Kaiser, Daniel: Disident. Václav Havel 1936-1989.

Paseka, Praha, Litomyšl, 2009, 276 S., ISBN 978-80-7432-012-5.

Kaiser, Daniel: Prezident. Václav Havel 1990-2003.

Paseka, Praha, Litomyšl, 2014, 317 S., ISBN 978-80-7432-518-2.

For someone who lived one of the most interesting lives of the twentieth century, Václav Havel by his own admission was not very good at recounting it. He attributed this in part to the nature of his memory, which organized events into either very general impressions or very fragmented episodes, neither of which would support a steadily-unfolding, full-bodied autobiography. Similarly, while he showed that he could write in a large number of genres (nine, on David Danaher's count, in Reading Václav Havel), narrative prose was never one of them, as he acknowledged in his early recognition of Bohumil Hrabal's talent. Perhaps the greatest obstacle was his conviction that all his life he was supposed to be, like the mediums his grandfather consulted at séances, acting as a conduit for ancient and ineffable truths, things he often felt clearly but struggled to find the right words to express. He was able to provide the highlights of his life in long interviews to journalists such as Antonín J. Liehm, Jiří Lederer and Karel Hvížďala, but wrapped them in thick commentary on what he saw as their deeper meaning, which, in the case of his quasi-memoir of his years in the presidency Prosím stručně (Please Be Brief), resulted in a disjointed and dissatisfying crumplage.

So it has fallen to others to tell Havel's story in more straightforward ways, and since he left the presidency in 2003 several Czechs have been willing to have a go. To do justice to every angle of Havel's 75 years is a challenge, so the authors have tended to play to their strengths and accentuate certain aspects or times: Pavel Kosatík wrote a group portrait of the young Havel's first literary circle,[1] Martin C. Putna traced the development of Havel's thought with special reference to Czech and American influences,[2] and Jiří Suk covered the 1975-89 period.[3] All three succeeded admirably.[4]

In the two volumes reviewed here, Daniel Kaiser, a journalist with the daily newspaper Lidové noviny and online weekly Echo, focuses on Havel in the two personae of dissident and president. His lucid, sober narrative is richly informed by interviews with Havel (in 2008-9) and a huge cast of Havel's friends, colleagues and a few rivals; by primary sources such as private correspondence, police and prison files and presidential memos; and by the full secondary literature in Czech. The result is an indispensable overview of Havel as a public actor, as someone who from adolescence

---

[1] *Kosatík,* Pavel: "Ústně více". Šestatřicátníci ["More in person". The Thirty-Sixers]. Brno 2006.

[2] *Putna,* Martin C.: Václav Havel: Duchovní portrét v rámu české kultury 20. století [Václav Havel: An intellectual portrait in the context of twentieth-century Czech culture]. Praha 2011.

[3] *Suk,* Jiří: Politika jako absurdní drama [Politics as an absurdist drama]. Praha 2013.

[4] See the review of Suk in Bohemia 53 (2013) H. 2, 493-495.

felt driven to be, in the words of the poet Jan Zábrana, 'constantly organizing something, chasing something down, putting someone together with someone'. Before 1968, this was not so much politics as what Havel called političnost, 'perception of the problems of a person as a member of a human polis', which he explored through critical essays, his early plays and involvement in periodicals such as Tvář and the inner workings of the writers' union. From 1968 onwards, it became politics outright, which (as Kaiser notes in the second volume) for Havel meant a struggle for the moral improvement of society rather than the competition or mediation of differing interests and preferences.

Among the many moments on which Kaiser sheds new light through his journalistic sleuthing are the risky contact with émigré publisher Pavel Tigrid in the mid-1960s; the police bug found in the Havel flat in 1969 (Havel had been tipped off about it before staging its 'discovery', which he wrote up for the weekly Listy); his first experience of captivity in 1977 and deliberation over whether to emigrate in 1979; his post-prison status as a dissident celebrity, recruiting a team of aides and fixers; the transition of some of that team into the presidential administration in 1990, with particular attention to the trio of Jiří Křižan, Saša Vondra and Michael Žantovský (whose own biography, Havel: A Life, is also very revealing of the early presidency); Havel's periodic disputes with the foreign ministry (especially during the Social Democratic minority cabinet of 1998-2002); the background to his 1997 Rudolfinum state of the union/re-election speech; and speculation that Vlastimil Tlustý, the parliamentary faction leader of Václav Klaus's Civic Democratic Party (ODS), inspired the character of Vlastík Klein in Havel's last play, Leaving (although I would contend that, given Havel's fondness for ironic surnames, he also had Stanislav Gross of the Social Democrats in mind).

The two volumes stand apart in significant ways. The first is largely the story of Havel's striving to overcome his family's double isolation (owing to its interwar privilege and then postwar downfall) by creating or joining collectives that would give him a sense of connection to Czech society. As Kaiser astutely observes, Havel had a strong Czech identity but rarely lived an ordinary Czech's life: compared to most countrymen he either enjoyed far greater comfort (such as during his first ten years before the Communist takeover, in middle age when foreign royalties from his plays made him relatively wealthy and then in old age when restitution of confiscated property made him very wealthy), or he was far worse off, with a disrupted and incomplete education, episodes of house arrest, prison, calumny in the Communist press and – after 1989 – the prurient prying of the tabloids. Only in the early 1970s, when he and his first wife Olga spent a few years in apolitical resignation fixing up their farmhouse at Hrádeček, did he lead something approximating the existence of a normal, 'normalized' Czech, and it made him miserable.

