

A Life in Poems:

Defining the artist's role with James Ragan

By: Caroline Corrigan

"We are colleagues."

These simple words spoken to James Ragan by the late Czechoslovakian president and dissident playwright Vaclav Havel at their first meeting in Los Angeles in 1990 beautifully highlighted the profound connection between the two artists, both of whose work had been banned in the previously Soviet-controlled Czechoslovakia. Havel, who had only recently become the first democratic president of the newly independent country, was in L.A. to receive an honorary doctorate from UCLA. Familiar with Ragan's poignant, anti-communist poetry, Ragan, an American poet with strong Czechoslovak roots, had been invited to read at the ceremony at Havel's request.

As their brief but momentous meeting came to an end, Havel asked Ragan for a favor. He explained that he was inviting all Czechoslovaks to come back to the country and donate something. Not money, but a piece of themselves.

"I told him, 'You know me as a writer, but I'm also an educator,'" said Ragan. "And he said 'That's it! You will come back here and teach at our university.'"

Ever since, Ragan has been spending every summer in Prague volunteer teaching at Charles University as Distinguished Visiting Professor of Poetry and Film.

Ragan said meeting Havel was one of the greatest honors in his life, despite the fact that reading for prominent politicians and world leaders is something Ragan has been doing for decades. In 1985, Ragan accepted an invitation from then-president Mikhail Gorbachev to travel to Russia with Bob Dylan and read in front of 8,000 people at Moscow's first International Poetry Forum. Today, Ragan has read for approximately 32 ambassadors and seven heads of state, including Havel, Mikhail Gorbachev, South Korea's Prime Minister Dr. Young Hoon-Kong, and the United Nations.

These numbers are impressive, especially given that Ragan has also worked as a screenwriter for Paramount Pictures on Academy Award winners such as *The Godfather* and *The Deer Hunter*, as well as his position as the Director of the Professional Writing Program at the University of Southern California.

"The poet's role is to move the minds of kings," said Ragan.

Ragan is an artist who uses his gift with words as a way to poetically critique the catastrophes of modern society, while simultaneously acknowledging its beauty. But his initial relationship with language was much

more volatile. Growing up in Duquesne, Pennsylvania as the son of Czechoslovak-immigrant parents, Ragan's first language was Slovak. Throughout his childhood, Ragan recalled fighting with other children his age because of his inability to communicate with them.

"I didn't understand it...but then I realized that it was because of my language," he said. "And so as I began to learn English, I noticed that the fights were less and less because I was communicating. So, language was a matter of survival for me early on."

Ragan said that this experience was fundamental to developing his respect for language, to know language, and to understand the power of words. Once he had developed this respect, he started writing poetry. Though he initially chose to write in Slovak, he eventually switched to English after realizing that few people would read his poems otherwise. However, he said that Slovak still has a huge impact on the lyrical quality of his work.

"Havel once told me, 'Don't you lose that dialect,'" said Ragan. "'It's the music of the language that's so beautiful.'"

Over the decades, Ragan's Slovak roots have played an increasingly important role in his writing. Having returned to his father's village numerous times since he was 16 years old, Ragan developed close personal ties with the country and people that his parents had left behind in 1929. He was in the country when the Russians invaded in 1968; an event that would completely derail social and literary freedom in Czechoslovakia for the next 22 years.

"The Russians invading was so unexpected," said Ragan. "It was a very difficult, frightful time. But my way of fighting it was to write."

Though Ragan was evicted from Czechoslovakia directly after the invasion, he decided to come back in the early 70s after publishing several works about the nefarious nature of the Communist regime. Because the regime had labeled him a dissident and banned his work throughout the country, Ragan was required to go to police stations when he traveled so that the government could record his location at all times. But avoiding arrest and continuing his political activism gradually became second nature to him.

"I remember how careful I had to be, what I said in front of relatives and other people," he said. "But I knew how to navigate it all once I got used to it; I knew what I could get away with and what I couldn't."

In 1984, Ragan went to Slovenia for a Fulbright professorship. He brought 10 Newsweek and 10 Time magazines from the United States to a basement reading and distributed them to the crowd.

"You should have seen the people jumping for the magazines," he said. "Because it was the truth. I was bringing the truth."

For Ragan, writing in protest of the regime went beyond his personal affinity for the country of his heritage – it had become a civic duty. His identity as

a poet and artist meant finding a way to use his art to change and heal society, as so many, including Havel, had done before him.

"Artists always have been and still are, and should be, those who engage suffering," said Ragan. "The artist must never pass by tragedy or suffering. That's how I was looking at my role in the world, what the role should be for artists."

Ragan explained that his primary purpose as an artist, as a poet, as a citizen of the world, is to break down borders. To create poetry that is universal, poetry that speaks to the worldview. For an artist, truth is the most important and beautiful word that people can pursue; a word that artists all around the world have died for. The years Vaclav Havel spent in prison for sending his writings abroad and for promoting a petition for the release of political prisoners will not be soon forgotten. After his release, he continued fighting political battles through the power of the pen, putting together a petition called "Just a few sentences," which implored the government to introduce liberal reforms.

"The truth," Havel wrote in his play *Temptation*, "isn't merely what we believe, after all, but also why and to whom and under what circumstances."

Like Havel, Ragan's belief in the power of art and poetry to act as a moral compass for the political sphere is wholehearted and pure. It is guided by ethics, both in writing and communication. It incorporates civility, discipline, ambition, and passion. But above all else, an artist must use his work to evoke compassion.

"Compassion – you can't be an artist without that," said Ragan. "Poetry is what you live every day. You don't call yourself a poet, someone else must. What you must do is live life daily with all your sensitivities open. Live every day as though it were new. Be passionate about everything you see."

But what is the role of the artist in today's world? A world that seems to be pervaded by smart devices and social media sites, where "instant" and "immediate gratification" have become the baseline of efficiency. Despite his generally positive outlook on the impact of the Internet, Ragan is afraid that today, especially in the United States, a tabloid culture has manifested, existing under a veil of what he calls "narco-narcissism." As an optimist, however, Ragan still believes that the potential for artists to continue to elicit change in today's world is far from lost – a message he repeatedly imparts to his students.

"You must believe there's a world worth saving," he said. "That the artist is there to engage all forms, whether its suffering or enjoyment. The artist must engage and not become insular, not pull back."

Havel would have certainly agreed.