Mayor pushes the positive to Jewish media. Page 9

LONG ISLAND Jewish World

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Prague Spring 1990

Once a dissident, now a diplomat. A Czech Jew's long journey

Page 3

JINDRA SVATEK

Blackboard jungle

Zionists fight in Jerusalem over who controls Jewish education

Page 2

Albany scorecard

How issues of concern to New York Jews fared in the legislature

Page 11

Teaching moral values

Interfaith group thinks it can be done—without religion

Page 16

Prague Spring 1990, part I:

Judaism and revolution mix in a young couple's odyssey

By YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI

PRAGUE—When I came to visit Leo and Hanna Pavlat, Leo had just been appointed Czechoslovakia's cultural attache to Israel. It was spring in Prague, Vaclav Havel's picture was hanging in almost every store window and anything seemed possible, even that Leo Pavlat, member of Prague's tiny Jewish community and formerly leader of its dissident circle, would suddenly become a diplomat.

Leo and Hanna didn't know much about Israel. As diplomats, they would be based in Tel Aviv, and Hanna wanted to know how far that was from Jerusalem. A friend had brought them an old *GEO* magazine about Israel, with a picture of a smiling female soldier on the cover; and they had a little photo book about Israeli women, published 30 years ago, with more pictures of pretty soldiers and happy Yemenite immigrants balancing baskets on their heads.

The post-revolutionary Czech government has no money, and can barely maintain its new embassy in Israel. The entire embassy staff, aside from the ambassador, will have to share a single car. Leo's monthly salary would be so small that Hanna didn't think they could buy meat. "We are going to be very poor diplomats," Hanna said, laughing.

But what did that matter? The revolution had brought miracles, and one of those miracles was that Leo and Hanna would be going to Israel, not as refugees but as diplomats. They are among the few people left in the world who live in both Jewish and Czech cultures; it seemed right that they would be a bridge between Israel and the new Czechoslovakia. "It is something fantastic," Leo kept saying, and he meant "fantastic" in both senses of the word: marvelous and incredible.

Leo, 39 years old, is a tall man with a full black beard; but his curly hair is almost grey. Before his government appointment, he worked as an editor in a children's publishing house, a field he had chosen as the least likely form of literature to be controlled by the state. At university he had studied journalism, but had never practiced it, refusing to serve the government's lies. For years, Hanna told me, Leo had had this nightly ritual: when the TV news came on, he would cheerfully greet the newscasters by saying, "Hello murderers"—murderers of truth, of the soul. Even now, Hanna said, he sometimes forgets himself and continues to greet the newscasters as murderers.

Leo's opposition to the Communist government began with his attempt to reclaim his Jewishness. As a child, Leo didn't know he was a Jew. Then, one day in school, his teacher mentioned that, during the war, Jews had been marked with blue numbers on their arms. Leo's mother had those numbers; whenever he had asked her about them she said, It's nothing, it doesn't matter anymore. But now Leo confronted his mother, and she confessed to being a Jew.

Leo first visited the synagogue when he was 20. It was Rosh Hashanah. A half-mad Holocaust survivor stood guard at the door, barring non-Jews. "Are you a Jew?" he asked Leo. Leo assured him that he was. But when the guard noticed Leo sitting in the synagogue without saying the Hebrew prayers, he told him to leave. Stunned, Leo left. But he returned the following week, and after a while the guard got used to him.

