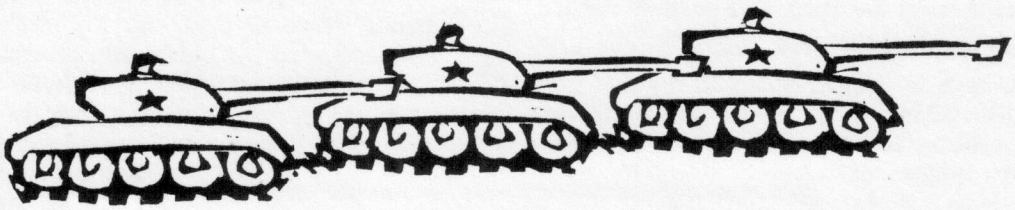


Not a Harlequin Romance

Olga Havlova *talks with Paul Wilson*

When I called on Olga Havlova at her home in Prague one afternoon early in December, 1989, she was on her hands and knees, scrubbing the bathroom floor. "I do this to relax," she said, emerging from the room and wiping her forehead with her arm. "When things get too hectic, I like to do housework. It has to be done anyway." Olga's husband, Vaclav Havel, was out with the Civic Forum, frantically trying to assemble a "government of national understanding" acceptable to both the Communist Party, which still held nominal power in the country, and the people, who held the streets. Havel was under a great deal of pressure to stand for president of Czechoslovakia, but he had not yet agreed.

Although Havel's Letters to Olga, *written when he was in prison from 1979 to 1983, can hardly be said to overflow with affection for Olga, he has acknowledged his deep debt to her in a later book,* Disturbing the Peace *where, in a memorable phrase, he describes her as "someone you can't get drunk on a bun." "I needed an energetic woman beside me to turn to for advice," Havel went on, "and yet still be someone I could be in awe of. In Olga, I found exactly what I needed: someone who could respond to my own mental instability, offer sober criticism of my wilder ideas, provide private support for my public adventures."*

A few days before, I had seen Olga in action, informally chairing a meeting of the crew that put out the Videojournal, *an underground video newsmagazine that was in its second year of operation. She ran the meeting tightly and efficiently, brooking no nonsense, snapping impatiently at anyone who wandered off the point. Yet the atmosphere was always relaxed and friendly.*

On the day of our conversation the Havels' flat was frantically busy, with people coming and going, phones ringing, little gatherings of people in corners discussing matters that were, no doubt, of historical importance. She led me into the living room of her brother-in-law Ivan's flat, with whom they share a common foyer, and there, in a bay window with a view of the Prague Castle, we talked. Olga had kindly agreed to this interview, I think on the assumption that I really wanted to talk about Vaclav — or Vasek, as she calls him — and knowing that he would scarcely have the time. It was a while before she realized that what I really wanted to talk about was her.

P.W.

— People who have read Letters to Olga *are curious about you. I find that the most sensitive readers tend to be women. They notice that you were present in the book as a very strong personality, but they were often annoyed at Havel for sometimes being harsh with you.*

That's Vasek's way, to give orders. It's not always my way to listen. But the situation in prison was a little different, and when he wanted something, I tried to get it for him. Once he wanted some cologne, and friends who were with the American Embassy went to Vienna and brought some back for him. I knew that in prison it was awfully important for him to have some things, like good tea, cigarettes. So it was more like something between friends; I certainly didn't take his criticisms of me as a put-down, because most of the time we do what we want anyway. Sometimes I listen, and sometimes I dig in my heels.

— He often complained that you didn't write, or that your letters weren't full enough to satisfy his curiosity about what was going on outside. Was it hard to write to him?

It turned out that he didn't get all his letters; the censors confiscated some of them. Sometimes I'd write a really good letter and they'd confiscate it, or hold it back, and meanwhile a letter would come from him complaining that I hadn't written. Sometimes our let-

ters would cross, and we'd ask questions that had already been answered. It was a vicious circle, and they did it deliberately, especially in Hermanice. So the impression from the book isn't entirely right.

— Are you originally from Prague?

I was born in Prague. I should say that I don't normally like talking about my life, or about how I met Vasek, because it's like a Harlequin romance. I come from the quarter of Zizkov, from a working-class family. Both my parents were in the Communist Party, but I didn't even graduate from high school because the condition was that I join the Communist Union of Youth and I refused.

