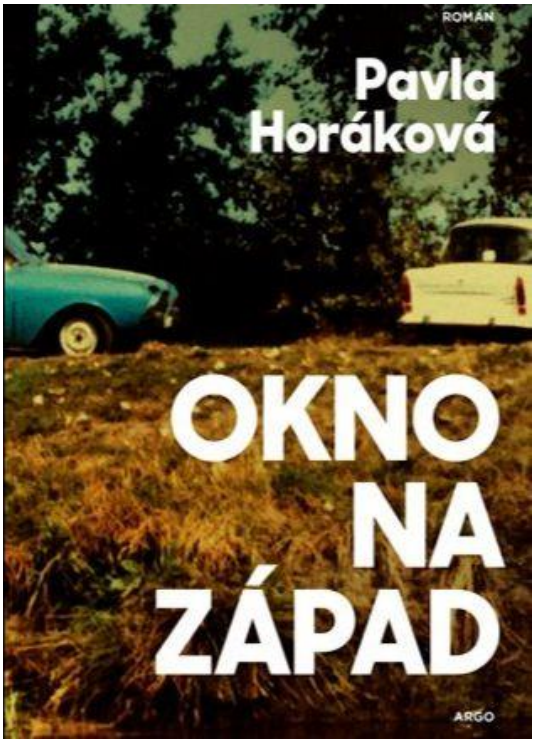
ARGO

Argo highlights



Pavla Horáková's new novel delves into the decay of communist Czechoslovakia of the 1980

Looking to the West

by **Pavla Horáková**

March 2025, 256 pages

Available material: English summary, English sample translation

David and Marta, classmates in a Prague housing estate, long for Western consumer goods above all else. In Prague, opportunities seem abundant, and the Iron Curtain appears far more permeable than it does up close. Husák's Children navigate the world of obsolete ideology with ease, learning the art of discrete collaboration from their parents and teachers.

No one suspects that the era of the normalization limbo has reached its final months. Or do they? Is Marta's parents' last-minute emigration mere misfortune, or a calculated escape from an impending reckoning?

A decade later, Marta and David cross paths again at the close of the pioneering 1990s. But will they seek another reunion now in their fifties, when the characters forged in their socialist childhoods have fully crystallized?

Told through the eyes of teenagers, the novel explores the final years of the 1980s in Prague, revealing that snobbery, materialism, consumerism, cronyism,

and nepotism – often attributed to capitalism – had been deeply rooted in Czech society long before November 1989.

Pavla Horáková (1974) is a Prague-based writer, Czech Radio presenter and literary translator. She has translated more than twenty books from English and Serbian (including novels by Kurt Vonnegut, Saul Bellow and Iain Banks) and has received two translation awards. In 2018 she published the novel *The Theory of Strangenes* (Teorie podivnosti), for which she was awarded the Magnesia Litera Award. The rights to Teorie podivnosti have been sold to eleven countries so far.

English summary of the book

The heart of the novel unfolds in communist Czechoslovakia in the late 1980s. Although the totalitarian regime outwardly embraces Gorbachev's policies of perestroika and glasnost, in practice, it continues to stifle free speech, persecute dissidents, and violently suppress peaceful demonstrations. The protagonists, elementary school students David and Marta, come from families that represent the silent majority—Czechoslovaks who remain largely indifferent to politics, neither challenging the system nor actively supporting it. Instead, they focus on their private lives, particularly their material well-being. Meanwhile, Western consumer goods steadily infiltrate the country through various channels, becoming coveted symbols of status and success. Toys, electronics, cosmetics, and clothing are not just objects of

desire but also markers of social hierarchy, especially among children.

David and Marta live in Prague, where the Iron Curtain feels more porous than in the heavily fortified border regions. Many aspects of the regime have become little more than hollow rituals—such as the Pioneer Organization at their school or the obligatory celebrations of Labor Day and the Great October Socialist Revolution. Thanks to their parents' prestigious positions, both children enjoy access to coveted Western goods. Fourteen-year-old David, ever pragmatic, has already mapped out what he sees as the easiest legal path to travel and acquire luxury items: enrolling at the Diplomatic Academy in Moscow. His greatest fear is that his older brother, whose growing anti-regime sentiments verge on activism, might sabotage his plans—either through open dissent or by defecting to the West.