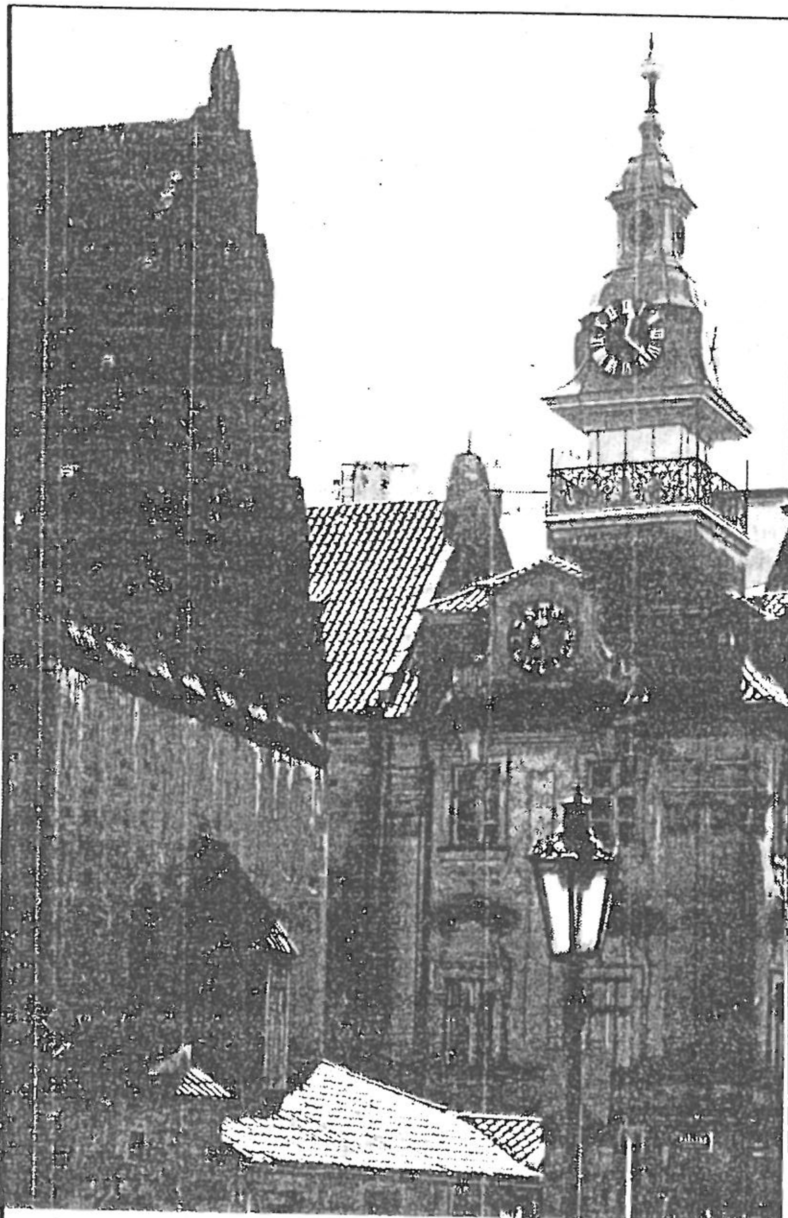
In the synagogue Leo met other young Jews who, like himself, were trying to retrieve memories that had never been theirs. Some of them were converts to Judaism; some were political dissidents close to Havel's Charter '77 movement. One of the dissidents was Karol Sidon, a novelist and playwright, who later left the country after being offered a choice of prison or exile. Sidon, who liked to wear a black fedora and functioned as a kind of unofficial rabbi for young Czech Jews, taught Leo Judaism, and gave him books on Jewish philosophy and history.

For a young Czech to identify with Judaism was itself an act of dissidence. Public mention of Jews was forbidden, except negatively, as Zionists who wanted to rule the world and who had tried to subvert Czechoslovakia by instigating the "Prague Spring" in 1968. Knowledge of the Holocaust was suppressed, absorbed into the general suffering of the Czechs under Nazism. During the Prague Spring, the government had intended to place a memorial at the site from which Czech Jews were deported; but then the Russians invaded, and the memorial was forbidden.

At work, Leo tried to get around the ban on Jewish themes by slipping

continued on page 20

This is the first of a three-part series.



JINDRA SVATEK

Prague's Altneu synagogue.

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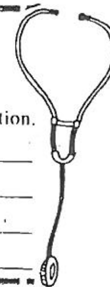

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Prague

continued from page 3

them into his books. He wrote a prize-winning children's book about the history of books, and managed to include a photograph of a Torah scroll. In a book he edited about the world's alphabets, he included Hebrew letters. But then he got a call from the Ministry of Culture. "They said to me, 'We can't allow the book to be distributed until we find out what those letters say.' At first I was very nervous. I didn't know enough Hebrew at the time to know what those letters said. But then I found out: it was nothing, just letters. Crazy system: Hebrew, a language, is an enemy."

