

SHNORHAGAL ENK (OUR THANKS)

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Viken L. Attarian, Montreal, 22 December 2011

***A piece of memoir and unknown history dedicated to the memory of
Václav Havel***

The individuals in this memoir could not be contacted for approval of disclosure. The author has disguised their identities so as not to betray their confidence. **Editor**

The Czech word is *děkujeme* (pronounced *dyeh-koooh-yeh-meh*), meaning "We thank you". The word is now part of the numerous makeshift shrines across the Czech Republic honoring the memory of the great Václav Havel (the name is pronounced *vaah-^xtslav*), who has now passed on into history. Most importantly, it is now an ongoing part of the landmark of the main square of Prague, the aptly named *Václavské Naměstí* – St. Wenceslas Square, literally meaning "Václav's Square", it being the square of the Velvet Revolution. St. Wenceslas was the founder of the Czech nation. Havel was the affirmer of the rights of the Czech and Slovak people.

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And yet, in Czech, the word "you" is implied, therefore the expression of thanks is more subtle. There is no need to designate who is thanked. It is more polite, more civilized, more erudite, and more gracious. It makes the accepting of those expressions of gratitude happen without any assault on the humility of the person being thanked.

English ("Our thanks") and French ("*Nos remerciements*") cannot express it the same way. The Arabic ("*tashakkouratina*") is archaic and frankly pompous, giving the exact opposite effect of what is intended.

Of all the languages that I love I would say that the closest in meaning and nuance is perhaps the Armenian ("*Shnorhagal*")

enk" – շնորհալուր (up). Here again, the target of our gratitude is implied. It is subtle, and it literally resonates with a gem of a meaning. Because it means "we are the recipients of (your) grace".

The people of the former Czechoslovakia, and then the Czech Republic and then the world were indeed the recipients of the grace of Václav Havel. The last of the writer-intellectual leaders of what was known, in a colonial sense, as "the developed world". He personified the unity of creativity and the struggle for human rights. He walked in the footsteps of his predecessors, Pablo Neruda (whose pseudonym was inspired by the Czech poet Jan Neruda) and Federico Garcia Lorca. Like them, he gave flight to the imagination of his people. Unlike them, he led his people to triumph over repression.

My encounter with Havel was more direct than that of most Armenians, and indeed that of most of his compatriots. I lived in Czechoslovakia from 1976 to 1982. I was a foreign student of the Czech Language Department of Charles University in the Language Center of the town of Jihlava, and then at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering of the Brno Polytechnic Institute.

I was and still am left-leaning in my political worldview. After all, as my father had taught me, "one's heart will be always on the left side". But much of what I knew then about a world bitterly divided by the Cold War was ideological. I knew the theory very well. I learnt the practical reality of living under Communism on the ground. I was not too discontent with the socialist "paradise", after all, it provided me and its citizens with top notch education. Yes, there were shortages of luxury items, but that was not essential. Life is not built around brand name jeans and high-priced perfumes. And of course, my sojourn there was temporary. I was to leave after a fixed expiry date on my student visa. In fact, I could pack up and leave anytime I wanted. That was a freedom that the citizens of that country did not enjoy.

And yet, there was also this sense of uneasiness. Albeit subtler than in other Communist countries, the place was still a police state. There was almost no variety of opinion in the media. Political analysis was, at best, mediocre. Opinions were expressed in whispers. It is as if the public spirit of the people was broken.

Luckily, that did not extend to the private spirit. I had numerous stimulating encounters with immensely interesting personalities, mostly in the creative spheres, writers, classical musicians, jazz musicians, folk musicians, historians, painters, actors, puppeteers, filmmakers. My affinity to them was instantaneous. Almost all of them never wanted to leave their country. They wanted to make it better.

My closest friends were actually the students in the humanities. The art historians, the music students, students in the performing arts. Did I have ideological conflicts with them? Of course I did. Many of them idealized the West as a place of endless creative possibilities. They had no clue about the mechanisms of financial enslavement of ordinary citizens. They were young and inexperienced. They were all well-read, but mostly in their own mother tongue. I was a world traveler by their standards, equally young but slightly more experienced. They were always amazed that I could speak several languages at such a young age and had read many of the classics of world literature in the original English and French. I was, in turn, inspired by their vitality and the immensity of their talents.

Into this world of student life and dreams of a better world exploded *Charta 77* ('77 Charter), the charter-declaration that condemned the loss of human rights in Czechoslovakia. The manifesto based its arguments on the constitution of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, it being a signatory to the Helsinki Declaration of Human Rights and thus unmasked the illegality of the inhumane practices of the regime.

