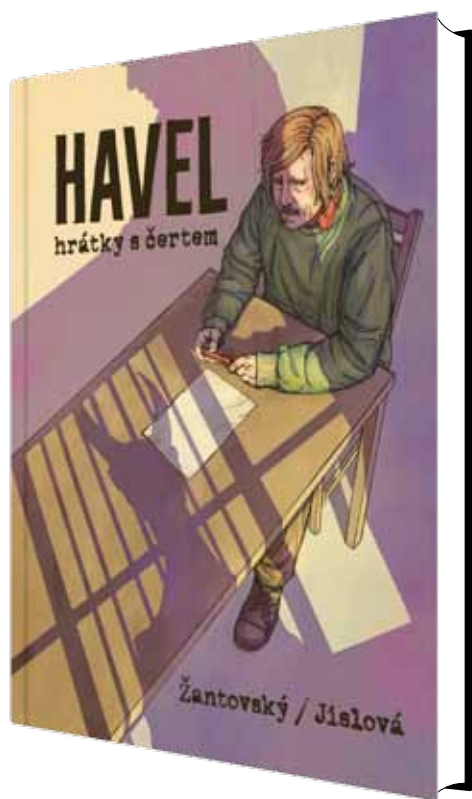


Havel: Playing with the Devil

by **Michael Žantovský** (script), **Štěpánka Jislová** (art)



An extraordinary story proving that true greatness and heroism arise from personal crisis and the courage to embrace one's destiny

A close friend of Václav Havel and an acclaimed comics artist present a graphic novel that fills a long-standing gap. The year 1977, when Charter 77 was published, marked one of the most dramatic periods in Havel's life. After several days of interrogations and house searches, the already renowned yet banned playwright was charged with subversion of the republic and damaging its interests abroad. He was placed in pre-trial detention and released only after four months. This episode provides the framework for a graphic microdrama in which the resolve of the future statesman is put to a severe test.

Štěpánka Jislová (*1992) is a Czech illustrator and comics author. She studied at the Ladislav Sutnar Faculty of Design and Art at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen. With her comic *Strom (Tree)*, she won the student competition CZ.KOMIKS in 2013. Her work has appeared in numerous Czech anthologies (*AARGH!*, *Caves*, *BubbleGun*, *XEROX*) as well as international collections (*Bobla*, *Dirty Diamonds*, *CBA*). She co-founded the Czech branch of Laydeez Do Comics, an organization dedicated to showcasing women creators in the field. She received the Muriel Award for her graphic novel *Srdcovka*. Beyond comics and illustration, she designs tattoos and clothing prints, sells her paintings, and gives lectures.



foto © Štěpánka Jislová

Michael Žantovský (*1949) studied psychology at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague and at McGill University in Montreal, later working as a clinical psychologist. He went on to become a translator (bringing into Czech works by Joseph Heller, Amos Oz, Norman Mailer, Tom Stoppard, and Woody Allen, among others), interpreter, journalist, and lyricist. He was a founding member of Civic Forum and served from 1990 to 1992 as Václav Havel's press secretary and advisor. He later held ambassadorships in the United States, Israel, and the United Kingdom. From 2015 to 2023 he was director of the Václav Havel Library, and he currently serves, among other roles, as a foreign policy advisor to President Petr Pavel.



foto © Jan Klíkava

Introduction by Michael Žantovský

Playing with the Devil unfolds on two levels. The first is the real world of the normalization regime—its machinery of repression and arbitrariness, a largely apathetic public, and a small circle of the unbroken, who draw strength from mutual solidarity and inner moral resources. The second, equally important level takes place within: it is the story of Václav Havel's inner struggle against dark forces seeking to break his will and push him toward resignation or capitulation.

This struggle, which in one form or another occurs in the soul and mind of every human being, finds its archetypal expression in the legend of Doctor Faust – a tale that appears in many versions across almost all European cultures, especially in our part of Europe. A part of the romantic aura of medieval Prague, after all, is the Faust House in the New Town, even though the historical Johann Georg Faust never actually lived there. Still, the Faustian theme relentlessly haunts the accused Havel, both waking and dreaming.