Ironically, it is Marta's family that ends up emigrating—just months before the fall of communism. Their sudden departure abruptly severs her bond with David, a relationship that had been on the cusp of growing beyond a fleeting summer romance as they prepared to enter high school. But was the timing of their escape mere misfortune, driven by the whims of Marta's ambitious mother? Or was it all part of a carefully orchestrated plan—one masterminded by Marta's stepfather, who'd left behind a police uniform in their abandoned apartment?

The fall of communism in 1989 reshapes David's life—though not entirely. He ultimately studies his chosen field in the Czech Republic and builds a career as a bureaucrat in European institutions in Brussels. During his university years, he reconnects with Marta, who has returned to a free Prague after a decade in Canada, eager to fulfill the childhood dreams once beyond her reach. Her status as a foreigner with access to hard currency makes the transition easier. Their reunion ignites a passionate, months-long affair, but in the end, David walks away—for the sake of his own self-preservation.

Even twenty-five years later, as they approach fifty, he refuses to see Marta at their planned class reunion. The prospect of facing his former classmates—and the

unspoken question of whether he has truly become a better person in a free world than he would have been under a communist dictatorship—is more than he can bear.

David's and Marta's stories unfold in alternating chapters. Teenage David, an active agent in his own life, tells his story in his own voice. Marta, on the other hand, is shaped more by external forces in her youth, retreating into an inner world of her own—so her chapters are narrated by an omniscient storyteller. In the prologue and epilogue, set in the present, their perspectives are reversed, hinting that the balance of free will between them has shifted over time.

– Pavla Horáková

English sample of the book

Translated by Bruce Bybee

David

This morning, there was a yellow fog outside. That happens here sometimes. It also reeks pretty often in the mornings. Mom's convinced it's the Spolana plant in Neratovice pumping out fumes after dark. Dad says it's Kralupy nad Vltavou. We'll never really know what caused that stench or tainted fog anyway, 'cause slip-ups are always swept under the rug.

Our housing estate supposedly has the cleanest air in Prague, since we're up on a hill and the wind blows in from the west, passing through nothing but fields. Except there's also Kladno and its industry. And there's the airport before Kladno, so we also

get a whiff of jet fuel from time to time. This morning's yellow fog is sprawled out across the entire housing estate and smells a little different than usual. Typically, when there's a chemical leak, the air stinks like a sewer, but this one stings your nose a little. But by lunchtime the haze clears and we all forget about it.

Due to the air pollution in Prague, we go out into nature for our school trips. We even went twice one year: to Slovakia under the Tatras in the fall and to Šumava in the spring. School in nature is only a thing if you're coming from a struggling area. So, from Prague, from North Bohemia, where they've got brown coal power plants and colored fog on a daily basis, and from Ostrava with its mines and steelworks. We learned about this in geography. On the economic map of Czechoslovakia, each city is color-coded to show which types of industries dominate. Ostrava's got a whole lot. Last year, on the train back from school in nature in the Beskids, we saw flames burning on thin masts in the distance and smoke rising from ginormous chimneys. It looked real spooky, that Steel City. There's a lot of talk about ash, emissions, fallout, and acid rain. In the mountains, there are entire slopes filled with rusty tree stumps that were healthy forests only a couple years back. Little planes drop lime onto the forests and fields. These teeny tooters are known as Bumblebees. At Grandma and Grandpa's, I read in the 100+1 Foreign Curiosities magazine that by the year 2000, there would be no more forests. They also predict which animals will go extinct by then. There was a show on TV called Will They Survive the Year 2000? I didn't watch it because I feel sorry for those animals, and I'm scared for them. I also saw a picture of the world's coal reserves in the hundred-plus-one. They drew them as a giant black cube, with a smaller chunk showing how much humanity had already extracted. Looks like coal won't survive the year 2000 either. I'm kind of expecting not to survive the year 2000 myself. If I do, I'll be twenty-six, with my best years behind me. I'll be done with college and the military, probably have a wife and kids like everyone else.