Vasek and I first met in the Café Slavia; we were introduced by a friend from the lab technicians' school where Vasek was studying. Vasek was seventeen at the time, and I was twenty, and he asked me to go steady with him and I said no, you're too young, wait for a while. Three years later, we met in the Slavia again, then Vasek wrote me a letter asking me to go steady, and I replied, "Well, okay then, but I won't be easy to live with." But it turned out that it was far more difficult living with Vasek.

Olga Havlova

— Someone once described Zizkov as a real breeding ground for Communism because of the poverty in the 1930's. Was it like that?

Well, Mr. Seifert was from Zizkov too. Maybe Zizkov was like that under the Austrians, but during the First Republic it certainly wasn't the way our television serials describe it — overworked mothers with lots of kids scrubbing the laundry in courtyards, slaving away while the kids go hungry. Here's an example: when Vasek was born, he weighed 3.6 kilos, whereas I weighed 4.5 kilos. My mother nursed me until I was a year and a half old, and they let her off work so she could come to the nursery where she fed me. So conditions where she worked couldn't have been so bad.

— Were your parents Communists by conviction, or — ?

There was a kind of euphoria in the air after the war. People believed a new era was coming and that everything would be different. My mother never really explained what led her to join the party and I was never able to get it out of her but I think she must have felt a need to change everything after the war, to start a new life. The Communists came forward with a new idea, which gave them the advantage over others who came back after the war with ideas and traditions from the First Republic, and when you come out with something new, something that's in fashion, it's usually more successful than something classical. My father wasn't living with us any more; he and mother divorced, but they still got along, and he worshipped me, and called me "Beauty" when I was small. I'm only telling you this so you'll know how — well, how pleasant it was in this so-called poverty. We went to the theatre a lot, my mother always took us to a restaurant for lunch every Sunday. But when I first visited the Havels', when Vasek first took me home, Mrs. Havel was terribly against our relationship. Not only had Vasek chosen a girl who was three years older than he was, she had no education, no knowledge of languages, none of that. His mother was terribly surprised to discover that I knew how to set a table properly, but I'd known all that from childhood. I mean, we used to go for ice-cream to the Barrandov Terraces, that Vasek's father had built — my mother in a hat and all of us in our Sunday best — and it was beautiful way to spend Sunday. And we often went to the theatre or the movies. I was a real movie fanatic; I sometimes went three times a day.

— Do you remember any of the movies you used to see?

During the war there was a man who for a crown would show movies and clips from American films and

old Austrian newsreels. I can remember bit of things, from Shirley Temple to Spencer Tracy, that beautiful film about boys in a reform school. *Men of Boy's Town* it was called, and I think it had Mickey Rooney in it too. I saw so many films that one of the women there said I must have started going to the movies when I was still in diapers. But I was twelve when the war finished, so I was big enough to start going to the theatre myself. We had a good Czech teacher who made us copy out passages from books, and not long ago I discovered my notes and I had some remarkable books side by side, from *The Foundling's Fortune* by Slava Jelinek, who was our greatest pulp fiction writer, to Balzac and Dostoyevsky, and when I looked at it again, I was astonished at what I'd been reading at fifteen and sixteen, a real goulash of trash and good literature. It was all there, except the Harlequin-type romances, which I never liked anyway. I liked reading boys' adventure literature instead.

— I think that experiences you have when you're very young and the things you observe around you help to shape not only your personality — that's obvious — but also your political convictions, even though it may be unconscious at the time.

Yes, for example Vasek wrote in *Disturbing the Peace* that he was always uncomfortable about being the child of a bourgeois family. Well, one of the gifts my mother gave me — my dowry, as it were — was a kind of working-class pride, and for me that means that whoever I talk with, rich or poor, I judge them the same way: either he's a good person, or he's bad, clever, or stupid, and I don't take account of any social differences. This is also connected with the traditions of this country. Sometimes there's an element of ridicule in it — as in *The Good Soldier Svejk*, but there's a strong peasant pride too. I think the greatest destruction, the greatest degradation, took place in the 1950's, and then again in the seventies — that was in fact the worst — the kind of humiliation that you could scarcely compare even to the Middle Ages, and that pride — that feeling that you can't retreat because of your pride, it's not fanatical, it's just . . . well, that kind of basis was here. And then after the war, when the Scouting movement was founded, I became a Girl Guide, and that was another influence. I'd spent a lot of time fighting with boys; I was pretty wild, and I talked back a lot, and then suddenly I began doing good deeds, which I'd done before of course, but now it was nobler somehow.

