The Velvet Revolution: Oral History Projects in Czech Classrooms

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How can oral history projects teach students about such abstract concepts as democracy or freedom? The literature reveals effective teaching of historical concepts requires teacher mediation—a finding that holds true for students worldwide. This article describes two middle school classroom oral history projects and discusses how teacher mediation and cooperative group learning led to creation of a Living History Museum in The Czech Republic. Through collecting family and community members' memories about recent events, students gained knowledge, understandings, and insights not available in Czech history books. Students also began to appreciate personal freedom and the democracy in which they live.

"Why do we need to learn this?"
"What's important about the Velvet Revolution?"

Lucie's Level Nine students asked these questions as she introduced a unit on contemporary history. Lucie had been searching for ways to interest her students in the concept of Democracy, and in learning about important events in Czech history. Finally, Lucie realized that while her students had no memories of living under a Communist regime, the students' parents and grandparents had many memories of pre-Democracy days. That was when the idea for an oral history project was born.

We met at the 2010 International Oral History Conference in Prague. Lucie teaches History in Czech schools, and Gail trains social studies teachers in the United States. In this article, we describe two classroom oral history projects, discuss how one oral history project served as the basis for a Living History Museum, and illustrate how students responded to the projects.

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Background: Czech History and Education

Before 1989, the Czech Republic was part of Czechoslovakia, a larger country ruled for more than 40 years by a Communist regime (see map link).[2] In November 1989, citizens banded together in a "Velvet Revolution."[3] Seven months later, in June 1990, many Czechoslovaks experienced their first free election. *The New York Times* proclaimed, "In their first chance to vote freely in 44 years, the Czechoslovaks overwhelmingly confirmed President Vaclav Havel's citizens movement as the governing party."[4] Czechoslovakia split into two political and economic domains on 1 January 1993, forming the entities now known as The Czech Republic and Slovakia. Significant changes in everyday life have occurred because of these events, including how teachers teach and how students learn.

The post-1989 Czech Republic presents a unique site for collection of oral history interviews. "Immediately after the fall of [the] Communist regime in Czechoslovakia … in November 1989," Vanêk notes, "new possibilities, ways and chances opened for development" in humanities research methods.[5] Prior to 1989, Czech historians and history teachers had "only minimal access to Western literature" about oral history methodology, and virtually no experience of using firsthand memories to teach history.[6]

Initial attempts to collect spoken memories of circumstances and events leading up to the 1989 Velvet Revolution, Vanêk asserts, resulted in oral historians asking eyewitnesses "approved" questions, and interviewees being expected to reply according to the "correct" ideology of the time. He further notes that as a result of these early Czech forays into oral history, Czech history teachers should anticipate interviewees' experiencing some discomfort with the process and perhaps offering brief, uninformative responses.[7]

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[2] "Czech Republic," WorldAtlas, accessed August 8, 2011, http://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/europe/cz.htm.

[3] "The Velvet Revolution and Beyond," myCzechRepublic, accessed July 23, 2011, http://www.myczechrepublic.com/czech-history/velvet-revolution.html. The phrase "Velvet Revolution" is commonly understood to refer to the events and circumstances surrounding Czechoslovakia's bloodless transition from communism to democracy. November 17, 1989 was a pivotal date commemorating the 50th anniversary of a Czech student who was killed by Nazi soldiers.

[3] Henry Kamm, "Now, The Czech Reality: Political 'Amateurs' After Free Elections, Turn to Problems Left by the Communists," Special to *the New York Times*, June 11, 1990, accessed July 23, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/keyword/civic-forum.

[5] Miroslav Vanêk, "The Development of Theory and Method in Czech Oral History after 1989" (paper presented at the International Oral History Association Conference, Guadalajara, Mexico, September, 2008).

[6] Ibid., 1.

[7] Ibid., 2.

ISSN 1923-0567

Schools in The Czech Republic are divided into two stages: Level One through Level Five, and Level Six through Level Nine. Czech children participate in the first school stage from six years of age until about eleven years of age, normally under the supervision of one classroom teacher. The second school stage includes students ranging in age from twelve to fifteen years.[8] Teachers working with students in the second Czech school level are experts in specific disciplines. Each group of students in the second stage has several teachers, as do middle grades and secondary school students in North America. History as a discipline is taught formally only in the second stage. During the first stage Czech students learn the story of their homeland, known as *Vlastivêda*. From the North American perspective, *Vlastivêda* would be somewhat similar to the study of state or provincial history.