But maybe none of us will make it that far. Maybe there's no point in me getting married and starting a family. By then, acid rain will have devoured the remaining forests, the animals will have died out, and there'll be nothing left to burn—not to mention nuclear war. Walking to school this morning through that stinging yellow fog, I kind of believed that. On my way home, I bought a soft-serve in a cone. Our pastry

shop sells four flavors. Vanilla, lemon, pistachio, and orange. But never all at once. I don't like pistachio, and lemon is my favorite. The trick is, you never know what flavor they'll be serving that day. They swap them out randomly, and sometimes it's a whole week of pistachio. Ice cream costs one crown forty. Pompela, mandarin juice in a cup with a foil lid, costs one crown fifty. Its correct name is Olympus, but everyone still calls it Pompela, since that's what it used to be called. I really like it. Sometimes, I buy one after practice and drink it right there in front of the store, even if it's warm. But lately, it's had this weird aftertaste and left behind an orange strip inside the cup that won't wash off. Mom says they load it up with more chemicals than before. Milk in a bag is two crowns. Except we pretty much always have to pour it out 'cause it's no good. Mom says that milk was a delicacy when she was little, but now they feed the cows who-knows-what, and the poor things don't see fresh grass or sunlight all year. Bagged milk goes sour right away, but mostly it just smells strange. For a while, we tried buying whole milk in bottles for three crowns and ten hellers, but that stank too. Mom doesn't want me and Sis drinking it, so she lets us have juice with dinner instead.

We don't drink store-bought sodas at home, just real, homemade raspberry juice from Grandma. It tastes amazing at her place. She mixes this gorgeous, deep red syrup with fizzy water from a big siphon bottle with a gas cartridge. But when we drive it back to Prague, the juice quickly turns brown, foam forms on the surface, and it starts to taste fermented. Mom says it's 'cause it gets shaken up in the car on the way. We also get eggs from Grandma and transport them in trays stacked up against the back window. Spotting those trays on a Sunday afternoon always lets you know who's coming back from visiting relatives in the countryside. Seems like every other car has eggs in the window. We don't drink tap water either—it's full of chlorine and tastes like the pipes. I'll have some at school or during practice, but we keep a supply of mineral water at home. Our folks usually buy Běloves mineral water, Ida. I only get bottled soda on trips with my other grandpa or at camp, and I'd also get a fountain soda as a kiddo when I went shopping with Dad. He'd always make a pit stop at a pub on the way home, and the bartender would pour me a shot of soda so I didn't have to stand around with my gums stuck to my teeth. Our folks won't even allow store-bought syrup. They say it's artificial and made from coal, so we stay loyal to

Grandma's fermented juice mixed with lightly salted mineral water. Anyway, even syrup will soon become a rarity, since it's made from coal, which'll run out in no time. Coca-Cola is only on the menu at Christmas. It costs five crowns at a store, marked up to five-fifty at a hotel. I know that because we bought some at the front desk on a school trip. Same with Deli candy bars and cream bonbons: three crowns at the store, three-thirty at the hotel. But when you're craving a sweet treat in the evening, you don't think twice about thirty hellers. Our folks don't get why I spend all my pocket money at training retreats or on school trips. Dad's always pointing to Bro, who leaves with fifty crowns and comes back with all of it. I get a hundred and can barely scrape together some loose change.

Our folks set up a Premium Youth Savings account for me. Actually, for all three of us siblings. When we turn eighteen, we each get twenty thousand. Our Grandma and grandpas chip in too, since our folks couldn't cover three kids on their own. I think I'll put the money into a savings book right away, probably a lottery one. I might luck out in the draw and win something on top of the interest. I wish I could win a hundred thousand in Sportka—that's the grand prize. Mom and Dad bet on the same numbers every week. I don't get how they remember them, 'cause their combination makes zero sense. They've never won anything worth mentioning, but there's no talking them out of it.

Sometimes I fantasize about what I'd buy if I won. Definitely a proper car. Škoda came out with a new model this year—the Škoda Favorit. It finally looks like a real car, not some box on wheels like the one-oh-fives and one-twenties. We have a one-twenty in sky blue, which is a lame color, but all Škodas come in lame colors. Only the Rapids and the Coupés look decent, maybe the one-thirties and the one-twenty GLS models too. You can already spot Favorits out on the streets here and there, but they're apparently defective. There's even a joke going around: "What do you call the new Škoda model in Slovak? Škoda, over it." Before the Škoda, we had a Trabant—but I never mention it so that I don't get laughed at. Dad's colleague recently bought a Fiat Uno from Tuzex. There's plenty of those driving around too. I might get one someday, but I'd first have to score some Tuzex vouchers.