Leo wrote a children's book of Jewish legends and included local Prague stories about the Golem, the robot-like man conjured from the earth by Prague's great 17th-century rabbi, the Maharal. The book was published in six languages and exported, to earn the government foreign currency and to show the world how Czech Jewish culture was thriving under communism. But the book was not published in Czech, the language in which it was written, because Czechs were not supposed to know about a Jewish past.

Leo met Hanna at a Purim party in the Jewish community building. Like Leo, Hanna had grown up not knowing she was a Jew; as a child she thought Jews had big green noses. Hanna's parents had both survived the Holocaust as children, her mother hidden by Christians, her father an inmate in the Theresienstadt concentration camp. After the war, Hanna's parents became Christians, to be as distanced as possible from Jewish suffering. When Hanna announced that she was going to marry Leo, her grandfather, who had also survived the Holocaust, came to the house and shouted at Hanna's father, "How can you let your daughter marry a Jew?"

Hanna was baptized; on Sundays she went to church with her mother. And yet, it was Hanna's mother who took her to the Jewish community's Purim party. Hanna is still not sure why her mother did it. Perhaps it was to spite the government: if the Communists were suppressing Judaism, then she would insist on being—culturally if not religiously—a Jew.

Hanna's parents were dissidents. Her father, Ivan Klima, was one of Czechoslovakia's best-known novelists—but only abroad: at home he was unable to publish. In the summer, Hanna's family visited Havel's country cottage; as a child she had drawn posters for dissidents' birthday parties. The police came often to the house, taking away Hanna's parents for interrogation.

I asked Hanna whether she had been afraid as a child that one day her parents wouldn't return from a visit to the police. Hanna said, "Maybe I am stupid, but I was never afraid. I thought this was a very nice way to grow up. Sometimes when the police came to the door my parents would start eating pieces of paper. I used to laugh watching them. Really, it was very funny."

When she was older, Hanna, too, was interrogated by the police; she was denied entrance to the university for five years as punishment for her parents' politics. Hanna said, "Some people were afraid or angry when they got a letter to come to the police. But I saw it as a way of testing myself against evil. I felt myself very strong, and close to God in the police station. I felt good about myself: I was protecting good against evil."

One could miss Hanna's spiritual sensitivity in her extravagant appearance. A hairband barely held her massive blond hair. She wore giant looped earrings and a necklace of brightly painted shells which her brother had made in kindergarten. Her nose and chin are sharp, her brown eyes slightly slanted, almost oriental. Those eyes hold a great but impersonal suffering: a compassion for those who, unlike herself, are not strong enough to endure pain.

Absurdly, Hanna often dismisses herself as a trivial person. "I am stupid," she would say, partly from habit and partly, one suspected, from frustration at her inability to heal the world's wounds. One afternoon we walked across the Charles Bridge. Young people were selling earrings from makeshift stands beneath the religious statues that line the bridge like watchmen. Hanna stopped at every stand and said, "I can spend all my money on these silly things." She spoke with sadness, regretting all those small desires that keep good people from becoming saints.

Hanna not only assumes the existence of God but senses His active presence. For Hanna, being a Jew is not so much an ethnic or national identity, something that defines her apart from non-Jews; Judaism is her language of intimacy with God.

The first time she visited the synagogue and heard the old men praying, she wept. But even as she went to synagogue on Shabbat mornings, she continued to attend church the next day. She loved her little wooden pyramid-shaped church, run by a liberal minister who played his own hymns on the guitar and around whom young people gathered. The minister often spoke to his congregation about his gratitude to the Jews for bringing Christians to God. At first, Hanna felt she could inhabit both the synagogue and the church, what her minister called the two parts of the House of Israel. She saw no need to choose between them: both were valid paths to God. There are not many places in the world where Hanna could so easily have lived such an eclectic religious life; but in Prague, where Judaism and Christianity were barely legal, a baptized Jewish girl could feel comfortable in both the synagogue and the church.