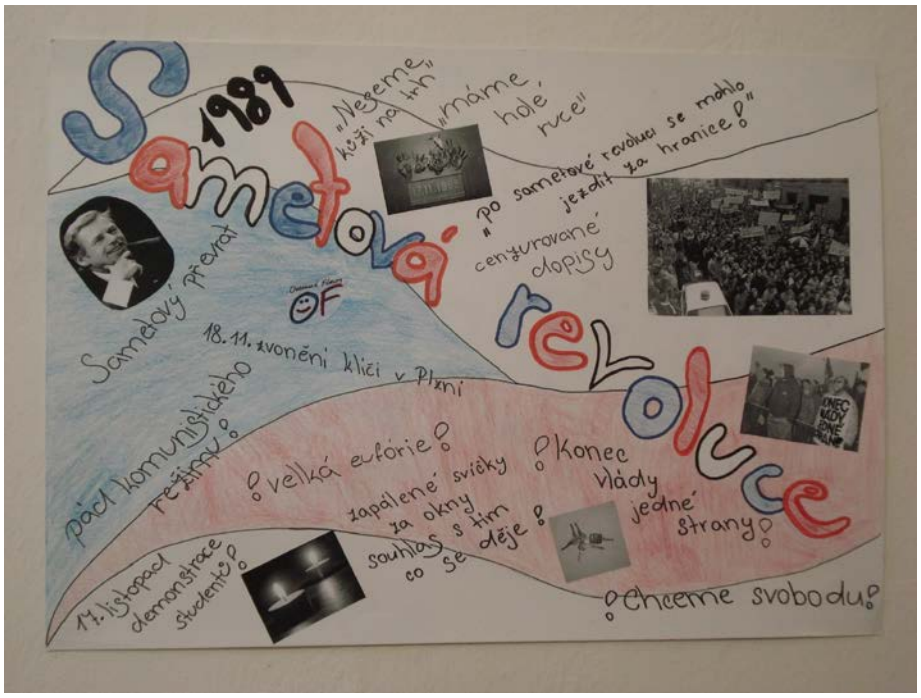

Figure 1. A student poster shows Czech citizens gathered in the square on November 17, 1989 in memory of the 50th anniversary of a student's death at the hands of Nazi soldiers. People held their keys aloft and rattled them (or "rang" them) in unison as a way to peacefully demonstrate their strong desire to end the Communist oppression of Czech citizens.

[8] Lucie Bohmova, "Usage of Oral History in the History Lessons in Elementary Schools" (paper presented at the International Oral History Association Conference, Prague, Czech Republic, July, 2010).

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The Czech educational system continues to experience reform. Teachers in modern Czech schools have more freedom to try different teaching strategies and select diverse instructional methods than their colleagues had prior to the 1989 revolution. Discussion, for example, is a relatively new teaching method and differs significantly from teacher lecture, dependence on textbooks, and recitation. Students working together in groups were first pedagogically acknowledged in Czech classrooms following the 1989 Velvet Revolution. Assignments involving students interviewing family members and/or neighbors and discussing interview analysis with classmates also represent a very recent educational development. Teachers did not use any of these instructional methods during the Communist era. Prior to the 1989 Velvet Revolution, the school curriculum included only those topics approved by the Communist regime, such as noted socialists, the first Soviet astronaut, the Russian Revolution of 1917, or approved festivals.

Czech teachers now receive training in several of these instructional methodologies including conducting interviews, cooperative group work, and class discussion. "Project Weeks," a recent Czech instructional format, often occur near the end of the semester or close to school holidays. During Project Weeks, students are engaged in active learning and might make use of community and neighborhood resources.

At the elementary level, the curriculum emphasizes regional history as a means of learning about one's homeland. Contemporary history, or the study of post-World War II local history, is the curricular focus for students during the Eighth and Ninth Levels. Czech and World History topics receive equal emphasis. History teachers concentrate instruction around the area or region where students' families originate. The Czech Republic consists of three geographic regions: Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia, the latter located partly in Poland.[9] Traditions and customs vary among the geographic regions and ethnic groups.

