed his private heroics or public turmoil through the strange and transformative decades of communism, could not help but wonder how Havel himself would have felt about the lavish state funeral and the requiem from Antonín Dvořák. In life, Havel was uncomfortable with praise, deeply so. And he had long preferred smoky bars and bouts of all-night drinking to official events. His humor was sardonic, dark. He often preferred to see the world from its underside, or through the broken mirror of what he called the absurd. As president, he was known for giving confessionals, for speaking about his metaphysical sense of

guilt, his sense that others would be better in his place, or, as he put it in a speech he gave in Israel, that “the higher I am, the stronger my suspicion that there has been some mistake.”<sup>4</sup> Many believed the funeral would have embarrassed him, or that he would have felt out of place or ambivalent about becoming the embodiment of official culture. As a child, he had longed for recognition, longed to be esteemed among the great, but the fantasy was at odds with suspicions of his own absurdity, the suspicion of his shortcomings and failings, the inner sense that he was somehow inferior and ridiculous.

As for music, some suspected he would have preferred rock 'n' roll to Dvořák, something along the lines of the Velvet Underground or the Rolling Stones. Havel loved the Velvet Underground. As far as Havel was concerned, Lou Reed sang like a prophet, his lyrics reveling in the nihilism of modern life. Reed's dark music had become something of an anthem for those who struggled against communism. When Havel coined the term “Velvet Revolution” to describe the political crisis of 1989, it was partly in tribute to Lou Reed's band. After the revolution, he asked Reed to join him while visiting the American White House, something of an embarrassment for President Bill Clinton, whose sex scandal was uncomfortably close to the illicit sex at the heart of much of Reed's music. Later, Havel insisted on making Reed a cultural ambassador. After giving Reed a personal tour of Prague, he presented him with a book of lyrics from the Velvet Underground that had circulated among dissidents. “If the police caught you with that, you went to jail,” he told Reed, as if that explained how passionately dissidents clung to the music.<sup>5</sup>

I saw Havel only once. On a late summer's day toward the end of his life, I found myself standing in the backyard of his country house, at a spot where his garden disappears into a few scattered plum trees owned by his neighbor, an irascible man named Andrej Krob. Havel and Krob were hosting their annual “garden party,” a tradition they began in the 1970s to stage music and plays that had been banned. Suffering from ill health, Havel walked about the party with great difficulty. Here and there he stopped to visit old friends, sharing chit-chat and snorts of *slivovice*, or homemade plum brandy, that he lugged

about him in a heavy jug. Havel had lived long enough to achieve the recognition he craved as a child, but at the garden party he was painfully reticent. When he spoke, he seemed to mumble, looking down at his shoes with an occasional wry smile, as if he was uncomfortable with being at the center of attention, even while simultaneously enjoying it.

Any attempt to recount the life of Havel faces the same problem as attempting to balance a drop of mercury in the palm of a hand. As a subject, Havel refuses to remain still. Not only was he a man of many talents (poet, playwright, essayist, amateur philosopher, dissident, politician), but he remained in constant movement, leaping continuously between the contradictions of his personality. He possessed a profound need for order but pioneered a new movement in Czech theater that turned order upside down. He was a painfully courteous gentleman who despised disagreements, yet most of his life he found himself in conflict with the state. He inspired the nation through the power of language, but he spoke in a mumbling lisp, often doggedly plowing through hard facts.

At the heart of many of his contradictions was this oddity: He was a world-renowned playwright who hated to write. He often wrote with the help of pills and all-night bouts of wild energy, and he spent months, sometimes years, avoiding his plays as if they were infected by a dangerous virus. Writing was a way of ordering the world, of using his highly rational mind to impose meaning on the aching chaos around him, the senselessness, the brutality, the random absurdity of existence. And yet the medium he was drawn to—the only kind of theater he found he could appreciate—was the odd and relatively obscure branch of drama known as the theater of the absurd, a theater that fought to reveal the random, the senselessness of existence. He was a man of epic ambitions, a man with a deep need to put his stamp on the world, to impose on it some order of his own creation, and yet he was also suspicious of his ambition, suspicious of authority and control, suspicious of not just the twentieth century but the entire direction of the modern world—suspicious of our understandings of power, of the rational scientific attitude that had conquered the

natural world and alienated us from it, of the industrialized mind that had mechanized the world and turned us into machines.