Finally, Leo, who was drawing closer to Orthodox practice, insisted that Hanna choose between Judaism and Christianity. Hanna chose Judaism. But Hanna and Leo haven't retreated into a Jewish ghetto, haven't felt the need to Jewishly "sanitize" every aspect of their lives. Some of their closest friends are religious Christians who, like themselves, had rejected the crude materialistic values of the state. When Leo and Hanna were married in Prague's famous Altneu synagogue, among the guests was Hanna's former minister. He never reproached Hanna for leaving the church; Hanna felt that perhaps he even approved.

A Jewish presence

On Shabbat Leo and Hanna took me to the Altneu synagogue. "It is the best synagogue in the world," Hanna said. The Altneu's foundation stone was said to have come from the burning Temple in Jerusalem; Prague Jews had believed that the synagogue would endure until the Temple was rebuilt. According to legend, the Maharal, creator of the Golem, had stored its clay remains in the synagogue's sealed attic. Perhaps the Altneu's greatest miracle was to be one of the few synagogues in Nazi-occupied Europe spared destruction or even desecration; the Nazis intended to build a museum in Prague devoted to the extinct Jewish race, and the Altneu was preserved intact, to become part of the exhibition.

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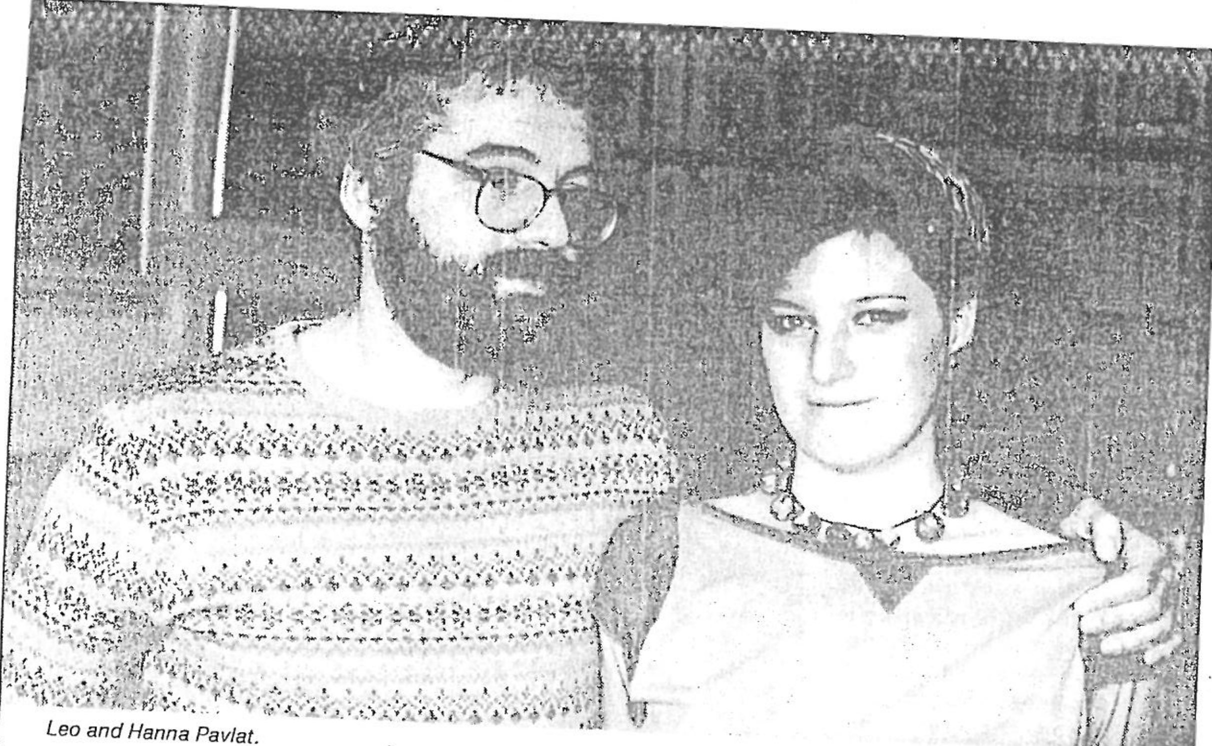

Leo and Hanna Pavlat.