I first heard of this charter when, after about a year of living in the country, I read an editorial in the official Communist daily, the most widely read newspaper of the times, the *Rudé Právo*. It condemned the signatories as traitors. Mainly because they managed to smuggle the document out of the country into West Germany into the hands of Radio Free Europe and the Voice of America to be then rebroadcast into Eastern Europe. The editorial called for harsh punishment for all the signatories who were accused of spreading lies about Czechoslovakia and of encouraging revolt against the system through foreign intervention. It just stopped short of calling them foreign agents.

Context is important in every analysis. I have to admit that, at first glance, I agreed with the editorialists. After all, Czechoslovakia was a progressive force in the world. Many of my friends were foreign students from Africa, Asia and Latin America who would never have gotten the opportunity for higher education in their home countries. I had met many from other countries like Chile and Greece who had settled there as political refugees when military dictatorships had taken over their governments. Furthermore, the country was a member of the Warsaw pact, which was technically the sworn enemy of NATO. The latter, at the time, was advocating the use of small tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. West Germany being one of the key members of NATO, using its territory to subvert one's own country did seem like treason. Particularly because West Germany was considered the successor state of the Nazi regime which itself had left a terrible scar on the modern history of Czechoslovakia by annexing it without a war (through the betrayal of its "allies", Great Britain and France), and then by its subsequent genocidal occupation of the country and the enslavement of all its inhabitants.

The only thing that bothered me then was that the text of that Charter was never made public. There were not even quotations from it. If it were such a condemnable document, then, in my view, it should have been made public and the citizens should have been given the opportunity to scrutinize it to reach their own conclusions.

I was of course, very much aware as well about the brutal end of the Prague Spring of 1968. I knew very well how Dubček's socialism with a human face was crushed. I knew that the existing system was far from ideal, but in my view, it could have been reformed from within. After all, Brezhnev was not going to live forever and surely there would be better times to follow. That is why I deemed that the signatories of the *charta* had resorted to truly unnecessarily extreme measures.

One of the main authors of that document was, of course, Václav Havel. In fact, the signatories, in the document itself, through an act of extreme bravery and faith in humanity, openly mandated him to be one of the three spokesmen of the group.

For the record, the *charta* in its original Czech can be found [here](#).

The original English translation of the authors can be found [here](#). It is a wonderful piece of archival treasure.

It was a couple of years later that I started to be included in the closer circles of the friends I mentioned above. There was Hanka, studying English and German literature; there was Zdeněk, the classical guitarist; Jana the history student; Zdenka from the department of sociology, there was Mirek the rock musician and student of ethnography; and there was Yveta, the fiery Slovak, at once a folk musician, poet, painter, art historian and archeologist. There were others who gravitated in and around this core group, and after the passage of over three and a half decades, they are for me memories, faces, voices and emotions rather than names and surnames. We were all in our twenties. We all wanted to change the world. We all believed we could. There was no organization, simply our faith in our ability to make things happen.

It was because of these friends that I actually read the original text and realized how mistaken I was. Someone brought it to us on two crumbled pages of typewritten text, fading apart after having been read who knows how many times, perhaps dozens, hundreds or even thousands of times.

Having read the *charta*, I came to realize how well it was crafted. It was not subversive at all. It was asking for the implementation of fundamental human rights as it was already in the law of the land. It was not asking to change the system; it was asking that all citizens live in dignity under the protection of the law.

It was through this same group that I was introduced to the other great Czech dissident, Milan Kundera. We read parts of his newly appeared book in France "Le livre de rire et de l'oubli" – *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* or *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění* as it was known in Czech. A sadly funny book of episodic stories that was unlike anything that I had read before, like all great art, it was subversive as it is supposed to be. Kundera, a post-modern writer, reminded me a lot of our own Shahan Shahnoor (Շահալ Շահնուր), reinforcing for me the latter's prophetic greatness. That was before *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* made him into a world celebrity. It was *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* that caused the Czechoslovak regime to revoke his citizenship. They seem to have judged that Kundera had embarrassed them with too many lurid descriptions of sexuality and his critical approach to memory and politics.

For some strange reason, all dictatorships also result in repressing expressions of sexuality. Especially the exploration of the theme in literature and art. I think because it is biologically linked to creativity. That is certainly a topic that deserves to be researched.

Our only possible act was in fact the most natural one. We wanted to help spread the ideas and words of Havel and Kundera. And only once that decision was made did we realize the enormity of the task.