When Havel wrote, either his essays or his plays, it was almost always to express these themes. His plays were partly an act of exorcism, and the act of writing tormented him. His friends suspected that he became a dissident, and later a president, as a way to avoid finishing his plays.

For much of his life, Havel saw himself as an outsider, even an outcast. He was, of course. He was also the ultimate insider.

Born on October 5, 1936, in a posh, private hospital on Londýnská Street, Havel entered a world of privilege and luxury. As the first-born son of one of the most prominent and wealthy families in Prague, he was the constant subject of attention, what one writer has called “a pampered bourgeois child attended by a governess, relatives, [and] friends.”<sup>6</sup> His paternal grandfather was one of the most important builders in Prague, while his mother’s father had been ambassador to various countries. His own father was a well-to-do businessman, his uncle a film mogul, the most successful film executive in Central Europe.

Despite living in the lap of luxury, Havel always spoke of growing up on the “outside.” He didn’t mean that he had grown up outside high society, or its expectations, but the opposite: He had grown up *inside* the highest of social circles, which left him outside the life of everyone else.<sup>7</sup> He felt excluded from those beneath him, the world of servants and gardeners and working-class Prague: the world of the common man. For much of his life, he was haunted by this alienation, longing for the ranks of the common man, the person of the street. Their world—the world of physical work and simple pleasures—represented a kind of lost paradise, an earthy, lower-class world that was always just beyond his grasp.

While those around him reveled in the family success, Havel found his childhood oppressive. Perhaps he simply felt that he had not yet done anything to make himself worthy of the praise he received. He once commented on home movies that showed him paraded before

a devoted family, a seemingly well-loved child who carried about him a secret sense of suffocation. “In those films,” he said, “I am a small baby who is constantly the subject of everyone’s attention, a pampered bourgeois child attended by governesses, relatives, friends, even the Mayor of Prague himself.” The incessant attention, he said, left him with a deep sense of loneliness, a sense that the adoration he received was somehow misplaced. Such personal ambivalence seems common enough among Czechs, but for Havel the feelings of inferiority left him feeling “petrified and astonished,” even overwhelmed by a personal sense of absurdity, as if he possessed “a fear of the world.”<sup>8</sup>

Havel’s earliest years were spent at 2000 Palacký Embankment, an elegant Art Nouveau, five-story building on the quay of the Vltava River near the heart of Prague. The Havel family occupied the third floor. In the middle of the penthouse stood an enormous central room with a chandelier and a large bay window that gave a panoramic view of the river and the old neighborhoods of Smíchov, Petřín, and Hradčany. To one side of the great room was a salon, and on the other side was the parental bedroom, which connected to a winter garden. Tucked away were other bedrooms and living quarters for a servant. The house had been built by Havel’s paternal grandfather. The grandfather had been a stern, hardworking architect who made his first fortune paving the town square; his second fortune came from building the Lucerna Palace, an Art Nouveau masterpiece and perhaps the best-known private building in Prague, home to some of the city’s most elegant shops and restaurants.<sup>9</sup>

Havel’s father and uncle were the first generation of the family to grow up in exclusive circumstances. At the Lucerna Palace, the family-owned theater began showing the first moving pictures in the country in 1909. Business and entertainment went hand in glove, providing the children with a powerful connection to elite families in politics, art, and business.<sup>10</sup> Through the Lucerna, Havel’s father would come to know Tomáš G. Masaryk (the first president of Czechoslovakia), Karel Čapek (the most important literary personality of the First Republic), and a wide circle of actors, artists, and government leaders.

