

# San Angeloan recalls Vaclav Havel

*Assisted Czech free market shift*

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WASHINGTON — Vaclav Havel summoned San Angeloan Mario Castillo to Prague Castle.

It was simple. The dissident, playwright and first president of newly democratic Czechoslovakia wanted to talk business.

This was soon after the peaceful Velvet Revolution, led by the late Havel, ousted communism in 1989. Castillo, a businessman and Washington lobbyist, already had been promoting capitalism — or at least economic development — with the old communist regime's blessing.

In fact, the Czech communists were embracing economic development.

"They were afraid of the revolution that was coming, and they wanted to try to stem it in some way," Castillo said during an interview at his Washington home after Havel's death Dec. 18. "Their thought was to get to a point where they had an economy kind of like China has."

Looking back at the late 1980s and early 1990s, Castillo described himself as "a kid from West Texas" who set up an overseas office and looked for business opportunities in Czechoslovakia.

But he'd already put in several years on Capitol Hill, including serving as chief of staff from 1980 to May 1988 for the House Agriculture Committee. Then he embarked on a career in private business that often led him through Berlin-Wall crossing Checkpoint Charlie to take a plane from East Berlin on to Czechoslovakia.

He'd return loaded down with samples of Czech cheese, cookies, candy, liquors and glassware.

Other foreigners — Chinese, Europeans and a few Americans — were looking to do business there, too, but Castillo had earned the Czech communist government's trust through his relationship with their ambassador to the United States, who was savvy about promoting business development, Castillo said. For a while, he was caught between two worlds.

Communism was waning, but democracy did not yet have the upper hand in Czechoslovakia.

Relations between the United States and Soviet Bloc countries such as Czechoslovakia were horrible.

"Each side for years demonized the other," said Jim Davis, who's known Castillo since 1976.

Davis formerly worked for the House Agriculture Committee. Now a writer, editor and sometime consultant, he has lived as a permanent resident in Kiev, Ukraine, since 1994.

During Castillo's travels in communist Czechoslovakia, the government provided him with a driver/bodyguard. The West Texas kid was aware he was followed everywhere he went. Waitresses tended to be friendly and inquisitive.

"A lot of people were employed as the eyes and ears of the government," he said.

Standing before 20-year-old documents and photographs spread over his dining room table, he pointed at two uniformed soldiers slipping through a crowd as more obvious examples.

Under communism, state-controlled enterprises — for dairy products, for clothes, for everything — dominated the economy.

So when Havel became president, the country faced transitions, including an economic one.

That was how Castillo came to be meeting with Havel in Prague Castle.

"He outlined to me what his vision for the future of Czechoslovakia was," Castillo said.

"Havel wanted to make a better life available to Czechs, and he wanted to do it in a way that didn't just give the country's economic base away to foreigners," Castillo said.

"It would have been very easy for him to sell the country's riches or industries to the highest bidder," Castillo said. "He didn't want that. He was specifically looking for businesses that were interested in viewing their Czech counterparts as that, counterparts."

Castillo continued to deal with Havel and developed an admiration for him.

"Havel inspired people through deed and words," Castillo said. "He knew how to translate the dreams of the people into everyday language. He was able to appeal to their better nature and inspire peaceful change through what I think are remarkably nonviolent ways, a little bit like Gandhi, a little bit like Martin Luther King."

The same day of Castillo's first meeting with Havel, Castillo sat down with the new Czech ambassador to the United States, Rita Klimova.

Klimova had Castillo's extensive government portfolio on hand. It filled several expanding file folders. She'd read all of it.

"We like what you've been trying to do," the late Klimova told Castillo. "We'd like you to continue down that path with us. Let us talk about it."

So began Castillo's relationship with the democratic government.

He would serve as lobbyist for the new government in Washington and foster business development in Czechoslovakia.

Davis said he recalled Castillo escorting Klimova to testify at congressional hearings on Capitol Hill, promoting the new Czech government.

"Castillo played an important role in taking what had been a very difficult relationship for a long time and transforming it into a productive one," Davis said.