From the meager offerings of the prison library, he manages to find Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*. In his prison diary, he writes: "At night... the devil gripped me!" And in 1985, eight years after his first prison ordeal, he brings the Faustian theme to life himself in the play *Temptation*.

Condensing the real-life story of Havel's battle with the repressive apparatus into the compressed form of a comic is a challenge in itself. But to depict, through the expressive tools of the comic book medium, the inner psychological processes of the protagonist seems almost impossible. Štěpánka Jislová deserves great admiration for how she has risen to this extraordinarily difficult task.

Our story is bookended by an episode from Havel's childhood, when – with the enthusiastic help of his younger brother Ivan—he imagined and enacted the idea of a large industrial enterprise, the "Good Factory" (*Dobrovka*), which would produce a commodity more valuable than any other: goodness itself.

We only wish to suggest here that in Havel's moral formation and development, the environment of his wealthy family played a vital role – one that valued not only material possessions, but also the humanistic ideals of the First Czechoslovak Republic, inspired by Masaryk.

Decades later, and through great adversity, little Václav was given the chance to try to realize the ideals of his childhood in practice.

Václav Havel's role as a fearless defender of human rights, the leader of the Velvet Revolution, and the president of both Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic—who played a decisive part in our country's democratic transformation – is indisputable. That is how history will remember him.

But from the comic *Playing with the Devil*, we gain a more vivid understanding of how difficult and far from inevitable his path to that historical pedestal really was.