My friend Pepan from basketball—his dad runs a factory somewhere outside of Prague. That stinky yellow cloud probably floated over from there last night. Every morning, there's a six-thirteen with a chauffeur parked outside his house, ready to take him to school and bring him home in the afternoon. You know how to say six-thirteen in Hungarian? Fatcatcar. And you call the drivers genteel coachmen. Dad says those things guzzle gas. No surprise, really, since it's a Tatra—basically a truck. Pepan lives down in Old Prague by the Vltava. He always says that in the center, they grew up playing with Legos, while we in the housing estate had Merkur. I guess there's some truth to that. I never had Legos, only the Merkur passed down from Bro, and it was missing a lot of pieces. Sometimes we'd build something with Merkur in manual training at school, but it was such a hassle. We'd dig out those dusty sets from the depths of the cabinet and pick dead bugs out of the boxes.

It's the same story with digigames. Last year for Christmas, I got that Russian game with Wolf from the You Just Wait, Bunny! cartoon, where he catches eggs in a basket. Pepan, of course, had one two years earlier, except his was from the West and had Mickey Mouse.

Pepan is used to these sorts of things. A minister's daughter goes to his school, along with kids of actors and singers, and they get whatever they want. The teachers supposedly favor them a lot—I guess they think they can get away with anything or that they're somehow untouchable. We don't have anyone too interesting at our school, since no politicians or artists live in our housing estate. They've got no place here. Anyone who's anyone lives in a villa in Ořechovka or in a brick house in Malá Strana, Staré Město, or Vinohrady.

(…)

David

We've got a basketball training retreat in the mountains over spring break, and in March, our class is headed on a mandatory ski trip. I'm pretty excited 'cause I asked

for Völkl skis for Christmas, and our folks promised they'd get them. At first, they wanted to buy me Elán skis, but I think those are kind of for girls. I'd also like Dachstein boots, but the Botas buckle ones I have aren't bad. At least I've got Marker bindings—the step-in kind. Thinking back to third grade, when I had to fasten the heel strap by hand and use safety cords instead of brakes, I cringe in shame. Dad got the bindings secondhand from a colleague whose son had upgraded to a newer model from Tuzex. I picked out my Uvex goggles myself. The old specs I inherited from Bro always fogged up, and the lens had to be swapped out whenever the slope got too sunny or hazy and never stayed in place. Good goggles from the West have a dual lens that doesn't fog and has a neutral tint that works in any weather. I would go to Pragosport on Wenceslas to keep an eye on them, terrified they'd sell out. I bugged our folks so much they finally gave in, but said I'd have to wait 'til Christmas for them, along with the skis. Which is fine—what was I gonna do with ski goggles in the summer anyway?

When I grow up, if I work hard and save up, I'll be able to buy quality imported goods at Tuzex, Pragoimpex, or Pragosport. Our folks pretend they don't get why I care about nice things, yet Mom only buys Diplomat soap and pours regular old yellow shampoo into an empty bottle of Fa to make it look more presentable on the bathroom shelf. We've had that bottle for so long that it's totally beat up. And Dad transfers his Spartas into a round tin labeled John Player Special, so I don't know why he's surprised that I want nice ski gear and good clothes.

They complain that you can't buy anything decent here, but that obviously isn't the case for the swarms of Ruskies splashing their overvalued rubles around Prague, as Dad puts it. When you walk down Wenceslas or Příkopy, you see dozens of Ruskies in tracksuits with gold teeth, buying everything up and stuffing their trunks. They even buy carpets and walk around town with them rolled up on their shoulders. You can spot them right away by their faces. Those gold teeth baffle me. Věra Chadimová from our class has one, and she catches a lot of flak for it. She can't wait to turn fifteen so she can replace it with a white one. But in Russia, it's a fashion statement and a sign of wealth. Paired with their tracksuits, it looks totally ridiculous. At the same time, they can be pretty intimidating. They don't know how to behave at all.

They can’t say “excuse me,” “please,” “thank you,” or “sorry.” They cut in line and shove their way through. They walk in formation on the sidewalk and never move out of the way for anyone. They’ve got heaps of dough and act like they’re at home here.

People say that Poles are smugglers, and there’s some truth to that. Dad recently called Mom to tell her to stop by his work ‘cause Polish women had arrived, peddling rubber boots under the table in the building next door. Shoes made of rubber are the latest trend among girls. I don’t get how they can walk in them, but everyone wants them. Even Sis managed to wheedle a pair out of our folks in Yugo. You can’t buy them anywhere here, so when an opportunity comes up, you grab what you can get. Apparently, the Polish ladies had them in huge bags, like the ones hockey players use, and sold only one pair to each person. Mom couldn’t get out of work in the end, so Dad bought a pair without trying them on first. Of course, they’re too small for Mom, and she’s upset. Sis slipped them on and started strolling around the apartment, looking like Puss in Boots, trying to convince Mom that she’d grow into them soon. Which is nonsense—and by the time she does, rubber shoes will be out of style. This pair barely toured the apartment before Mom sold them to a colleague, at a markup. So in the end, everything turned out fine.