The second volume reverses the dynamic and is about the throngs of people who wanted to belong to the new president; the narrative becomes very much that of the 'collective Havel' rather than the individual himself. For those too young or too forgetful to have memories of the 1990s, Kaiser gives all the necessary background, but that means a lot of political history in which Havel was but one of dozens of actors, and already by October 1990 was becoming one of the less powerful ones. We see

Havel applying himself with special vigour as president of Czechoslovakia to questions such as the survival of the federation or relations with Germany, both of which caused him disappointment; only the pursuit of NATO membership received the same degree of commitment once he became president of just the Czech Republic.

The second volume also marks a change in tone, as Kaiser's attitude to his subject cools. In Disident, the author assures us his approach would be objective but not conceal his view of Havel as a 'positive hero of Czech history' (p. 7). By the time Prezident reaches 1997, however, it is clear that author feels that Havel had run his course and had nothing more to offer from the president's seat. It was, in Kaiser's view, a mistake for Havel to seek another term as he struggled with ill health, a controversial second wife and a diminishing sense of purpose. For Havel personally, that last term was indeed not worth the toll it took on his welfare: Kaiser cites splenetic internal memos that Havel dictated, such as in the dark days of 1999 when he felt under-appreciated and over-scheduled. (In general, the memos Kaiser cites are far more revealing than the ones Havel sampled in Prosím stručně.) Havel's determination to be a human-rights hawk by lending his authority to George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq, and his belief that he could reconcile the forces of transnational capitalism and opponents of globalization by hosting a World Bank/IMF summit in Prague, were horrific errors of judgement. It would have been very tempting for Havel to leave the Castle in 1998, in a gesture of disgust with the party system, tunneled-out capitalism and 'foul mood' of the country, much as he had seen Jan Werich quit the ABC Theatre in 1960 in a funk of poor health and bad reviews.

What is more contentious is Kaiser's implication that Havel's last term was also bad for the political system and the country. His description of the Rudolfinum address that kicked off Havel's re-election bid as 'his worst ever presidential speech' (p. 224) is too severe; one could fault Havel more for times when, tired of the speechwriting treadmill, he slipped into lazy formulas or national myths. Kaiser reproduces the oft-heard claim that by helping defeat the electoral reform act that ODS and the Social Democrats were pushing in 2000, Havel condemned the political system to the tyranny of the minor parties, which contributed 'to the decline of the reputation of democracy in the Czech Republic' (Prezident, p. 259). Although the country has had crises of coalition formation and instability, they are not automatically the fault of the electoral system (which is far from strictly proportional), nor is it necessarily those crises that caused the greatest damage. Almost all of the incidents most harmful – the big bribery scandals, misuse of European Union regional funds, association with shady lobbyists and mafiosi, culminating in President Klaus's questionable amnesties and a police raid on the prime minister's office – have come courtesy of the two major parties which, had Havel not referred their bill to the constitutional court, would have been able to govern alone on manufactured majorities.

Another tendentious claim is Kaiser's assertion that in the twilight of his presidency Havel lurched into a harebrained ecologism, which led him to make embarrassingly outdated or unsupported statements about the environment. Even if Havel was not always in command of the best statistics, his 'green turn' was not a radical departure from statements he made in his earlier presidency, at a time when – on Kaiser's telling – he was more properly putting his weight behind the transformation

strategy of the Klaus governments. If anything, the natural world as a philosophical and political problem had a constant presence in Havel's thought from his adolescent pantheism to the 1980s influence of Václav Bělohradský and the Kampademy into the presidential years (as shown in Putna's book). At times it receded, but at others – such as in his 1994 address in Philadelphia – it was front and centre.

Together these two volumes are as complete an account we could hope for of Havel as a prominent figure in modern Czech political history, and will long be an essential work of reference. But they are not a biography of Havel in the full sense, of a man who was at heart a poet, culture critic and film director manqué. We hear Havel speak through his letters and memos, less so through his more thoughtful and stirring works. With the story told in Kaiser's (mostly) neutral tone, there is a risk that if we focus only on his mixed record as a man of action, we will lose sight of what made Havel exceptional – the only Soviet-bloc dissident apart from Poland's Adam Michnik to become a global public intellectual after 1989, and only the fourth European to be commemorated with a bust in the US Congress. After all, other Czech dissidents had biographies just as full of drama and courage, and often more outrageous private lives; other Czech writers were just as, if not more talented; other Czech politicians were definitely more skilful and effective. It is the combination of all the aspects of Havel, and of the 'collective Havel', that sets him and his story apart. For that reason, we must read Kaiser, but keep within reach Kosatík, Putna, Suk, Žantovský, Danaher, and Havel himself.

Des Moines Kieran Williams