By 1936, when the future playwright and president was born, the clan had become what Havel later called a “grand-bourgeois family.”<sup>11</sup> The phrase suggests a family ethos. Grand-bourgeois refers not just to social status but to a certain style, a way of seeing the world, even to a series of understandings about the obligations of wealth. For Havel’s father and grandfather, business was a complex social affair that was about much more than money. Success was measured by enterprise and by how well one lived up to responsibility.<sup>12</sup>

By the 1930s, however, the family’s situation had become precarious. Havel’s father and uncle were more influential than ever, but the Great Depression had forced them to borrow vast sums of money to keep their businesses afloat.<sup>13</sup> Havel’s father still owned such establishments as the Barrandov Terraces (an enormous hillside restaurant with panoramic views of Prague), the Trilobite Bar (where an inner circle of guests could meet at night), and a pub at the Lucerna Palace. He also built a modern swimming stadium that held three thousand spectators. The stadium accumulated substantial debts, as did a garden city he built in the hills south of Prague, which was modeled after a neighborhood in San Francisco.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, Uncle Miloš expanded the Barrandov Film Studio at a time when people could no longer afford to go to the movies.

Perhaps the family fortune would have survived the Great Depression, but the coming war changed everything. In 1938 Adolf Hitler annexed the borderlands of Czechoslovakia, known as the Sudetenland. Hoping to avoid a worldwide conflict, France and Great Britain agreed to Hitler’s expansion, signing a treaty known in Czechoslovakia as the Munich Betrayal. Rather than fight a war alone, the Czech government allowed Hitler to occupy the Sudetenland. A few months later, in March 1939, Hitler marched his armies across the rest of the nation, giving Germany control over one of the most advanced industrial economies of Europe.<sup>15</sup> Havel was three years old.

According to some, the conquest of Czechoslovakia gave Hitler the industrial backing to prepare for a world war. It also brought about thousands of arrests, especially among intellectuals and Jews. Most Czechs, however, learned to hide their patriotism and any hatred they

felt toward Germany.<sup>16</sup> Havel's uncle adjusted to the war by continuing to manage his film empire under German bureaucrats, as well as taking over management of the family restaurants, which became hangouts for senior officers in the German army. At the insistence of Havel's mother, the family moved out of Prague to their secluded family estate, near the village of Žďárec. The estate was known as Havlov (or Havel's Place), and it seemed to provide some distance from the dangers of wartime Prague.

At Havlov, the family lived in a vine-covered mountain lodge with ten guest rooms, tennis courts, and a swimming pool. A one-lane road led through the woods to a small village, where Havel and his brother, Ivan, attended the three-room schoolhouse.<sup>17</sup> On the surface, life could still seem carefree. A chauffeur, a maid, and two families of caretakers kept life comfortable. Guests arrived from Prague, including writers, actors, and the future Wimbledon champion, Jaroslav Drobný, who knocked around the tennis court with a young Václav Havel.

In such a secluded refuge, it was almost possible to forget that the family had lost their country, becoming (like all Czechs) foreigners in their own land.

Steeped in the humanism of Old Europe, Havel's father appears to have been a kind man who saw himself as a faithful caretaker of the family tradition. On his desk he kept a paperweight that he had inscribed with the phrase "tolerance and love." The paperweight described the father well enough. Business was a civic activity, requiring a keen intellect, but business hardly defined his life. Václav M. Havel (for three generations, the male children all shared the same first name) reveled in all manner of interests, including what he called the "high culture of freemasonry."<sup>18</sup> His library was full of books on literature, history, and philosophy. He was also attracted to spiritualism, an area of interest he inherited from his own father, who had once taken an active role in séances.

The young Havel and his father seemed to share a genuine fondness for each other, although the relationship was occasional-



ly strained by issues of class, wealth, and status. When Havel later described his father as “a wonderful kind man, despite being a capitalist and a bourgeois,”<sup>19</sup> he was acknowledging how capitalists were perceived by others: men centered on their own, selfish interest, oblivious of the needs of others. Havel’s father was no such man, but he was (like most fathers of Central Europe in that era) somewhat aloof and distant. He welcomed all sorts of discussions about history and ideas, but he rarely, if ever, discussed his private life or feelings. Such topics weren’t exactly forbidden, but they weren’t acceptable, either.<sup>20</sup>

