

VÁCLAV HAVEL'S PRAGUE



Martin C. Putna



Václav Havel

The Havel family not only resided in Prague, but actively participated in the construction of the modern Czech capital. Both father and grandfather of Václav Havel were – what we would call by current terminology – developers. The most significant of their projects are the film studios constructed on Barrandov (situated south of the city center on a hill overlooking the Vltava River) and the Lucerna Palace on Václavské náměstí (The Wenceslas Square). The Havels also built their own family home which can be found on Rašínovo nábreží n. 78. Today, this elegant structure built in the years 1904–1905 is less striking and noticeable than before. The reason for this is the fact that in the 1990s a modern structure called Tančící dům (The Dancing House) was built alongside it. Most tourists who photograph the Dancing House are usually unaware that right next to this modern building is a house, which was a starting point of Václav Havel's life journey. To this day the ex-president's brother and philosopher Ivan Havel resides here. And let me add one little detail: One window in the original Havel family apartment is situated in a skewed wall which offers a clear and direct view of the Prague Castle. This was a specific wish of the constructor of the house, Václav Havel, who wanted to be able to look at the majestic seat of Czech kings every day. In a symbolic fashion he foretold his grandson's journey from the family house to his presidential role on the Prague Castle. Places connected with Václav Havel and his life before the presidency can be found in an almost direct line, which copies the bank of the Vltava River. Fore mostly, the Café Slavia standing across the street from the National Theater, has to be mentioned. This is where Václav Havel spent his young bohemian years, where he as a seventeen year old organized the literary group "Sestiatifénici" ("The Thirtysixers") and where he started to get fully involved in the independent literary life of Prague. Another very important place for Havel is without a doubt a theater called "Na Zábřehu" (The "On the Rails" Theater), which can be found in the Prague Old Town. In the 1960s, Havel worked here as a stagehand and later on as a dramatist. In 1963, this theater was the scene of the first of many successes Havel later experienced in his world famous playwrighting career – the premiere of the play "Zahradní slavnost" ("The Garden Party"). The exposition of the Václav Havel Library was recently set up in this area (Rejšovská Street n. 7) and carries the name "Václav Havel – český mýtus aneb Havel v kostce" ("Václav Havel – Czech Myth or Havel in a Nutshell"). On exhibit are rare contemporary documents which offer complex visual information about Havel's life and literary work. From the year 1989 the Prague Castle became Václav Havel's main area of function. From here Havel not only carried out his presidential duties as the head of the Czechoslovak and later Czech state, but managed to take care and literally beautify the Prague Castle as well. He freed it from the grayish isolation which it suffered from under the Communist regime, opened it to the general public and injected it with life and "happiness". During his presidency Václav Havel purchased a villa in a Prague residential area, where he moved after his presidential term expired in 2003. He lives in this villa to this day – formally as an ordinary Czech elder, but in fact as one of the most distinct personas of not only Czech public life but global public life as well.

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In the Old Town house located in Rejšovská Street n. 7 used to stand a café called Montmartre. From the early 1920s it was one of the ancient centers of Prague's Czech-German-Jewish avant-garde, favored by Jaroslav Hašek, Franz Kafka or Egon Erwin Kisch. The café is now reopened and right above it is situated the recently opened Montmartre Gallery. The exhibition of The Václav Havel Library named "Václav Havel – český mýtus aneb Havel v kostce" ("Václav Havel – Czech Myth or Havel in a Nutshell") can be visited here. On display are rare contemporary documents which offer complex visual information about Havel's life and literary work. The exhibition is in harmony with the values and character of Havel and his life. Therefore it is playful, "non-pathetic" and conserves the element of humor and irony. Also various exhibitions connected with the Czech dissent movement and artistic underground are organized in the Montmartre Gallery as well as public debates and literary recitals.