Czech History teachers appreciate oral history methodology for its flexibility. Teachers apply oral history interviews to everyday history instruction as well as during Project Weeks. History teachers use oral history methodology to collect and preserve contemporary historical accounts when teaching Czech History.[10] Despite some interviewees' reluctance to speak openly, Czech teachers appreciate the benefits of classroom oral history projects.[11]

[9] "Czech Republic," Countries and Their Cultures, accessed July 20, 2011, http://www.everyculture.com/Cr-Ga/Czech-Republic.html.
[10] Vanêk, "The Development of Theory," 2.
[11] Bohmova, "Usage of Oral History."

ISSN 1923-0567

The Oral History Projects

Students formed four cooperative groups as they began the first oral history project. The main goals of this project were to teach students to work in cooperative groups, to recognize the difference between the recent past and present, and to use the basic tools of oral historians. Through their role as a member of a journalistic team, each student was able to bring his/her own local environment to life within the school setting.

Students wanted to describe one area of everyday life during the years immediately preceding the Velvet Revolution. Each group identified a major topic of interest to pursue during the oral history process. Group members worked with their teacher to articulate a descriptive theme, such as "Fashion." The students then prepared a list of at least ten questions related to the identified theme. These questions facilitated development of an interview questionnaire.

Students began to visualize their project as consisting of two parts: use of primary sources and use of secondary sources. Lucie provided training in interview techniques, having students practice on one another in the classroom until they became comfortable with asking questions and waiting for complete answers, using prompts to facilitate elaboration, and using probing questions when needed.

Figure 2. A student-made banner saying "Free Election," which was the password Czech citizens uttered to show their solidarity during the November 1989 Velvet Revolution.

ISSN 1923-0567

Individual students identified potential family and/or neighborhood interviewees. Within their cooperative group, students discussed each potential witness and how s/he might contribute to the group's assignment. Activists and other knowledgeable witnesses were available to come to the school, but Level Nine students were mainly interested in interviewing family members and school personnel outside the classroom setting. Students were particularly interested in interviewing witnesses with first-and knowledge about the Czech historical period known as "The Normalization."

Witnesses who participated in the Level Nine project included parents, grandparents, other relatives, as well as individuals from students' neighborhoods who were not relatives, including football coaches, storekeepers and pub owners. Students took copious notes during the interview process. Once collected and organized into categories, these first-hand witness accounts became primary sources students used in their research. Each student interviewed one witness, and selected the "Best Excerpts" from his or her interview to share with group members.

Students had access to secondary source materials within the classroom to use in their research: summaries of previous interviews collected by the media, and published books on topics related to the Velvet Revolution. Before 1989, many of these instructional materials would have been unavailable to Czech teachers due to suppression by the Communist leadership. The project outcome for Level Nine classes was an oral report. Early in the project students learned when their oral reports were due. The students presented their oral reports using Power Point™ or Movie Maker™.

Self-assessment was an important part of the oral history project. Students evaluated their own group's efforts. Then they voted to recognize one group's project to receive the "Best Team Award." The element of competition linked to Best Team Award nominations helped motivate cooperative work within groups.

As they developed their interview questionnaires, students made use of "focusing statements." These statements helped students organize their thinking about identified topics and during the interview process, facilitated questioning technique. Some examples of focusing questions follow:

Focusing Statement #1: What was everyday life like during the transitional period of government censorship and oppression?[12]

[12] "Normalization," Country Studies, accessed July 23, 2011, http://countrystudies.us/czech-republic/42.htm. The transitional period of the 1970s and 1980s is referred to in Czech history books as *normalization*. This was an era of political repressiveness and emphasis on conformity in thought and media, in which political reformists were removed from positions of authority. The government replaced heads of publishing houses and movie studios, imposed strict censorship, and replaced 54 of the 115 members of the *Komunistická strana Československa* (KSČ), or central political leadership party. The actual Focus Question used by Czech history teachers in this project was *How could I live*

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In order to organize information related to this Focusing Question, students decided to interview witnesses about specific topics related to everyday life. Topics selected included:

1. Fashion (clothes, shopping centres, prices, fashion magazines);
2. Culture (cinema, theater, films that were shown, prices, description of how the theater looked);
3. Entertainment (pubs, clubs, food, drink, discos, price, fun in the clubs);
4. Sport (the sports sectors which were developed regionally, halls, playgrounds, training method, races, personalities in sport).