Thanks to the rich foods at Havlov, the young Havel was a plump, clumsy child. He had difficulty, he later said, “jumping across a creek or turning a summersault.” This, along with his social status, left him estranged from children in the village. Those at the village school naturally resented his privileged life. They took their revenge in all manner of ways, excluding him from games and activities or taunting him with verbal abuse. By Havel’s own account, he felt ridiculed and mistrusted. Even more, the world around him seemed a problematic place.<sup>21</sup>

Books were one refuge. Havel read prodigiously from his father’s library, poring over philosophy and Czech history. By the time he was five, he had read the entire Bible. By the time he was ten, he had read the Czech histories of František Palacký; the work of Ferdinand Peroutka, a legendary Prague journalist; as well as most of J. L. Fischer, an anti-Marxist philosopher. He not only read these books but talked to many of the authors when they came to visit his father.

Of the books Havel read in his father’s library, two authors were of particular importance to the young boy: Walt Whitman, the American poet, and Josef Šafařík, a Moravian philosopher. For Šafařík, the modern, scientific outlook, with its emphasis on objective reasoning, revealed a dangerous tendency to distance ourselves from the natural world, thus “jeopardizing the foundations of existence.”<sup>22</sup> Whether the ideas of Šafařík resonated with his own alienation, or whether Havel projected those ideas back into his childhood after reading Šafařík’s work, the essays proved foundational. Havel would become

linked with many philosophers over the years, but it was Šafařík who influenced him the most.<sup>23</sup> Šafařík's work explained Havel's own personal sense of alienation, the way in which his childhood seemed absurd. Alienation was an essential part of the modern condition, Šafařík suggested, and alienation was related to the way we had fallen out of grace with the natural world.

Later, as an adult, Havel would go on to explore the works of Martin Heidegger and Jan Patočka (the Czech Socrates). Heidegger and Patočka wrote a great deal about what had been lost in modernity—about the ways in which the Western tradition has alienated us from Being. Havel got the ideas first, however, from reading Šafařík and Whitman. Havel's own experience had convinced him, as he later put it, that we all inhabit a difficult existential situation: Like a newborn child, we live in a state of separation. It was as if birth itself were a metaphor for the way in which each individual intuited a larger Being that we can only dimly perceive. Having “fallen out of Being,” we therefore always reach out toward it, longing for a more complete experience, a sense of our secret and mysterious relation to the cosmos.<sup>24</sup>

By the end of the war, even Havlov wasn't safe. In the spring of 1945, German troops took up a position in Žďárec, the village beneath the Havel mansion. Both the Germans and the village were bombed by allied planes. In a short essay written for school in the last few days of the war, the young Havel reported on scenes of destruction. On the morning of May 9, “Žďárec was bombed because German troops who had not surrendered were still there. After the air raid many residents of Žďárec came to our house to seek shelter. In the afternoon, we experienced a stampede of German troops near us and shooting at them. They left behind a lot of ammunition, wagons, cannon, horses” after fleeing west. Some of the artillery shells landed in the fields next to the house. Havel wrote, “We children were afraid (and I think the grown-ups were as well). At that moment I wanted to be in Australia and little Ivan [Havel's younger brother] poo-ed himself.”<sup>25</sup>

For Czechs, the war seemed to rip open the cultural fabric, revealing a variety of terrors. The nation had been betrayed, and had

been unable (or unwilling) to stand up to the German army. Even at a young age, Havel understood that the order for the Czech army not to resist the German invasion had been an act of compassion, an attempt on the part of national leaders to avoid a slaughter.<sup>26</sup> And yet many Czechs, especially the young, had been deeply shamed, even traumatized, by the refusal to fight, leading to a generational crisis that was later chronicled by Havel's literary friend and publisher, Josef Škvorecký, in his postwar novel, *The Cowards*.