— Maybe when we get a certain distance on things, we'll see that one of the greatest mysteries is how the Communist Party could have attracted workers into its ranks, when they, of all people, were the most put down and humiliated by it.

You know, back in Zizkov where I lived, some of the first to join the Communist Party were people who had the greatest contempt for workers, I mean the layabouts, the black-marketeers, people who hated work. When my mother and father joined, it was that longing for something new, but the others — well, who knows why they joined? And seeing that was one of the reasons I began, very early, to think politically, and of course I was rebelling against my parents, that too. And I remember once — when was it? Maybe 1951? When did Stalin die?

— In '53.

So once, on Stalin's birthday, a train was sent off from here full of gifts, everything from painted Easter eggs to crystal, and mother and I were listening to the radio and I said, "That Stalin is a real oriental monarch, he's taking tribute from us," and mother jumped up and slapped my face and we didn't speak to each other for a year. So I think I had pretty good judgement at a time when a lot of people still had to — it was probably instinct, or something.

— I wanted to ask you about that, because you must have argued with your parents about their beliefs.

I think I must have had a natural sense of justice. I remember arguing with my teachers over the marks she gave two classmates who couldn't carry a tune. Whenever someone sings off key — Vasek, for instance, always sings horribly off key — I can't help laughing. I was always tested after them because my last name started with S — and one of them got a C and the other an A in singing. The one who got the A was the principal's daughter and the other was her friend, and I was very upset and stood up in the class and asked how come they got such good marks when they couldn't even carry a tune.

— I assume you got into trouble for it.

I got into a lot of trouble; the teacher would sometimes say he couldn't stand the sight of me and throw me out of class. I was pretty mouthy; sometimes I was just misbehaving, and sometimes I was mad because of some injustice, especially when someone got marks according to the kind of family he came from. Once we were supposed to decorate the classroom with flags and things to celebrate the anniversary of February, when the Communists took over, and the whole class — there were twenty-three girls, it was a girls' school — the whole class refused and one of our teachers, a wonderful Czech teacher, came to talk to us, and she said we couldn't do this to our homeroom teacher, that he'd be in trouble for it, but we said, No! We don't agree with it and we won't decorate the classroom, and we didn't, but then someone else came — two "traitors," we called them — and did it for us.

— When was that?

It was in 1949, I think. I worked out a deal with my Russian teacher that in return for not acting up in class, he wouldn't make me learn Russian, because I refused to learn anyway. He was a wonderful old man, a Russian émigré, so he was sensible about it.

— Do you remember the Communist takeover?

Very vaguely. I remember the uprising of 1945, strangely enough, but not 1948. I don't even remember what I was doing at the time. Somehow it's completely dropped out of my mind. Maybe it's the kind of thing you don't want to remember. I was going to school then, but in 1945 there was more to see; there was shooting in the streets, and it was more horrific.

The Hungarian events of 1956 had a deep impact on me. I was working in an office at the time, in the bookkeeping department, and I was terribly upset by it; I talked about it at work, and they called me in and told me to stop or they'd fire me.

– Did you keep going to the theatre and the movies in the fifties?

Oh yes, a lot, and to the opera and concerts, and I was surprised later to learn that Havel's family wasn't much for music. I went to concerts, and an awful lot of theatre, while Vasek was writing poetry at the time, and trying to catch up with his education. And he was three years younger, after all.

You know, there's a mysterious thing; I managed to escape or avoid a lot of the nonsense that went on then. I never had to study people like Kohout in school, and I don't even know his poems very well – or any of those Communist Youth League poets. We still studied decent poetry, like Erben and others. And I remember one wonderful experience we had when we were still going to school; they showed us *The Fall of Berlin*, and we all began to shout out loud and whistle and carry on and then we stood up and ranted and the teachers were running about like chickens because it was as though we were ridiculing them. It's a totally ridiculous film, you know, Stalin descending from an airplane in white clothes and all that.