Students were interested in fashion because before the 1989 Velvet Revolution, there had been no free market economy. Before 1989, Czech residents were obliged to purchase whatever clothing Communist-controlled shops had in stock or else make their own clothes. The selection of goods was very limited during the time students' parents and grandparents grew up. Now, in the 21st century, Czech citizens have many choices for purchasing clothing. They may purchase a great variety of clothing items by simply going to local shopping centres.

Students selected Culture as a theme once they learned that before the Velvet Revolution, Czech citizens had access to only Communist-approved culture. Literature on the approved list, for instance, included only Soviet authors. Television as a cultural medium also was of interest to students. Before 1989, Czech televisions had only two channels, and programming was some form of propaganda emphasizing the socialist lifestyle. Now, Czech residents have a plethora of choices for television viewing and for reading. Movies and television series from the North America have made their way into Czech students' homes. Current students cannot imagine their family having a TV with only two channels and very limited content.

Examples of interview questions arising from subtopics include:

Fashion

1. How did the dresses look that you wore as a 15-year-old?
2. Did you wear flowered patterns? Did you use plastic accessories?
3. Where did you go shopping (for clothes and accessories)?

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in the normalization? The Focus Question as used in this article is revised to more closely reflect experiences of North American educators.

ISSN 1923-0567

Culture

1. What cinemas did you go to, and where were they located?
2. What did the cinema look like?
3. Could you purchase food in the cinema? If so, what was it?

Hotels and Restaurants

1. Where did you go for entertainment?
2. Is the club/pub still here?
3. What did you eat or drink in the restaurant?

Sports

1. What did the sports ground in your town/village look like?
2. What sports were played in your town/village?
3. Have you ever met any famous sportsmen?

In the Hotels and Restaurants group, one student's relative had owned a pub. The pub was confiscated during the Communist era. During their class presentation, this group of students described the story of pub ownership and government confiscation in detail.

Seventeen students participated in the *What was everyday life like during the transitional period of government censorship and oppression?* oral history project. The class divided into four groups, with each group representing a subtopic based on the focusing statement. Within their groups, students compared and contrasted how family members responded to each of the 10 questions. The resulting discussions prompted students to develop additional questions for clarification, and to conduct a second interview with particular interviewees.

Focusing Statement #2: Year 1989 - The Democracy in Which We Were Born

This project involved students in eighth and ninth grades, or fourteen to fifteen years of age. The goal of this project was to process all the information that students learned during oral history interviews about November 1989, including conceptual understandings of *democracy* and *freedom*.

While the theme of the entire oral history project emphasized the Velvet Revolution, this focusing question encouraged students to concentrate their interviews on events surrounding one day in November 1989. Background research included newspaper clippings and video clips. Students first learned about events during November 1989 through media accounts. Then each student in the group interviewed one person from the school staff, for example, a teacher, school porter, janitor or cook, about how s/he remembered the events of November 1989.

ISSN 1923-0567

Figure 3. A banner proclaiming "Havel for President." Czech citizens wanted to elect their own president, an act forbidden under the Communist regime. The banner is a reminder that, following the 1989 Velvet Revolution, a free election was held and Havel was elected president of the newly formed Czech Republic.

Two witnesses visited the school to talk about their memories of November 1989 and what they recalled of their own lives at the time. Prior to witnesses' visit, students developed an interview questionnaire. While these students also used at least 10 questions to guide their research, they soon realized they would have limited time to conduct interviews during each witness' classroom visit. Final interview questions included:

1. Where were you on 17 November 1989?
2. Did you know Vaclav Havel before the Velvet Revolution?
3. What did you think about an almost unknown person becoming [Czech] president?
4. Did you participate in any demonstration? Please describe.
5. Did you light a candle as evidence of resistance against Communism?