On May 5, 1945, the Red Army broke through the German defenses in Dresden, crossing the Ore Mountains into Czechoslovakia. At the same time, the American Ninth Army advanced to Plzeň, just sixty miles from Prague. In the capital, Czech citizens stormed the radio station and Gestapo headquarters. After pleas for help were broadcast over the radio station, more than a thousand barricades were erected in the streets of Prague. Uncle Miloš joined the barricades on the morning of May 6, as the German army began a bloody, street-to-street fight to regain the city.<sup>27</sup> Two days later the German High Command announced their unconditional surrender, ending the war in Europe.

Like all of the Havels, Uncle Miloš had been a lifelong patriot. Joining the barricades was an act of physical courage, but it was also a shrewd attempt to prove he was no Nazi sympathizer, a charge that emerged because of his close work with Germans during the war. Trying to save his company, which had produced up to eighty feature films a year during the 1930s, he had negotiated to continue making Czech movies in exchange for filming Nazi propaganda. The Germans tolerated the compromise since all revenue from his company went into the Reich budget, helping the war effort.<sup>28</sup>

Miloš later said that negotiating with German bureaucrats took nerves of steel, since the Nazis could throw him into a concentration camp at any time. After the war, Miloš argued he had remained in his position to protect hundreds of individuals who worked for him. He was, he said, part of the "resistance." He had placed his life in danger for the sake of not only the employees but in order to produce films such as *Babička*, which brought traditional Czech culture to the big

screen. Few believed that was the whole truth. In the aftermath of the war, he was condemned by the Board of Employees of the Czech film industry and ostracized from the business of making movies. He was also called before a special public tribunal, which in 1948 exonerated him of collaboration with the Nazis.<sup>29</sup>

Whatever others said, the young Havel admired his uncle deeply. Miloš was a brilliant, charismatic dandy, a chain-smoking tycoon who calculated the economics of a film deal by writing out numbers in the air with cigarette smoke.<sup>30</sup> Some of the affection that Havel felt toward his uncle may have had to do with similarities in their personalities. Both were artistic visionaries, eccentrics in a family of businessmen. Both also shared the same lisp. The young Havel admired his uncle's bohemian side, as well as his love of luxury. Much later, when he bought a Mercedes Benz in the early 1970s, despite being an out-of-work playwright, surely part of the appeal was his remembrance that his uncle had been among the first to drive a Mercedes in Prague in the 1930s.

Not everyone in the family was keen on Miloš. Havel's mother, Božena, disapproved of his homosexuality, a taboo subject in the household. Miloš was something of a playboy who kept a private apartment at the Lucerna Palace for his trysts. Keeping up the family interest in spiritualism, he also lent out the apartment for occultists who needed a place for meetings. Božena tolerated his upper-class boyfriends (and his interest in the occult) but not his taste in working-class men, such as waiters from the family restaurant. Showing up with such men at family gatherings made it difficult for Božena to pretend that these were simply friends.<sup>31</sup>

The financial situation of the family continued to erode after the end of the war. In all, Havel's father and uncle owed as much as thirty million crowns, more than half the capital of a midsize Czech bank.<sup>32</sup> Despite their precarious situation, in 1947 the Havels sent their eldest son to the finest boarding school in the country, the Academy of King George. The idea (conceived by Dr. Jahoda while serving time in the Dachau concentration camp) was to create an English-style boarding school to educate an elite group of postwar leaders. The school de-

pended on wealthy patrons, like the Havel, but a large percentage of the students were war orphans who attended for free.<sup>33</sup>

One of Havel's roommates at the school was Miloš Forman, the future filmmaker. Forman later emigrated to the United States, eventually making such classics as *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Amadeus*, and *Hair*. Like many at the school, he was a war orphan. His mother died in Auschwitz, and his father was killed in Buchenwald. Forman admired Havel's background, with its hints of a high society that Forman knew only from the newspapers. After hearing Havel mention Café Mánes, on the banks of the Vltava River, Forman, who was several years older, ditched school, hitchhiking into Prague to feast on salami salad and hard-boiled eggs while sitting next to a lady in a fur coat, an experience he never forgot.<sup>34</sup>