This was a time much before email. And certainly well before the Internet. It was a time even before personal computers and word processing software. Once again, some context. Access to photocopiers was severely restricted in Communist

Czechoslovakia and what was available was purely for research purposes, perhaps no more than a single machine in government offices, and no more than two in the whole of the Faculty of Electrical Engineering where I studied. To use them, I had to fill in forms and provide my originals to someone behind a window and pick up my copies a week later. Buying a typewriter required the production of identity documents and every purchase was separately recorded in a register submitted to the department of Internal State Security (secret police). Who bought the machine, who sold it, day and hour, serial number and so on. Of course, there remained the option of using an existing typewriter in one of the families, but that one would already be registered and we certainly did not want to incriminate anyone. We could perhaps try to find a typewriter that was in existence from the times of the First Republic (1918 – 1938), but imagine embarking on such a quest in a country that is a police state. We could not just put an ad in the paper like “looking for a second hand typewriter purchased before 1938”. Access to the technology to reproduce text in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic of 1979 was a major hurdle.

As a foreign citizen I had two major advantages, firstly, if I were to get caught, the most that could happen to me is that I would be deported and my studies would end right then and there; secondly, I could regularly travel to Western Europe and come back in. We decided to use that advantage as I had a habit of backpacking across Europe every summer. In the late summer of 1979, as I returned to Brno, my last stop was in Vienna, Austria. I had already smuggled back out the text of Charta '77 with me, and on my way back I stopped at a public photocopying service in Vienna to copy the document. Within less than half an hour I had made a hundred copies. I paid for it dearly. An Austrian Shilling a page it cost me; the equivalent of one whole month of my student stipend in Czechoslovakia. I would not be able to pay rent nor for food after my return. It was now the harsh world of capitalistic profit that was rapidly turning into the second hurdle. Such an enterprise would be unsustainable. Finally, the copies were made on photo sensitive paper, the text would fade away after a few months of exposure to light.

There remained the issue of re-smuggling those texts back into the country. An ironic Odyssey that needed to be experienced to be believed. The charter was authored in Czechoslovakia, smuggled out to Germany and disseminated in the West, then smuggled back in as a copy that eventually was read by us, then it was smuggled back out to the West for photocopying and then smuggled back in by me for distribution. Kundera could probably write a poignant short story just about this unbelievable trek.

As for the copies themselves, I literally crumbled them and tore them in half and some even in quarters (to tape them together when I would be back in). I stuffed them in my shoes, into the pockets of my clothing, I mixed them with wrapping paper for the small souvenirs that I had bought for my friends. I was relying on the fact that I did not fit any profile of a potential dissident sympathizer within the country and had an exemplary student behavior during my studies. I was right. The border crossing back in was relatively swift and I was not bothered.

I do not know what happened with the texts. We decided that task details need not be shared, in case anyone got caught it was better not to know than to know. But I did advise my friends that the financial cost of such a project would be prohibitive.

We had to find a better way. And we did. We decided to hand copy the texts we wanted to distribute. We would do this at night, when we would be alone in our dorm rooms. The only issue was that if any of the documents ever fell into the hands of the authorities, we were concerned that our handwriting could be analyzed and identified.

I have now to confess that I came up with a rather tedious but clever solution. I proposed to have each one of us write a single word at a time. Sort of the equivalent of cut up letters in the ransom notes that we see in films. To make this succeed, we would need to devise a structured approach. The way we did this was by dividing the text and each copier would write his/her first word, then estimate the amount of space needed to leave open for all the other copiers, and then write his/her second word and so on. To make things more complicated for potential analysts of handwriting, the writers would also disguise their writing and furthermore, the initial distribution of who would write what word was decided by a random draw of a number corresponding to the order of the word in the text (so number 1 would represent the first word and number 100 would represent the 100th word respectively). This was too complicated for me even to explain, but once we got the hang of it, it was relatively easy to implement.

We managed to copy about another hundred copies of the *Charta* this way within a few days. Again, I do not know what happened with those copies, but I am hoping that one or two have survived. Who knows, perhaps one day I shall encounter one.

As for Kundera, I had no part in the actual distribution work, although I know that my friends used the same technique on some of his texts.

I am glad that no Czech and no Slovak needs to do what we did at that time. I am glad those days are over. But I am mostly glad that I lived them. I am thankful for the experience and the great memories.

The person who caused all this to happen is now himself a great memory for a people who grew because of him. And now as my middle age advances, I feel that I bore witness to something extraordinary that was undertaken across that landscape at that time. For the first time I have told a story that I had thought would go with me to the grave and which I had not divulged to even the closest members of my family. I am immensely relieved that the times have permitted me to share this history.

And for enabling me to do just that, it is now my turn to say to Václav Havel:

Děkuji (dyeh-koooh-yih - I thank you).