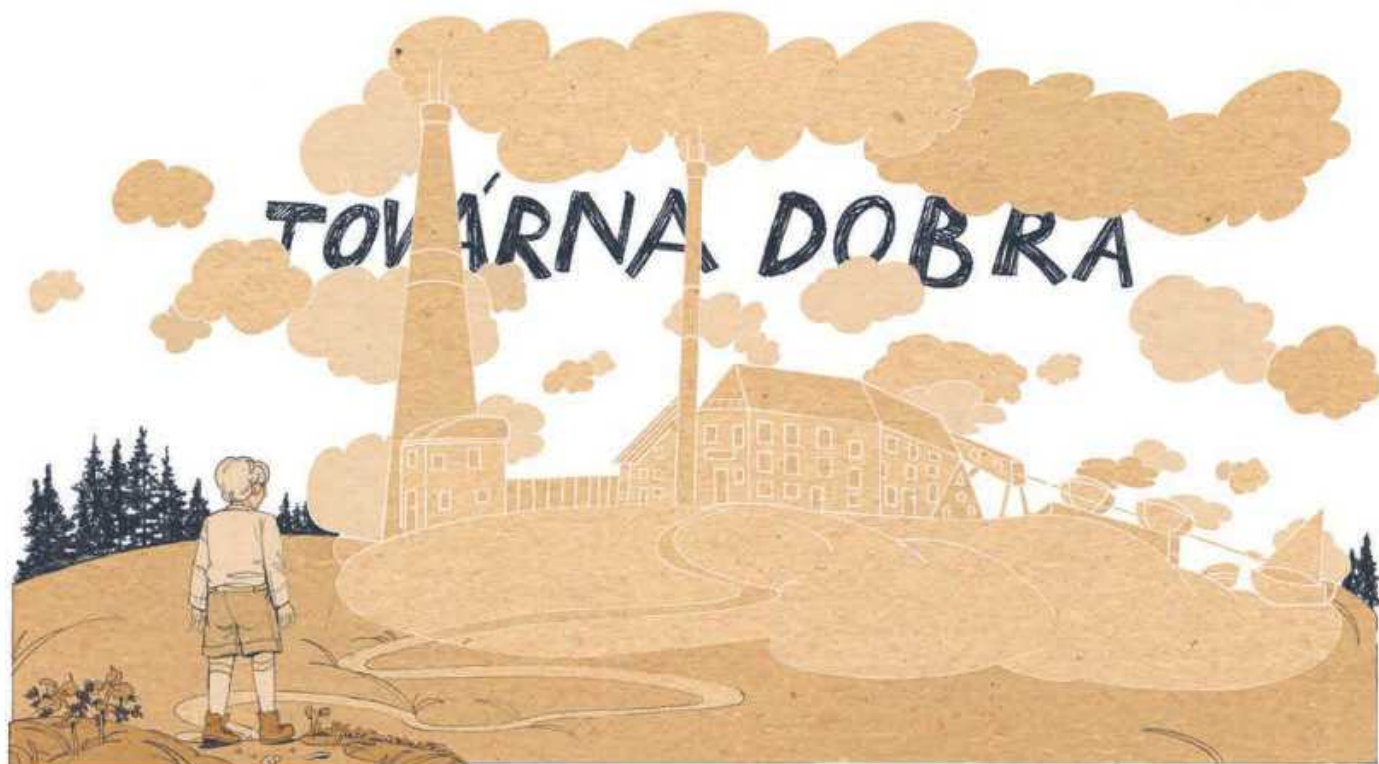
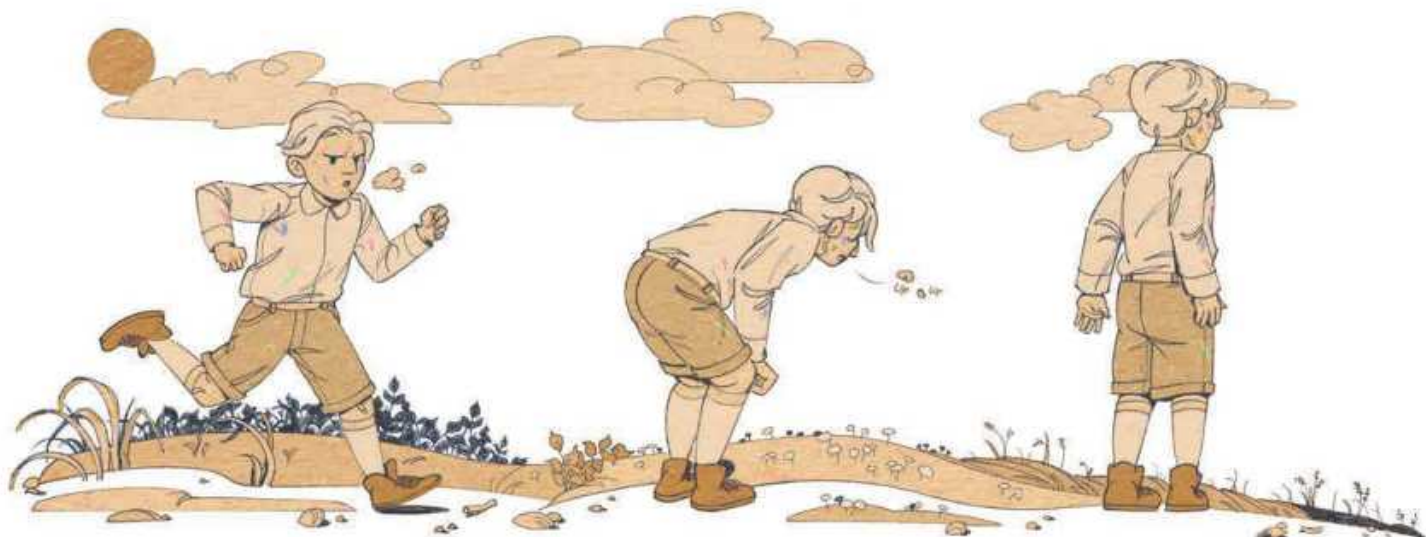
Havel's story illustrates more clearly than most the dictum of Jan Patočka: that the greatness of a person is not measured by how they deal with the tasks they choose for themselves, but by how they face the obstacles that life places in their path.