JINDRA SVATEK

Hanna's Holocaust survivor grandfather shouted at her father, 'How can you let your daughter marry a Jew?'

I asked Leo if he believed that the synagogue had been protected, perhaps from the merit of the Maharal, perhaps because its foundation stone had come from the Temple. He laughed; but he didn't deny either possibility.

The synagogue is on a quiet alley, near the Jewish cemetery. Steps lead down into the sanctuary, which is below street level. Inside it is cool and cavernous. High and narrow arched windows barely admit light from the street above. From the domed ceiling hangs an extraordinary density of brass oil lamps and candelabras, some of them covered with cobwebs.

And yet there is life here. Unlike synagogues elsewhere in Eastern Europe, there are nearly as many young people as old. The seats were arranged in a single row against the walls, forming a square around the platform from where the Torah is read. Though this is an Orthodox synagogue, there is no physical barrier between men and women. Leo and I sat near the Ark, and Hanna sat in the same row, separated from us by several empty seats.

Leo and Hanna's deviance from the Communist system had been most fully expressed here. By helping to keep alive a Jewish presence in Prague, they had preserved a place beyond official ideology. That was the struggle of the intelligentsia under communism: to create enclaves of immunity from government lies.

Being involved in the synagogue placed them on the fringes of Czech life. An undercover police agent who regularly attended the synagogue tried to entrap Leo by offering to help him send "anything you want" abroad; Leo refused to speak to him. Once, Leo and Hanna invited Israeli tourists to their home, where they all danced the hora. A few days later, Leo and Hanna were visited by the police.

But despite their occasional troubles with the authorities, it was not until last year that Leo and Hanna became public dissidents. It began with a letter Leo wrote to the leadership of the Czech Jewish community, and which 25 young Prague Jews co-signed. The letter warned about the obvious: that the community was dying and immediate steps had to be taken to keep it alive. In a normal country, sending that letter would have been a harmless act; its suggestions—publishing Jewish books and permitting Hebrew classes—were hardly subversive.

But the letter was an implicit rebuke to the leaders of the community, especially two men whom Leo calls simply Kraus and Heller, the government-appointed dictators of the community. The Czech Jewish community was among the most controlled in Eastern Europe; even the text of a Purim play had to be approved by the authorities. Kraus and Heller spied for the government on their own community, and especially on the young Jews. Kraus and Heller's real job was to preside over the end of the community, to suppress all attempts at Jewish renewal. In effect, they made this deal with the government: let the old Jews eat their kosher meals and pray in peace, and we will help guarantee that this will be the last generation of Jews in Czechoslovakia.

Kraus and Heller took Leo's letter to the police, and Leo became an enemy of the state. He and Hanna were followed in the streets and summoned to the headquarters of the secret police, who wanted to know whether Leo was stockpiling weapons. Kraus even denounced Leo to the press as a paid agent of imperialism— an invitation for the authorities to arrest Leo.

"That's Kraus over there," Leo whispered to me, pointing to an old man bent under a prayer shawl. Then Leo said, "He's a very sad man. First he was in the Nazi camps, and then the communists put him in prison for eight years. When he came out he was completely broken and working for the police. He put us in such danger; but how can we really judge him?"

Triumph of truth

On Shabbat afternoon, I walked around the center of Prague with Leo and Hanna. The narrow cobbled streets were filled with people. Everyone seemed to be laughing and eating ice cream. A man with an accordion sang an old Prague song about a poor widow with 14 children. "You never saw such a thing before," said Hanna, meaning, "before the revolution." Posters on the wall read, "Jesus is your chance"; that, too, had been illegal under the Communists. Nearby, a group of Hare Krishna with shaven heads chanted mantras in Sanskrit. "This is also new," Hanna said. "Before, it was forbidden. Everything was forbidden."