– I hope it's preserved somewhere in the archives.

I hope so too, and the paintings and the art from that period. I used to go to exhibitions a lot then too. I always had slightly older friends who would encourage me and push me. The first *samizdat* I ever read was Hrabal, and the poems of Jiri Kolar, and of course Vasek's things. He dedicated two collections of his poetry to me for my birthday, and then we began to discover stuff together, like the New Wave of French films, or special programs featuring famous directors like Chaplin, Carné, and so on. We saw all those films. And then amateur theatre has a great tradition here; there was a place in Zizkov called Masaryk Hall where I acted in little theatre productions.

– Ah, so you once were an actress?

It was a tradition here. Every town had its own little theatre company that would put on plays, so as a matter of fact I was involved in theatre a lot earlier than Vasek, who was more interested in philosophy. I tried to read some of the books he read too but, well, my tastes ran more to classical literature. Of course when Vasek became a dramaturge and had to read all those plays, I'd read most of them already. It's true that a lot more stayed in his head than in mine, but still – anyway, from this point on we were together, and I'd have to talk about both of us.

– Did you work at the Theatre on the Baludstrade along with Havel?

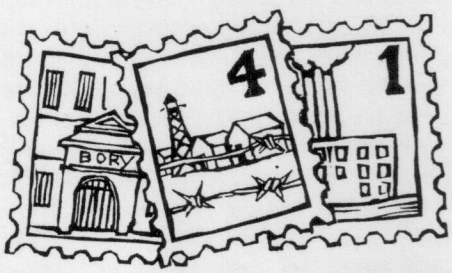
Yes, I had a daytime job there and Vasek worked as a stage hand. At first it was awful, because the best part was sitting around in the evenings and I couldn't manage this because I had to get up early in the morning. Then I was offered the job of usher, and I took it because work started at seven in the evening, instead of eight in the morning, and it meant I could be there in the evenings with Vasek and sit around with everybody afterwards. The atmosphere there was wonderful. The writers' wives hung out in the theatre and everyone sat in on rehearsals. Being an usher was nothing like you see in those movies from the West, where they shove tips at the ushers and then ignore them. There was a wonderful feeling of camaraderie.

– Did you have a feeling then that things were getting better all the time, at least in the theatre?

Oh, yes. From 1956 on it was evident that things were improving. There was still censorship, but we could travel, for instance. Our first trip was to Poland in 1958; then I went to Hungary and later, in 1968, Vasek went to America.

– Did you go with him?

No, but in 1969 both of us were supposed to go to the U.S.A. for half a year on a Ford Foundation grant and we had a big party at Hradecek. Vasek and I were sleeping in the attic on a straw tick – we let our guests have the beds – and suddenly, about six in the morning, someone came in and yanked at Vasek's leg and said, "Passport control!" and it was the police coming to confiscate our passports. When this happened Vasek was right in the middle of a dream that we were on a boat to America and someone had come to check our passports. Anyway, they took them away, and last year – twenty years later, I got a passport, and then this year in June they confiscated it. So I had it for not quite a year, and the only place I went in that time was East Germany. Vasek was always trying to get me to travel, but I just didn't feel like it.



– It's my experience that the year 1968, as I lived through it at the time, was quite different than how I look back on it now. What I thought was going on at the time, and what I know now was going on back then, are two different things. I wonder if you have the same feeling?

Someone was just saying recently that in 1968 – I'm talking about the time before August 1968, before the invasion – there seemed to be more time to get ready for the changes. Now, suddenly, twenty years go by and we realize that we didn't really have the time we thought we did. But I love the idea that things weren't as hectic then as they are now, because now, there's the feeling that if we don't do everything right away, we'll never have another chance, conditions will never again be right again, or there will never be the kind of enthusiasm for change again. I'm not putting this very clearly, but –

– No, I think that's exactly right. I remember the whole Prague Spring had a very leisurely pace –

I wrote Vasek a letter in 1968, when he was in America – and my short letters, the ones that Vasek always scolded me for when he was in prison, have a long history; I always wrote awfully short letters – and when he was in Paris, Vasek complained to Pavel Tigrid: "Revolutionary things are going on in Prague, and Olga writes me a half a page." And he gives my letter to Tigrid, and Tigrid says, "But she's written everything you need to know." I guess it takes a journalist to know if what I say makes sense, and when half a page is enough. We were sceptical of everything in 1968; the Communists were mostly people we didn't know – I mean who knew Dubcek or Mlynar? Besides, we mostly moved with people in the arts; our friends were actors, directors, film-makers, people in the technical end of theatre, so the political world was pretty distant.

