

## **Artists marginalized by own revolution**

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PRAGUE | Martin Putna stood next to his favorite poster at an exhibit that opened here recently celebrating the life of Vaclav Havel, the Czech playwright and former president who became the face of the peaceful revolution that brought down communist regimes throughout much of Eastern Europe 20 years ago.

"Being in power makes me permanently suspicious of myself," reads the caption on the poster, which shows a smiling Mr. Havel sitting on an ornately decorated chair. A tagline notes that Mr. Havel made the statement in 1991, when he was awarded a prize for outstanding contributions to European culture.

Artists and other cultural figures played an outsized role in the demise of governments in the old Soviet satellites — a role that has diminished as societies have opened up to a freer interchange of ideas with the rest of the world.

Under communism, mimeographed manuscripts known in Russian as "samizdat" or self-published works, passed from hand to hand to avoid the censors. Other works were smuggled out to the West for publication. Western culture, from modern art to heavy-metal music, was coveted forbidden fruit.

The catalyst for the Charter 77 movement co-founded by Mr. Havel in 1977 was the arrest of a Czech psychedelic band known as the Plastic People of the Universe. The "velvet" revolution that remade Czechoslovakia in 1989 took its name from the Velvet Underground, a U.S. rock band that was a favorite of Mr. Havel's.

The role that culture and literature played in Central and Eastern Europe was "bigger and more important than in the free world," said Mr. Putna, who is director of the Vaclav Havel Library.

"Literature played a role in society. Literature played a role in politics," he said.

Now, American writers Dan Brown and Stephenie Meyer by far outsell Czech authors, and culture has lost its place here as a focus of political life.

The Havel Library, which opened its doors earlier this year on a quiet street in Prague's picturesque Old Town, illustrates a different time when the printed word could be a matter of life and death.

Born into a well-to-do family, Mr. Havel was not necessarily the most talented of those who opposed the communist regime, Mr. Putna said. Yet by the time he and four contemporaries founded Charter 77, Mr. Havel was on his way toward becoming the leader of the opposition.

Charter 77 was an informal civic initiative that lasted from 1977 to 1992. Beyond protesting the arrest of rock musicians, the group criticized the government for failing to implement human rights provisions in international treaties it had signed.

Pavel Pechacek, one-time director of the Czech Service at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and now a senior adviser to the radio's president, said Czechs who had earlier fled their homeland aided those left behind by publishing their works in the West.

Josef Skvorecky and Zdena Salivarova, a renowned literary couple who emigrated to Canada in 1968, founded 68 Publishers, a Toronto company that published works smuggled out of Czechoslovakia, including books by Bohumil Hrabal, Nobel Prize-winner Jaroslav Siefert, Jewish writer Arnost Lustig, human rights activist Vaclav Cerny and poet Ivan Blatny.

The couple surreptitiously sent printed materials back to their homeland to be passed hand to hand. They included a Czech translation of Alan Levy's "Rowboat to Prague," an account of the 1968 Soviet invasion that became an underground classic here. For their efforts, Mr. Skvorecky and his wife were awarded the Czech Republic's highest order in 1990 by Mr. Havel, whose works they also published.

"It was something very special," said Mr. Pechacek, himself a former dissident. "The best Czech literature made its way to the West. In the Czech Republic, culture had influence."

Theater also played an important part in communism's demise. During the 1960s, Mr. Havel had cemented his reputation with works such as "The Garden Party," "The Memorandum" and "The Increased Difficulty of Concentration." When he went into opposition, Mr. Havel and others would perform plays for small groups of trusted friends in their homes.

Libuse Sidlova, who worked at the central bank in what was then Czechoslovakia, said cultural figures helped give a voice to the discontent people were feeling with the system.

"That was important to us. I felt I wasn't alone with my feelings," she said.

The communist regime began to breathe its last when well-known entertainers joined public protests against it, said Prokop Tomek, a historian with the Military History Institute in Prague.

In June 1989, a petition asking for greater democracy and media freedom began to circulate. Among the 40,000 signatories was Hana Zagorova, a well-known singer.

"People thought, 'People who are known to us are signing the petition.' For the regime, that was very unpleasant," Mr. Tomek said.

Mr. Putna, who is also a professor of comparative literature at Prague's Charles University, lamented that for all it accomplished, the Velvet Revolution may have marked the end of an era of great Czech literature. No up-and-coming writers have grabbed the Czech public's imagination in recent years.

The situation is more promising in Poland, where striking factory workers and the Roman Catholic Church, rather than cultural figures, are credited with bringing down communism.

Today, a group of writers, many of them women, are giving voice to a new Poland and dealing with the economic hardships that linger after communism's demise.

Among the most popular is Dorota Maslowska, whose first book, "The Polish-Russian War," describes the plight of young people living in economically depressed eastern Poland and was recently made into a film. Two other books by Ms. Maslowska are also best-sellers.

Another important new Polish writer is Malgorzata Kalicinska. Her first novel, about a middle-aged divorcee who is fired from a big city ad agency and begins a new life in the Polish countryside, sold more than 300,000 copies. Katarzyna Grochola's female-centered novels, Wojciech Cejrowski's travelogues, as well as Andrzej Pilipiuk's and Andrzej Sapkowski's fantasy books have also sold well in Poland.

The leading Czech writers today are older: Mr. Havel, Milan Kundera and Mr. Hrabal. Franz Kafka, perhaps the best-known Czech writer, lived and died at a time when Czech lands were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and he wrote in German.

Lucie Pracharova, an assistant at the Havel Library, said Czechs are only now beginning to learn about others who penned works during the communist era.

"We didn't know about all these people," she said. "It's all part of a mosaic of our culture."

Meanwhile, Prague has experienced another sort of transformation into a pricey international tourist mecca.

Buildings once blackened with centuries of soot have been carefully restored. Streets are now lined with brightly lit shops where sellers peddle wares ranging from Swarovski crystal to handcrafted wooden puppets. Restaurants are filled with diners from around the globe sitting at tables with starched white cloths and warmly flickering candles.

Prague Castle, the crown jewel, keeps visitors lingering on the banks of the Vlatova River, which bisects the city. Lovers young and old gaze at the water, even on a cold day, and then kiss. Prague unveils its beauty — and painful history — with each step.