We passed a stone wall on which someone had drawn a Star of David. That was all, simply a star. In Communist Prague that symbol had needed no words; its very appearance was a protest. Leo and I spoke Hebrew together, delighting in the normalcy of our conversation, offering the forbidden words to the Prague celebration. Hebrew, Sanskrit, Jesus' name: the suppressed languages of religion blended into the life of the streets.

Hanna and Leo pointed out the sites of the revolution. On a spot on the pavement where students had been beaten, there were lit candles and fresh bouquets. On the wall was a plaque with raised hands, symbol of the Czech revolution: students confronting the police had held their hands high, to show they were not armed and that their power didn't come from weapons. "It was the greatest time of my life," Hanna said, already nostalgic, as though convinced that nothing in her future can ever be as worthy as that time.

Prague University's Theater Department, where Hanna is study-

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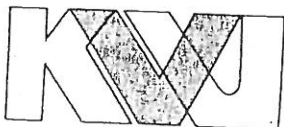

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Prague

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ing stage art, had been one of the uprising's main centers of operation. As soon as the revolution began, Hanna and her friends went on strike and converted their campus building into political headquarters, each room organized for another purpose: eating, sleeping, exercise, prayer. Every day for six weeks Hanna was at the telephones, coordinating demonstrations and sending student organizers to factories around the country. At two in the morning she would ride home in one of the free taxis that waited at the students' disposal, prepare her daughter's meals for the following day, sleep for a few hours, then return to the theater department.

For Hanna, it was as though her entire life had been a preparation for that moment. Everything in her past seemed to merge: her dissident childhood, her spiritual search, even her Czech and Jewish identities. Hanna said to me, "The revolution made everyone feel themselves more intensely. Christians became more Christian, and I felt more Jewish. A priest brought in a crucifix into the room where I was working, and I brought in a menorah.

"During the revolution I realized that Leo and I had made the right decision to remain in Czechoslovakia. Before, Leo would sometimes say we should go to Israel. Especially after a police interrogation. He would come home and say to me, 'That's it, we're leaving.' But I said, 'No, we are needed here.' Of course I understood Leo's desire to go to Israel. But Jews had been so much a part of Prague; I felt at least a few Jews should be left here, especially for the struggle against the Communists. Some Jews might say to me, 'What do you owe those non-Jews? What did they ever do for you?' But I believe that human beings are in the world not to receive but to give. And this Czech people needed us."

The grave of Rabbi Judah Low, the Maharal, creator of the golem.

The miracle of Prague: A golem people had come to life.

The ubiquitous Havel

Vaclav Havel's face seemed to be in every store window. In photocopied pictures or full-color posters, he almost never looked into the camera, but turned away, distracted or shy. There was Havel in a pullover sweater and open-necked shirt, Havel nervously stroking his thin mustache, Havel with his hair blowing in the wind. In the window of a surprisingly elegant jewelry shop, Havel smiled and shrugged, as if acknowledging the absurdity of his picture appearing there, the picture of a man who would never shop in such a store.

We stepped into a bookstore, and inside hung the inevitable picture of Havel. "Isn't he sweet," Hanna said, laughing at herself as she tenderly stroked Havel's face.

The adoration of Havel is the opposite of the personality cult demanded by the old Communist leaders. For it is not Havel's infallible vision that is being celebrated but his simple humanity, even his vulnerability. The Czechs feel intimacy toward Havel, not awe. Leo and Hanna had even hung his picture in their bedroom. The Prague Spring of 1990 was one of those moments when a leader embodies people's most personal emotions, and even his picture posted in a bedroom is not an intrusion into private space.

We visited the storefront office of Civic Forum, Havel's group that had led the revolution. A small German flag hangs on the wall, a rebuke against Czech anti-German emotions, which Havel had recently denounced. Beside it was Civic Forum's latest poster, announcing the revolution's "birthday": a smiling baby and the words, "I'm four months old!" That same innocence is the message of Civic Forum's symbol: the letters "OF," initials for "Civic Forum" in Czech; within the "O" is a child's drawing of a smiling face. In the West that symbol had become an instant cliche. But the Czech revolution had salvaged good will from kitsch and restored its power to transform.