– In Disturbing the Peace *Havel talks about how his greatest, most direct arguments in the sixties were not with the regime as such, but with reform Communists. This made a lot of things clear to me, such as the fact that the reform Communists, like most normal people, had a lot of illusions about what they could do in that situation, and a lot of illusions about what people wanted.*

It's odd, because at that time Vasek was trying to reform the Writers' Union and he spent most of his time with people like Kundera and Kohout; and then later, after the trial of the Plastic People we found – not just with the Plastics, but with the whole cultural underground, who were mostly younger – that we had far better relationships than we ever had with reform Communists who were pretty much our own age. There was always a kind of distance, because they were always very reluctant – like Kohout, for instance. Kohout often came to visit us at Hradecek, and towards morning, when the conversation would seem to be somewhat more intimate, Vasek would ask him how he felt now about his Communist past, and Kohout would always give an evasive answer, or brush it off with a joke. He was never forthright, always very guarded. But whenever the Plastic People came to Hradecek to record those two records, we'd sit up till morning drinking beer, and the conversation would really get deeply into things that mattered.

But as far as the generational thing goes, I've never had any problems getting on with people far younger than me, or with good people who are older. But there are people my age and I just know I'll always have problems getting along with them. And now, at these recent demonstrations, there were parents who went along with their children. In France, for instance, there's a huge gap between parents and their children, but here, the generations intermingled, and as a matter of fact it was the children who really showed their parents what they should be doing.

– Speaking of generations, I've seen manuscripts by young Czech writers lately, so young that they can hardly remember 1968. So their writing is not marked by those events, and also they write differently. For instance writers in Josef Skvorecky's generation learned how to say some things in roundabout ways to get past the censors, and as a translator, I have to find ways of expressing directly what the author is really only hinting at.

I can't imagine how you'd translate *The Miracle Game* by Skvorecky, for instance.

– I've just finished doing it.

It must have been awful. There was some of it I didn't understand at all, and as a matter of fact, I didn't like the book.

– Why not?

I don't know. It was too personal or something. It has to do with distance, the feeling that it was written by someone who wasn't here, who didn't have certain experiences. Because August – the invasion – was such a powerful thing, just like these demonstrations now. It created common feeling among people, a common bond, a genuine brotherhood. Maybe it was like that during the war, you know, a tense situation that brings people together. And I think Skvorecky is looking at the subject with too much distance.

– But he was here in 1968, and he wrote The Miracle Game *not long after he left.*

Maybe, but there was something unpleasantly personal about it. Perhaps if he'd written it five years later, it would have been better. Anyway, I have to admit that I didn't read it right through.

– Are you sure you don't like it because Skvorecky makes fun of a certain "world-class playwright"?

No, no, no. I know, for instance, that some of the writers who are in the book still break out in a cold sweat whenever they hear it mentioned. But – I just think he should have let more time go by before he wrote it, that's all.

– How about his Engineer of Human Souls*?*

I'm awfully fond of that book. I think it's probably the best of his recent work, although I admit I haven't read everything, because not everything has been getting through, so there are some of his books I haven't read yet. But I love *The Engineer*. Unfortunately the police confiscated our copy during a house search, so I can't even read it again.

– How are you managing these days, with the stormy events going on around you?

It's terribly hard, but I'm mainly worried about Vasek. People are coming at him with demands from all sides, and he needs to sleep at least once every other day, but he's only managed to get a good sleep once ever since things began. He's got to hold up because if he doesn't, then – I'm deliberately not with him all day long so that I won't collapse with fatigue, but as a matter of fact I don't actually get much sleep either, because I know that if I go to bed, Vasek will wake me up when he comes home anyway and we'll go over the events of the day. If I were with him, it would be like living through everything twice: once myself, and once again when Vasek would tell me everything from his point of view.