ISSN 1923-0567

The Living History Museum

As the date for presenting their research findings approached, students who participated in the *Year 1989: The Democracy in Which We Were Born* oral history project decided they wanted to share their findings with other classes in the school. Parents and community members could visit the school. This was when the idea for a Living History Museum was formed.

Students decided to turn their *Year 1989* oral and written sources into visual museum exhibits. They became excited about the creative potential of the project, discussing possible venues for presenting their findings. Students realized they might highlight witnesses' experiences and knowledge in the form of leaflets, posters, banners, or slogans. Flag displays, political signs, and photographs also could enhance instructional displays.

Figure 4. The school corridor where students displayed their oral history products, including banners with slogans and posters depicting witness statements. The sign above the door shouts "Freedom!"

ISSN 1923-0567

The Living History Museum exhibit began at the school's entrance. Visuals and text information about the Communist period prior to 1989 were on exhibit. The hallway wall displayed the Soviet flag and emblem of Czechoslovakia. As visitors and students moved along the hallway, the direction of the exhibits served as a chronological illustration of Czech citizens' movement toward democracy. Paper cutouts representing human footprints lay on the hallway floor to guide visitors through the Living History Museum exhibit. Students also displayed banners with slogans of democracy and/or freedom, for example: Havel to Castle; Free Election; We Want Freedom; We Don't Want Censorship. Posters depicting eyewitnesses' first-hand memories of historical events also were displayed. At the end of the Living History Museum walkway, the flag of Czechoslovakia after 1989, which is the current Czech flag representing the democratic Czech Republic, was displayed.

What Students Learned

The interviews and analysis, combined with class discussion, group work, oral reports, and Living History Museum experience, helped Czech students understand that the Communist regime under which their parents and grandparents lived was not free. Students learned that everyday life under Communism and everyday life under a democratic government differ in significant ways. *Real people*, students' neighbors, family members, and family friends, lived through the Period of Normalization and under the Communist regime. People they know personally were part of Czech history.

Students also learned that under the emerging democracy, Czech citizens now live lives of comparative *freedom*. The students began to comprehend how their own lives differ from those of their parents' generation, especially when oral history interview analyses yielded themes about lack of choice or limited choice in everyday life such as clothing or reading material, absence of freedom of expression, government-controlled entertainment and celebrations, and differences in general lifestyle.

Adolescents who participated in these oral history projects realized many differences between the present and the recent past. Prior to experiencing the Project Week and Living History Museum described in this article, young Czech students could not imagine the personal and social limitations of a Communist regime. Through interviewing family and community members and with the help of their teacher, the students gained knowledge, understandings, and insights not available in history books. One student noted, for example, that under the Communist regime admission to university depended upon whether or not one's families were members of the Communist Party. Another student realized that even sporting events and membership on sporting teams were matters controlled by membership in the Communist Party. Family members' lives and the lives of students' neighbors and

ISSN 1923-0567

other people students knew, were affected by whether they joined or did not join the Communist Party.

Through these educational experiences, students constructed understandings about events and people involved in recent history, about differences between Communist regimes and Democratic Republics, and about how social and political movements effect the lives of people like themselves. As a result, Czech students are beginning to appreciate personal freedom and the democracy in which they live.

What We Learned

As educators and oral historians, we learned several lessons as a result of our collaboration. We are convinced classroom teachers benefit when other teachers share their own oral history experiences and techniques. We decided to share what we have learned in the hope that other teachers may benefit from our project.

Students in Level Five and above participated effectively in Czech oral history projects, especially during *Vlastivêda* (local history) studies. However, we found that oral history projects are more effective when students work in small groups, rather than independently, while researching and conducting oral history interviews. Younger children may participate in oral history interviews; children in grades below fifth are not yet ready to work independently and may need significant teacher intervention in order to interpret their findings. This recommendation is supported by reviews of research on children's historical learning in North America,[13] which demonstrate the importance of instructor intervention for the development of historical understanding.