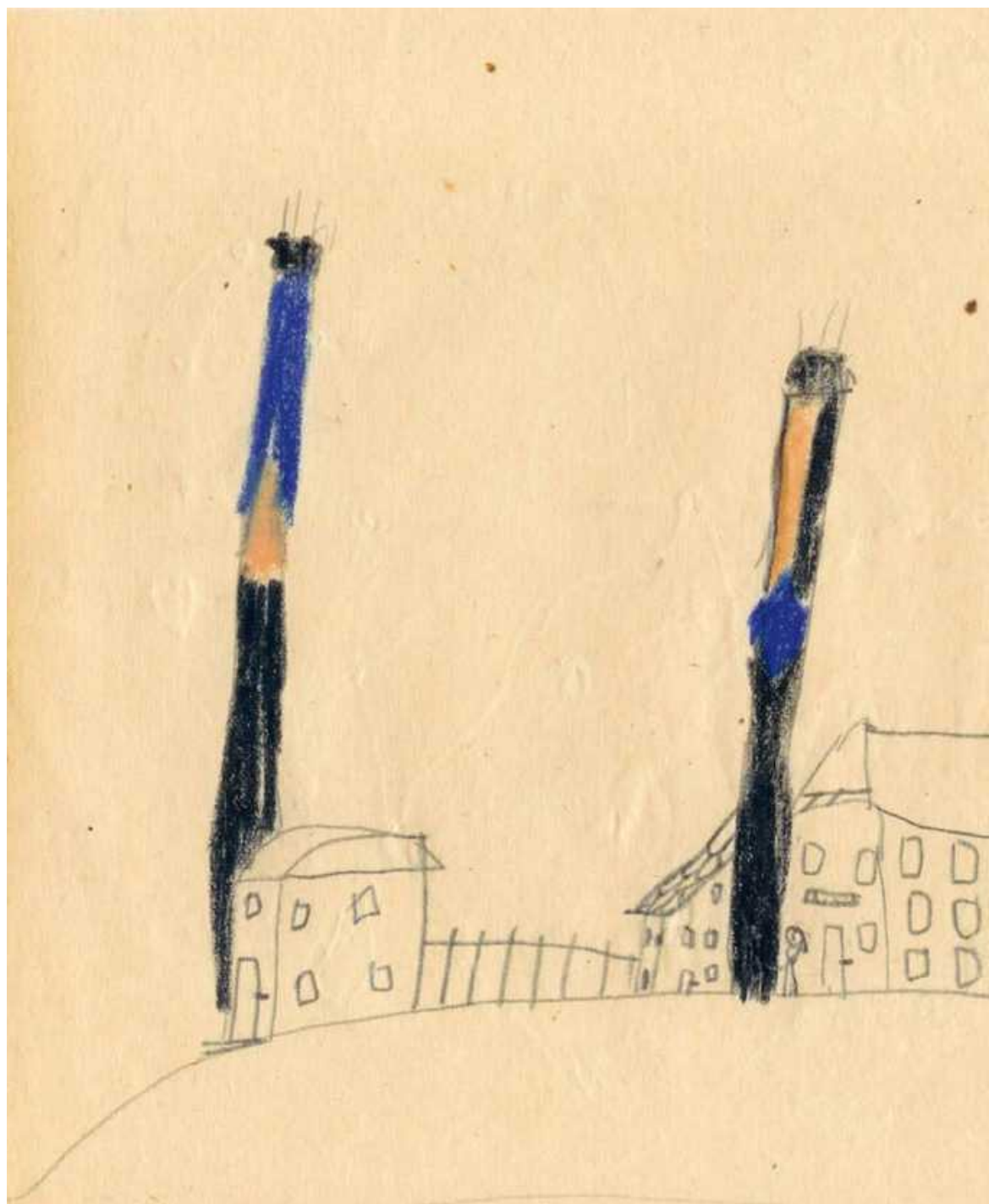


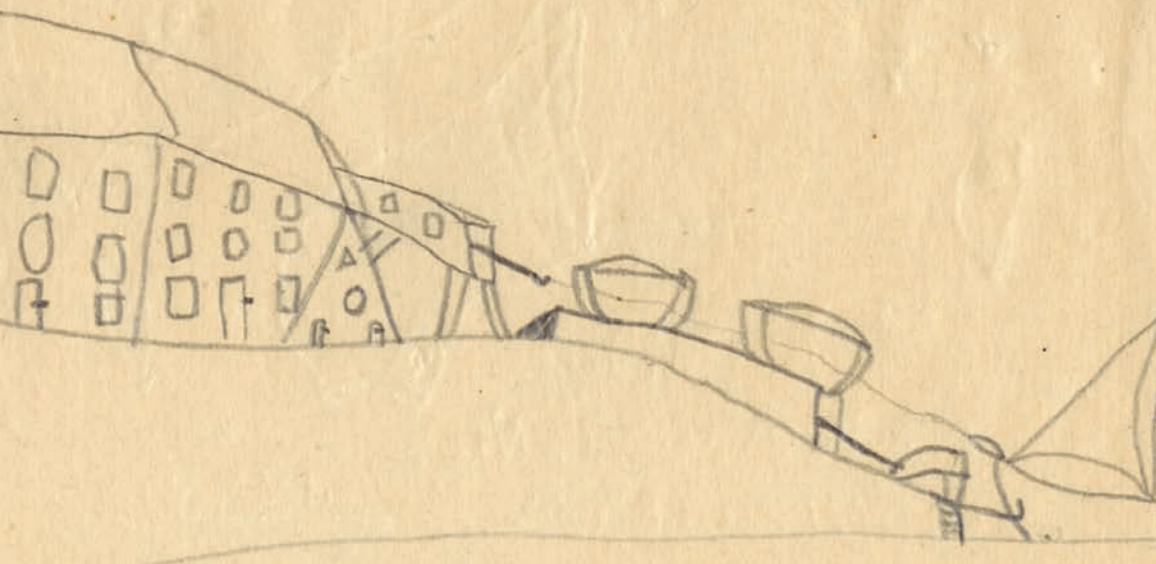














HAVEL