When Havel entered the Academy of King George, he was still an awkward child of ten. His nickname at school was Chrobák, which was a type of slow-moving beetle. He was hopeless in school sports, but his pluck seems to have won him a number of admirers. In one incident, Havel and Forman were with a group of kids who were waiting to ride a bicycle. Each child was supposed to make a loop out the front gate and turn back, a distance of less than a hundred yards. When Havel's turn came, he wobbled out the gate and kept going, while the kids cheered that Chrobák had escaped. The professor on duty ran back to campus, returning with leather gloves, goggles, and a motorcycle, catching up to Havel halfway to the next village. It turned out Havel had never ridden a bicycle before. Not knowing how to stop or turn around, he simply kept peddling as fast as he could.<sup>35</sup>

Not long after the bicycle incident, the democratic government in Czechoslovakia collapsed as a result of pressure by the Communist Party, which had been strengthened in the 1946 elections. Havel learned the news while returning from a field trip with classmates, including Forman. They were sitting in a train station when the communist leader (he also served as prime minister of a coalition government), Klement Gottwald, suddenly came over the loudspeaker, announcing that he had just been given permission to form a communist government.<sup>36</sup> Life changed quickly after that. The following

year, Miloš Forman was expelled from school for urinating on the son of a communist leader. In his defense, Forman pointed out that the young boy possessed a staggering and unmitigated ignorance, and that the school had only passed him along in order to gain favor with the Communist Party.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, the headmaster expelled Forman from school. He also told Forman he was concerned for his safety. One of the teachers, Professor Masák, had accused Forman of expressing counterrevolutionary intentions by disrespecting the son of a communist functionary. "Let me give you some personal advice," the headmaster told Forman. "Get lost from here and leave no tracks."<sup>38</sup> Forman left for Prague that same day, leaving no forwarding address.

Soon after Forman fled the boarding school, Havel and his brother, Ivan, were expelled for political reasons. Then the state, now controlled by the Communist Party, denied them entrance to a public gymnasium, the equivalent of an American high school. The Havels belonged to the old ruling class, the bourgeoisie. The children of such families no longer needed an education. Their old social positions had been liquidated, and the state would generously provide them with a new role: manual labor.

Having grown up as one of the privileged children of Prague, Havel now found himself on an entirely new stage. As a youngster, Havel had resented his privileged life. Now he experienced the situation in reverse: In the new classless society, everyone was equal, but some citizens were less equal than others. Whereas Havel had once been afforded every advantage, deserved or not, now a totalitarian state made him an outcast of a different kind, unable to attend school or hold a professional job.

The irony didn't escape him. The communist takeover was like a modern fairy tale, one expressing the inner reality of the twentieth century, with all of its alienation and absurdity. The state had become a collective expression of hope and despair, but it was also the result of a vast number of private choices, the consequence of individuals who had abandoned their own moral responsibility in exchange for the

unbending ideology of the Communist Party. The faithful believed that the Communist Party alone possessed the truth. The Communist Party demanded complete loyalty, and in return the members believed that its doctrines were based on an infallible science and a thorough, if mechanical, understanding of the world.

Havel was never in danger of joining the Communist Party, but he understood the internal totalitarian state all too well. Since the earliest days of his childhood, he had always possessed “an amplified tendency to see the absurd dimensions of the world.” And like many who had joined the party, he had experienced the terrifying and chilling alienation that descended, like a plague, on everyone during the postwar years, making the world seem as if it lacked logic or meaning or sense.<sup>39</sup> Years later, as a young playwright, he even delighted in writing speeches for the various functionaries he inserted into his plays, speeches in which, as he put it, nonsense and pure lies are “defended with crystal-clear logic.” Or speeches in which everything personal and individual had been replaced by clichés, and by a mechanization of language that seemed to remove all traces of humanity.<sup>40</sup> Havel had a special talent for writing such dialogue. In those speeches, he recognized himself, and human nature, and he recognized the fatal desire to simplify the world, the desire to eliminate all mystery from our vision of life.

The allure of Marxism-Leninism was that it provided a simple and total picture of history, politics, and culture. Everything was knowable, everything was material, and everything was the result of a material cause.<sup>41</sup> Havel would spend the rest of his life fighting this idea. And fighting a totalitarian idea meant searching for a different vision of the world.