Here at home there's peace and quiet; it's a kind of asylum. I don't give interviews myself because things are too tense now and I don't feel like sitting down and explaining things to people. I get very annoyed when they ask you questions they should have done their homework on, like how did Charter 77 start up, or when they ask you over the phone how to get here. I mean, if they have the address, surely they can look it up on a map of Prague. If I had to give out that kind of information all the time, I'd go crazy.

– I've seen an interesting video called "A Few Sentences About Hradecek," where Havel shows the viewer around your cottage in North-East Bohemia. You appear as only a static figure, reading a book in the garden, studiously ignoring Havel as he babbles on about the house. In fact, you seem pretty annoyed. I wondered if that scene was deliberately set up that way, or whether it expressed something deeper about your relationship?

Ha, that's exactly it; that's my revolt. When I saw Vasek really get going, talking on and on, I was almost afraid to interrupt, so when he finally asked me if I wanted to say something, I said, "No!" very decisively and went on reading whatever I was reading, probably *Revolver Review* or something.

– Whose idea was it to make the video?

Vasek's. We'd been getting anonymous letters from people threatening to burn the house down, and Vasek wanted to make sure that if something happened, there'd be a record of what it was like. We were afraid it would look kind of self-congratulatory – and in fact we, Andulka Krobova, – they're our neighbours, and her husband shot the video – and I were pretty sceptical about the whole thing. And besides, you remember the bit where Vasek talks about the picket fence he was so proud of. Well, it's true that he made the fence – he made several plans and cut the pickets out according to a form – but it's also true that I pounded in the nails, and the main thing was, I painted the whole thing by myself with old motor oil, which is absolutely awful work, and he never mentioned that. So if I had said something, I would have said, "This is what *I* did."

But that's just the way Vasek is. I mean a lot of my ideas he takes for his own and puts them into a more refined form and uses them and doesn't quote me. He'll quote others by name, like Jiri Grossman, or Zdenek Urbanek or Professor Patocka, but he never says he's quoting me.

– Isn't that a great pity?

Oh no, I don't think so, because he always adds something a little extra, to make the idea clearer. I express myself very awkwardly sometimes and often when we're having a discussion I'll say something and Vasek will say, "Wait, I'll translate that for you!"

– People are always coming to visit you. How do you manage to get any privacy at all?

For one thing, we've always had dogs at Hradecek. Golda, who died this fall, so I could always spend two or three hours in the woods with Golda, she'd have a good run, and I could think, or gather strawberries or mushrooms – I'm a bit of a fanatic when it comes to mushrooms. And at Hradecek there's a garden and a lawn, and lots of work to be done around the house, the cleaning – sometimes I feel like a chambermaid, changing the bedclothes all the time. And I really enjoy cutting grass with a scythe. I learned how to do it when I was young. So that's how I relax. I can't stand just sitting around on my behind. And I like reading.

– Who are your favourite authors these days?

I always read *Revolver Review* from cover to cover. I like Charles Bukowski a lot. And I've read everything that's been published here by Isaac Bashevis Singer – another Central European. I've read some Updike and Styron, but I can't work up a great liking for them. One book I did enjoy, though, was *Confederacy of Dunces*. And I like Vonnegut. But I think the choice of authors we have to read here is very narrow. And I've tried, but I simply can't read Kundera. Not at all. I worked at it. I told myself, no, I should read at least one of his books all the way through. But I can't. One of the books that I always love going back to when I don't have anything else to read is *Tristram Shandy*. I keep coming back to that, a bit at a time. But my reading is divided. At bedtime I like reading sci-fi or crime novels, but the classics – I'm not too fond of the rough stuff, though I'll read that too. They're like fairy-tales, something to help you sleep. Whereas books that require some thought and concentration I'll read during the day.

– Has there been any moment in the past few weeks when you felt: this is it! Now we've won the revolution?

The most hopeful thing is the way people express themselves in the street. You give them a microphone and they speak in beautiful Czech about what they want, with no umms and ahhhs. And for me, that's the greatest thing – how ordinary people know exactly what to say and how to say it; not like the media. But it's hard to keep track of what's going on. I think I have a broader view sitting here in this apartment watching TV and listening to the radio than if I were out there in the middle of it. I spent yesterday with Vasek, when he gave his press conference and I lost my sense of what was going on in the rest of the country.

