

# Culture and Art on the Road to Democracy

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In the Czech Lands, freedom above all has meant spiritual freedom. It was therefore no coincidence that intellectuals and artists were always in the forefront of the fight for freedom. Words gave courage to implement changes; words were the political instrument used to uplift the morale of the nation.

By the power of sermons preached by Master Jan Hus, a great Reformation movement was launched in Bohemia. For his words Hus was pronounced a heretic and burnt at the stake in 1415. Two hundred years later, the great "Teacher of Nations," Jan Amos Komenský (1592-1670, better known as Comenius), a scholar and promoter of the idea of the democratization of education and modern methods of teaching, was driven from his homeland for his words. The systematic Germanization of the Czech nation and the suppression of Czech language and culture (after the repression of the Reformation in Bohemia in 1620) led to the 19th-century movement of Czech intellectuals and artists called the National Revival. Through their works writers, poets, historians, musicians, playwrights, and painters helped to awaken the Czech nation's consciousness of the legitimacy of its history, its language, and its culture. Since Czechs had no effective political power within the multinational Austro-Hungarian Empire, art and education served as politicizing factors in the rebirth of Czech society. The National Revival movement culminated in 1918 in the constitution of the sovereign state of Czechoslovakia and in the election of its

first president, the philosopher and scholar Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. With the founding of a new democratic state all spheres of culture flourished.

Fear of the word and independent thought also characterized Nazi Germany. Losses suffered by the Czech nation in the intellectual sphere during World War II were tragic for its culture and its future.

The Communist regime, installed in 1948, feared the word, too, using censorship and imprisonment to silence a number of Czech intellectuals, including the current president of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel. And it was the Czech intellectual and artistic community which played a decisive role in the 1968 attempt to reform the political and economic system and which — after the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact tanks and the consequent escalation of Communist terror — was harshly persecuted. As the regime decayed, censorship weakened, and the cultural community raised its anti-regime voice more and more distinctly. In the days of November 1989, these were the first people prepared for changes and willing to implement them. Theaters became tribunes of public discussions, and actors, writers, playwrights, artists, and musicians the apostles of history in transformation. Václav Havel, a playwright, writer, and philosopher, became the head of state. He is a symbol and personification of the continuity of the history of a nation whose respect for words and for the power of ideas has withstood all that was antagonistic to the principles of freedom and a democratic society.