Introduction by Michael Žantovský

Dancing with the Devil unfolds on two levels. The first is the real world of the communist "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 in his waking hours and in his dreams.
In 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 graphic novel 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 well-to-do family played a vital role – one that valued not only material possessions, but also the humanistic ideals of the First Czechoslovak Republic, inspired by its founder, Thomas Garrigue 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 *Dancing 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 the philosopher Jan Patočka who briefly appears in the story: 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.

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, *The Audience*, which, according to him, is “about beer and about the secret police (StB)”. The group of friends, including Pavel Landovský (Landák) and other dissident figures, discuss their anti-regime activities while under constant surveillance by the secret police (StB), which monitors their home.

The Trial of the “Underground” and the Creation of Charter 77

Havel learns about the arrest of members of the underground band The Plastic People of the Universe and some of their colleagues. 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 organizing a petition.

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

Havel's First Imprisonment and Moral Crisis

The attempt to deliver the document to the authorities turns into a grotesque chase with the StB. Havel is arrested on suspicion of the criminal offense of subversion of the republic. During the period of pre-trial detention, Havel is interrogated by secret police interrogators.

His personal 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 promises to stop making public political statements. Upon his release, 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 which he tries to drown in alcohol and partying. He feels he has disgraced himself and everything he stood for. His wife Olga, his "rock", is skeptical and pragmatic but remains supportive. She believes he had only harmed himself by allowing the policeman to exploit him. Havel finally comes to terms with his failure. He writes and 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.

Second Imprisonment and the Letters to Olga

Havel continues his dissent. After co-founding the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Prosecuted (VONS) in April 1978 he is arrested again, and in July 1982, sentenced to four and a half years of imprisonment for the criminal offense of subversion of the republic. The story concludes with a letter to his wife from prison at Plzeň-Bory, in which Havel writes to Olga about his realization that “accepting responsibility even for one’s own failures”, is the only path to “true peace of mind”– the final victory in his struggle with the devil of his own weakness.