– When I saw Havel at that press conference, I had the impression that he was calmer and more relaxed than he'd been earlier. Perhaps it was because he feels that at this point, it looks as though the revolution just might be successful.

You know, at one point, when they were bombarding him with questions about whether he would run for president or not, I wanted to stand up and say, "I'm Olga Havlova, the wife, and I'd like to say on his behalf that I hope nothing of the kind happens." Or something like that. When I told Vasek, he said, "Jesus, you should have done it! Why didn't you do it?" I didn't do it because whenever I say something in public, Vasek is horrified. When he was on trial in 1979, each of the wives was allowed to say something, and when I stood up to speak, Vasek gave me a look of such horror that I began to stammer. I finally got out what I wanted

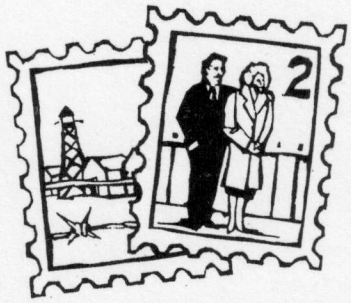
to say, but not as coherently as I'd planned. And at that press conference, I could just imagine standing up and Vasek taking one look and falling off his chair in embarrassment. But I should have done it.

– Of all your experiences in the last few weeks, does any one stand out in your mind?

The other day we went to that big concert in the Prague Sports Hall, "The Concert for All Decent People." There were dozens of bands and musicians and performers, all celebrating the revolution. And when Karel Kryl, who as you know left in 1968, came on stage and the whole arena – fifteen thousand people – all sang along with him, I suddenly felt as though those twenty years had just vanished, and we had picked up where we left off in 1968, and although something terrible had happened in the meantime, it was as though it happened elsewhere, and in some other way, like a horrible nightmare. Then I realized that this revolution was touched off by a generation that were babies in 1968, and those twenty years suddenly meant nothing, because they had no value and yet, at the same time, they had a value, because something was created here, and it was somehow connected with the time Karel Kryl left, because those young people had kept on singing his songs around the campfire all those years, and when Kryl came back, it was as though those twenty years were wiped out.

– I have this feeling every day here; I walk down the street, and I see someone I haven't seen for twelve years, and when the first shock is over, there's an optical illusion and the years fall away, and they look just the way they looked when you last saw them, as though nothing had happened in between. And yet an awful lot has happened.

Yes, a lot, but I'd put it this way: in this Communist time, or bolshevik time, it's as though nothing did happen. The world went on, but nothing happened. Vasek could certainly write a beautiful essay about that.



Today, as Czechoslovakia's first lady, Olga Havlova is using her position for the greater good. In response to thousands of letters asking her to intervene in cases of human misery, she has set up and directs a charitable foundation called the Committee of Good Will, the main purpose of which is to alleviate the lives of handicapped or disturbed children who live in institutions. ❧

MONSIEUR MIRANDE

M. Mirande had an equally rich life between meals. He had pleasure of women. Currently, pleasure and women are held matters incompatible, antithetical, and mutually exclusive, like quinine water and Scotch. Mirande also gave women pleasure; many women had pleasure of him. This is no longer considered a fair or honourable exchange. Women resent being thought of as enjoyables; they consider such an attitude an evidence of male chauvinism. They want to be taken seriously, like fallout.

The function of the sexes, if I read the authors of the age aright, is mutual boredom.

It has become customary to write freely of the sexual connection, but always with solemnity. One may respectably write of his sexual initiation, provided it was a disaster. Holden Caulfield never got to the post. Henry Miller may write about revellers self-woven into a human hooked rug, because his ecstasy is solemn. (Arriving in Paris at thirty-nine, he wrote about la noce *like a child making a belated discovery of the banana split.)* Lady Chatterley's Lover *is acceptable because it is "a* serious *work of art." It is impossible, for the best of reasons, to prove it is a work of art, but it is easy to show that it is serious, the legalizing word. The jocund work of art is still beyond the pale. This is no damn joke.*

The wretched how-to-do-it books about copulation are serious in intention, solemn in tone; the do-it-yourselfs will soon be with us.

The one thing about the glorious diversion that is no longer written, or if still written never published, is that it remains the most amusing as well as the most instructive of human activities, and one of the most nearly harmless. – A.J. Liebling