hrátky s čertem







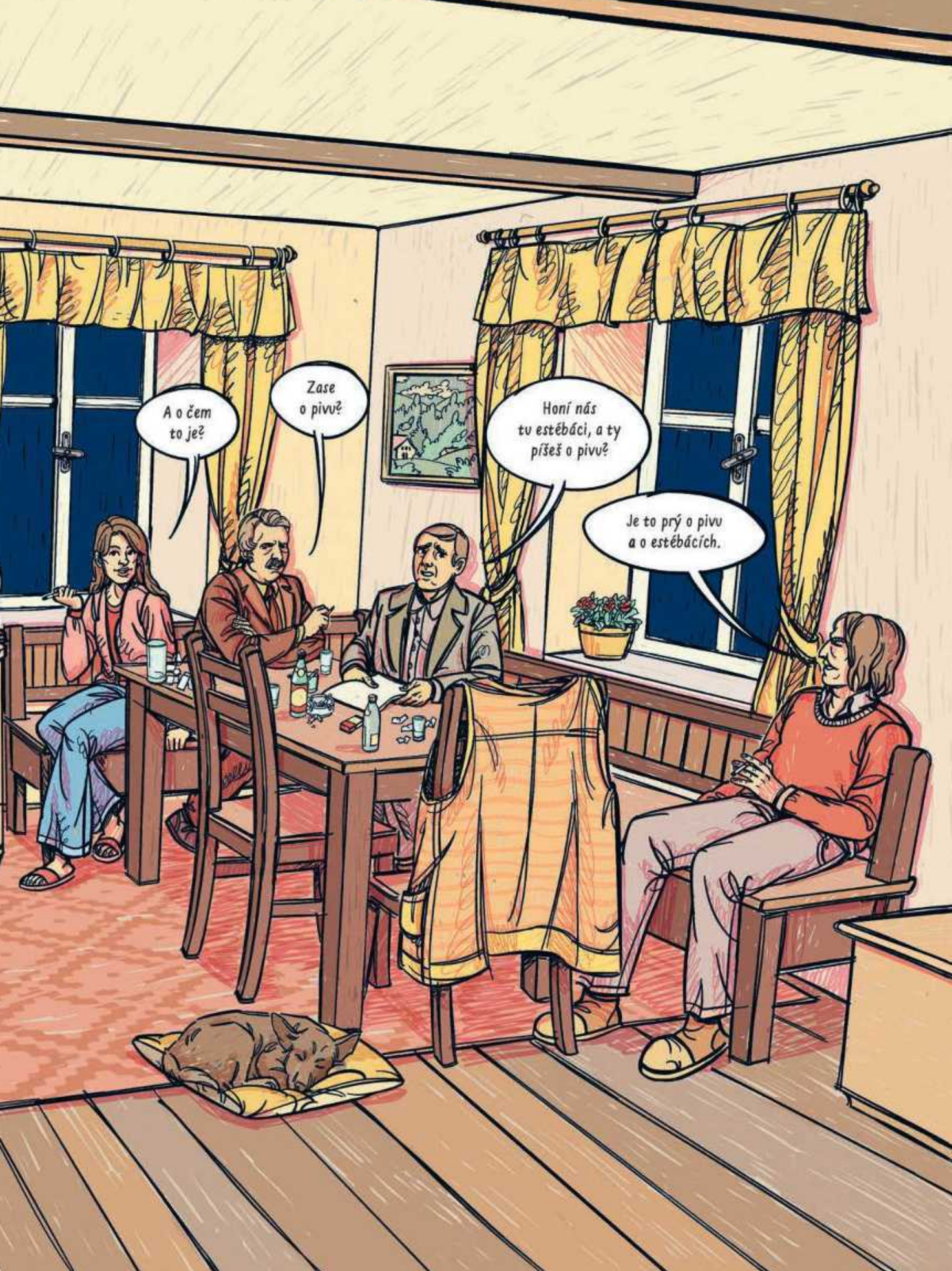
Heleme se, Olga
navářila Ančku
hladkou!