When younger students participated in oral history projects, they were unable to use prompts and probes to elicit detailed responses from interviewees in the way that older and more experienced oral history interviewers were able to demonstrate. Level Eight students' Living History Museum exhibits tended to be less sophisticated and less informative than those developed by Level Nine students. Moreover, younger students tended to have less experience with and knowledge about technology use. When displaying their oral history findings, younger students tended to use posters and similar visual exhibits due to their lack of experience with computer technology.[14]

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[13] Lis Cercadillo, "Significance in History: Students' Ideas in England and Spain," in *International Review of History Education*, ed. Alaric Dickinson, Peter Gordon and Peter Lee, vol. 3 (London: Woburn Press, 2002). M. Gail Hickey and Fred Risinger, *What Can They Know and Do? Research, Kids, and Social Studies* (Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies, 2001). Yi-Mei Hsiao, "Taiwanese Students' Understanding of Differences in History Textbook Accounts," in *Understanding History: Recent Research in History Education*, ed. Ron Ashby, Peter Gordon, and Peter Lee (London: Routledge Falmer, 2005), 54-67.

[14] Bohmova, "Usage of Oral History."

ISSN 1923-0567

Teachers noticed a marked improvement in students' learning through oral history projects conducted with those in Level Six and beyond. "There is a big difference [in student performance at this level]," Lucie explains in a paper about her work with Czech students. "Students can work independently, prepare themselves for interviews, ask additional questions during the interview, and are able to do good interpretation [of interviews]… [They] create very nice outputs [at this stage of development]. Their work is more sophisticated compared to younger students."[15]

Creating equal groups within the classroom setting was preferable to having some groups with four members and others with five members. Interviewee responses to the second interview in the *What was everyday life like during the transitional period of government censorship and oppression?* oral history project were less detailed than responses during the first interview. Possible reasons for this include parents' and/or students' reluctance to participate in a second interview, and parents' lack of time.

While we describe only two oral history projects in this article, a third oral history project, *Become an Explorer*, was in the developmental stage when the journal went to press. We describe the third project here in the event teachers may wish to adapt it to their own neighborhood environment.

Become an Explorer

We recommend the use of this long-term oral history project with students in middle school or above. Goals include acquainting students with their native land, encouraging family-school cooperation through the use of student-led interviews, exploring historical topics through group work and classroom discussion, and teaching students the basic tools of the oral historian.

We divided students into small groups. Each group was assigned the task of mapping one street in their city over time; that is, through various historical eras. Students were asked to take on the role of journalists who describe the key moments of city history by discussing how and if street names have changed over time. Groups were assisted as they focus on key events applicable to the street under study. For example, Czech students might research the following key events and their relation to street name changes:

- Arrival of the U.S. Army and the takeover of Pilsen in 1945
- The Communist Party gaining power in 1948
- The Velvet Revolution of 1989

[15] Bohmova, "Usage of Oral History."

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Students asked their parents and grandparents to share memories regarding street names. Students then identified and described significant monuments, stores, or institutions located along the street studied. Students were cautioned to verify family members' memories using street maps published during the era in question, and through the use of picture books depicting city history. The intended product for this oral history project is a newspaper article describing visible changes in city streets. Each group would write a separate "newspaper article."

As Lucie introduced her students to the study of street name changes over time, she noticed that younger students enjoyed using a game format to conduct their interviews. They played a game inspired by a television game show "Nobody's Perfect." The essence of the game is to conduct a survey by asking random passers-by for their knowledge about a specific topic. Students asked their classmates, and students from other classes, to tell what they know about the street under study, its history, and its name changes over time.

Conclusion

In this article, we described two oral history projects planned and executed in Czech classrooms. Through these projects, students learned about abstract concepts such as *democracy* and *freedom* after interviewing family and community members who had firsthand knowledge of recent Czech history. Students read and studied secondary sources, then compared and contrasted secondary historical sources with the primary sources they themselves collected.

Circumstances and rights young Czech students had taken for granted prior to engaging in the project, such as freedom of expression, began to acquire new perspectives as students worked in groups to analyze oral history interviews and develop Living History Museum displays to communicate their findings. Oral presentations, banners, and patriotic displays communicating phrases such as "Free Election" and "Havel for President" became synonymous in students' minds with *freedom* and *democracy*. Perhaps most importantly, these students learned that people like themselves make history.

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