Hanna repeated for me the words of the revolution's theme song, which had been sung at the great demonstrations. "A table is firm/ A mountain is firmer still/ But nothing is as firm as human faith." It sounded embarrassingly simplistic, until one imagined half a million voices singing those words in Prague's Wenceslaus Square.

We passed a side-street taken up entirely on either side by a single long building. This had been the headquarters of the secret police. All its windows were closed; any identifying signs on its facade—even a street sign—had been removed, to erase the memory of this place. Leo and Hanna had been brought here several times for questioning. Hanna said, "I would like to meet those police who used to interrogate me and follow me around. I would like to ask them what was in their minds when they were doing this. And I want to tell them that I forgive them."

Nearby was a tiny park, an enclave of benches and trees. A sign read: "This park is clean because it is tended by policemen." "It is a terrible shame," Hanna said, laughing. "Without the secret police, who will keep this little park clean?"

In the window of a bookstore we saw a novel by Hanna's father. Even four months after the revolution, it still stunned Hanna that a book of her father's could be publicly displayed. Beside the book was a hand-written sign explaining that the author, Ivan Klima, was one of Czechoslovakia's best novelists. The note was obviously necessary because Czechs had not been allowed to read Klima's books; they were only now learning, for the first time, their own literature.

And yet many Czechs, Hanna said, had read her father illegally. Copies of his novels, published abroad, were smuggled into the country. "My father used to say that in the West people smuggle drugs. But in this country, we smuggle books."

In a cobblestone square surrounded by spired stone buildings, a line of people waited before a parked trailer. Inside the trailer was an exhibit on the life of Czechoslovakia's founding prime minister, a democrat and philo-Semite named Thomas Massaryk.

The Communists had banished Massaryk's memory; now Czechs paid eight kron to enter the little trailer to see Massaryk's documents and photographs. One young man took notes, learning his suppressed history.

All at once, Thomas Massaryk and Ivan Klima and the varied names of God had been released into the streets; this country of lies had instantly become a place of truth. And it was led by a man who is perhaps the most honest political leader in the world. For the first time since I was a student, I wanted to wear a political button, the button that so many passersby were wearing: a picture of Havel's face, symbol of the triumph of truth.

We came to Wenceslaus Square. A crowd of several thousand had gathered to celebrate the revolution's fourth-month "anniversary." Communism had finally worked: it had brought the people together in a revolutionary spirit. High school students held hands and skipped through the crowds. During the revolution, that had been the high school students' form of protest: moving through the streets in human chains.

A tour bus drove by, and the passengers waved. The Czechs waved back, happy to include the world in their celebration.

In the center of the square was a large concrete circle filled with dirt, a giant flowerpot. But instead of growing flowers it held candles and wreaths. On the wreaths were written the names of Czechs who had been murdered by the secret police, and the name of Jan Palach, the student who had burned himself to protest the Soviet invasion in 1968. These were now the nation's saints. The wreaths were surrounded by dozens of bouquets, two tulips, three roses, the modest offerings of simple people.

Leo said, "The revolution made this Czech people better than it really was. Until the revolution, Czechs cared about their houses and their meat. The dissidents were very few. But suddenly the whole nation became great, even if just for a few days." The miracle of Prague: a golem people had come to life.

On a large stage, amateur groups played bluegrass music and sentimental village songs. One group sang American spirituals: "I know the Lord that laid His hands on me/ His spirit comes and makes me free."

I asked Leo and Hanna if they had felt that God was close during the revolution. Hanna said, "I knew we were being protected. I had no doubt that once the revolution began it would be successful."

For me, I said, the miracle was that the Communist system, with its vast apparatus of fear, had simply vanished. Hanna told me of a dream she once had, in which she was repeatedly attacked by horrible creatures. But as soon as she closed her eyes and thought of the name of God, the creatures disappeared.

She said, "I don't believe evil exists outside of us. When you meet evil, it is only a test against the *yetzer hara*, the evil in yourself. That is what we learned in this country. If you are afraid, you give power to evil. But if you are strong, if you overcome the evil within yourself, then the evil outside of you is completely powerless." □

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