To zní sexy.
Co to má být?

Ty myslíš jen
na jedno, Landáku.
To je krkonošská
houbová polévka.

Dokončil jsem jednu
aktovku. Zítra vám
ji přečtu.

Ale tobě ji, Anno,
přečtu zvlášť.



A o čem
to je?

Zase
o pívu?

Honí nás
tu estébáci, a ty
píšeš o pívu?

Je to prý o pívu
a o estébácích.



Statisticko-evidenční odbor FVEV / 2. správa STB 23038

jméno: OLGA	příjmení: HAVLOVÁ <small>roz. Spilmatová</small>
d. n.: 11. 7. 1933	krycí jméno: OLINA
sociální rozvrstvení: PROLETÁŘSKÝ PŮVOD	
problematika: BOJ S VNITŘNÍM NEPŘÍTELEM	
zaměstnavatel: V DOMÁCNOSTI	
charakterizující údaje: MANŽELKA TOMISE, SPOLUVYDAVATELKA PROTISTÁTNÍ LITERATURY („EXPEDICE“)	



Statisticko-evidenční odbor FVEV / 2. správa STB 4771

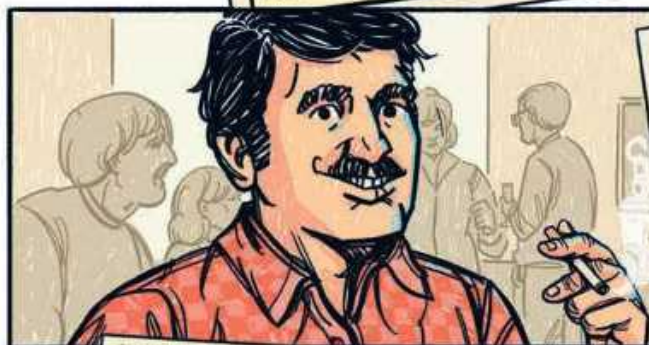
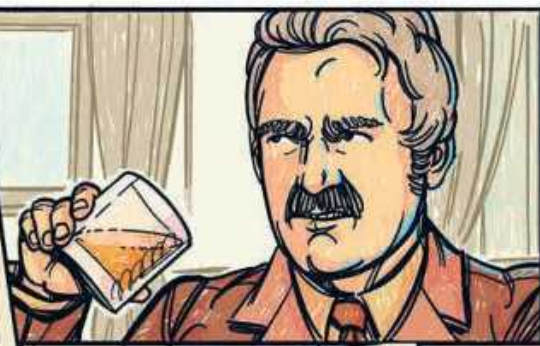
jméno: VÁCLAV	příjmení: HAVEL
d. n.: 5. 10. 1936	krycí jméno: TOMIS
sociální rozvrstvení: BURŽOAZNÍ ŽIVEL	
problematika: BOJ S VNITŘNÍM NEPŘÍTELEM	
zaměstnavatel: BEZ ZAMĚSTNÁNÍ	
charakterizující údaje: OPOZIČNÍK, AUTOR PODVRATNÉ LITERATURY A DÍVEDELNÍCH HER, PODEZŘELÝ Z PODVRACENÍ REPUBLIKY, ROZŠÍŘOVÁNÍ PODVRATNÝCH MATERIÁLŮ, ŽIJE BOHĚMSKÝM ŽIVOTEM, DOLOŽENY ALKOHOL, ŽENY A HLASITÁ HUDBA	

Statisticko-evidenční odbor FVEV / 2. správa STB 21407

jméno: ANNA	příjmení: KOHOUTOVÁ
d. n.: 5. 8. 1932	krycí jméno: SLEPICE
sociální rozvrstvení: ÚŘEDNICKÝ PŮVOD	
problematika: BOJ S VNITŘNÍM NEPŘÍTELEM	
zaměstnavatel: PRACOVNICE ČT VE VÝPOVĚDNÍ LHŮTĚ	
charakterizující údaje: BÝVALÁ ŽENA DIALOGU, PŘÍTELKYŇE TOMISE, PŮVODEM SNAD Z BULHARSKA, MATKA DVOU DCER, VEDE NEMORÁLNÍ ZPŮSOB ŽIVOTA	

Statisticko-evidenční odbor FVEV / 2. správa STB 15206

jméno: PAVEL	příjmení: KOHOUT
d. n.: 20. 7. 1928	krycí jméno: DIALOG
sociální rozvrstvení: BURŽOAZNÍ ŽIVEL	
problematika: BOJ S VNITŘNÍM NEPŘÍTELEM	
zaměstnavatel: SPISOVATEL	
charakterizující údaje: PODVRATNÝ ELEMENT, AKTIVNÍ ÚČASTNÍK KONTRAREVOLUČNÍCH UDÁLOSTÍ 1968, VYLOUČENÝ Z KSČ, HRAJE DIVADLO PO BYTECH, KUMPÁN TOMISE	



Statisticko-evidenční odbor FVEV / 2. správa STB 074021

jméno: PAVEL	příjmení: LANDOVSKÝ
d. n.: 11. 9. 1936	krycí jméno: BOHÁČEK
sociální rozvrstvení: DĚLNICKÝ PŮVOD	
problematika: BOJ S VNITŘNÍM NEPŘÍTELEM	
zaměstnavatel: HEREC BEZ ANGAŽMÁ	
charakterizující údaje: PODVRATNÝ ŽIVEL, HOSPODSKÝ RVÁČ A DĚVKAŠ, TĚŽÍ Z POCHYBNÉ POPULARITĚ SVÝCH FILMŮ, HRAJE DIVADLO PO BYTECH, KUMPÁN TOMISE	

Statisticko-evidenční odbor FVEV / 2. správa STB 34257

jméno: ZDENĚK	příjmení: URBÁNEK
d. n.: 12. 10. 1917	krycí jméno: MONTY
sociální rozvrstvení: VELKOSTATKÁŘSKÝ PŮVOD	
problematika: BOJ S VNITŘNÍM NEPŘÍTELEM, BOJ SE ZAHNANIČNÍMI CENTRÁLAMI	
zaměstnavatel: SPISOVATEL BEZ ZAMĚSTNÁNÍ	
charakterizující údaje: BURŽOAZNÍ ELEMENT, ŽIVÍ SE PŘEKLÁDÁNÍM NAČERNO, KONTAKTY S PODVRATNÝMI ŽIVLY V CIZINĚ, MILOVNÍK ŽEN A WHISKY, OSOBNÍ MENTOR TOMISE	



Plot summary

Childhood and the Birth of the Factory of Good (Introductory Episode)

The story is framed by scenes from the childhood of Václav Havel (Vašek) in 1946. Young Václav and his brother Ivan dream of founding a "Factory of Good" (Továrna Dobrovka) that would produce goodness for everyone. This idealistic childhood dream is contrasted with the later reality.

Dissident Activities and the Play "About Beer and State Security"

The scene shifts to adulthood, where Havel and his wife Olga host a gathering of friends. Havel has just finished a new one-act play, which, according to him, is “about beer and about State Security (StB)”. The group of friends, including Pavel Landovský (Landák) and other dissident figures, discuss their anti-regime activities while under constant surveillance by the State Security (StB), which monitors their home.

The Underground Trial and the Creation of Charter 77

Havel learns about the arrest of members of the band The Plastic People of the Universe and others from the underground. Although he barely knows them personally, he feels a moral obligation to act. He realizes that condemning musicians “for their music” could lead to condemning “every artist for his novel, poem, or picture”. This leads him to the idea of a petition.

A scene from the court trial follows, where Ivan Jirous, Pavel Zajíček, Svatopluk Karásek, and Vratislav Brabenec are sentenced. Havel and his friends subsequently meet to discuss their next step. The petition they create calls on the government to observe human rights, to which it committed in the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference. Landovský warns him that they are heading for trouble.

Havel's First Imprisonment and Moral Crisis (1977)

The attempt to deliver the document turns into a grotesque chase with the StB. Havel is arrested on suspicion of the criminal offense of subversion of the republic.

In prison, Havel is interrogated, surrounded by representatives of the repressive apparatus. His interrogator has Mephistophelian features. Havel, devastated and depressed, is overwhelmed by an inner, devilish temptation. In April 1977, he writes a letter to the General Prosecutor, in which he offers his binding promise that if released, he will refrain from all activities that could be qualified as criminal. He promised to stop making public political statements. This concession, which became his greatest trauma, is published in the press and exploited for propaganda.

Overcoming the Crisis and Renewed Activity

After being released from custody, Havel is tormented by remorse and drinks. He feels he has disgraced himself and everything he stood for. Olga, his "rock", is skeptical and pragmatic but remains supportive. She accuses him of only harming himself and that the policeman exploited him. Havel finally comes to terms with his failure. He publishes the essay "THE POWER OF THE POWERLESS" (Moc bezmocných), dedicating it to the memory of Jan Patočka, one of the three spokesmen for Charter 77, who died in March 1977 after a long interrogation.

In April 1978, he co-founds the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Prosecuted (VONS).

Second Imprisonment and the Letter to Olga (1982)

Havel continues his dissent. In October 1978, he attempts to attend the Railway Workers' Ball with friends, but they are thrown out. Havel is later arrested, and in July 1982, he is sentenced to four and a half years of imprisonment for the criminal offense of subversion of the republic.

The story concludes with a letter from prison at Plzeň-Bory, in which Havel writes to Olga about the difficulty of “accepting responsibility even for one’s own failures”, and finds the path to “true peace of soul”—which is the final victory in his struggle with the devil of his own weakness.





HAVEL!

BUCH!
BUCH!

VSTÁVAT!



Vy jste mi
ale ranní ptáče!
Šup, oblékat!



Zešílím z toho
nicnedělání. Dejte
mi aspoň učebnici
angličtiny!

Ha, ha. To
se kvůli vám mají
všichni příslušníci
učit anglicky?



Proč by se
měli učit anglicky?
To budu jen já.



A kdo bude
kontrolovat, jestli
nečtete něco závadného?
Vy jste mi pěkný
lišák.



Dejte mi aspoň
nějaké léky proti
depresi.



Pošlu vás
k doktorovi.



březen 1977

Všem je jedno, že jsem tady.
Budu tu pořád.