A few years ago, Mom and I were walking down Wenceslas, and she had an Indian bag slung over her shoulder. That was the trend back then. All the women had Indian dresses, Indian scarves with silver threads, and Indian leather bags with some sort of oriental designs. A Polish lady wandered towards us, probably a tourist strolling through Prague, and said to Mom, “Proszę pani, szukam takiej torby.” Mom was waving her arms around, trying to explain that she didn’t buy it in Prague, but that it was imported directly from India. At first, I didn’t get what was happening, but Mom explained that “szukam” means “I am looking for” in Polish. I still find it hilarious how dirty it sounds.

Smuggling and the barter trade overall are pretty remarkable. When you travel to Yugo, you bring over coffee, and pretty much anything goes in Romania or on Cuba. Our folks flew there last year on a company trip. They were told in advance to buy cheap shoes and clothes, and maybe a carton of Starts, as they might come in handy. In the end, they exchanged almost everything they brought for seashells,

dried crabs, and parrotfish. They also returned with several bottles of Cuban rum, which they use as bribes for officials. You gotta bring a bottle or a box of chocolates wherever you need something. Doesn't quite have to be French cognac, but it's better if it's uncommon. For instance, Dad has his colleagues bring him Slančev Brjag from Bulgaria, their local spirit. It means Sunny Beach, a resort that many Czechs visit, so they're familiar with it and have fond memories. A bottle of "Sunny" always brings them joy. As soon as I'm older, I'll start stocking up on bottles so I'll have some to give away.

Marta

She had always felt lonely, really, and sometimes it wasn't just a feeling—it was a plain fact. For one, she had no siblings. When Mom and Dad first sent her to Pioneer camp, she had no scarf, was the youngest there, and was a complete stranger. Everyone else already knew each other because they were from the same Pioneer group in Old Prague, not far from where Mom worked. Mom had met one of the camp leaders, who offered to let her daughter join. They were given a list of mandatory gear and supplies: a backpack, a bread bag, a canteen, Pioneer boots, a green Pioneer shirt, a blue Pioneer shirt, and various other standard camping items. Mom found it all too expensive, so she only bought the blue shirt, while a plastic vinegar bottle served as a canteen. During evening assembly, Marta had to stand apart from her troop because her sky-blue shirt stuck out among the green-clad outdoorsmen. Not only was she a stranger in a clique, but she was also the only one yet to receive her scarf yet, so she wasn't allowed to salute the flag. To make matters worse, her grandmother—well meaning as she was—addressed her postcards to Pioneer Marta Straková, even though everyone knew she wasn't a real Pioneer. When the head counselor handed out mail during the evening assembly, he announced each name in full, title included, and made a big show of it. The shame crushed Marta. In her tent, where she slept alone because her troop had an odd number of kids, she would cry the whole night through. Then she'd pass out from exhaustion and couldn't make it out of the tent in time to go pee.

Ever since Mom and Dad stopped getting along, they sent Marta to two summer camps, so she spent most of her vacations away from home. The kids spent most of the summer in rubber boots. They wore them to run through tall grass soaked in dew to the warm-up spot each morning, waded through streams and mud in the forest, and in the evening, when they lined up for roll call by the flagpole, the dew had settled once again. That is, if it didn't happen to be raining. Some years, it rained through almost the entire three weeks of camp. Marta always had regular brown rain boots, like most of the kids. But one girl in her troop had beautiful red ones with white trim. Her grandmother lived in Gottwaldov and bought the export-only boots at the Svit company store. They weren't available on the Czechoslovak market otherwise. Marta desperately wanted those red rubber boots, but this wish was impossible to fulfill.

Marta has no grandparents. Pop's parents died long ago, Mom's dad never lived with the family, and Grandma, who once sent Marta postcards addressing her as a Pioneer, passed away while Marta's parents were getting divorced. Mom is an only child, just like Marta, and Dad's siblings never kept in touch because they didn't like Mom. Marta is very glad to have Simona.

One time, Simona brought a girl from volleyball over. They call her Adidaska. Her dad holds a high position at Pragoexport, a company that deals in consumer goods, including sports equipment. He travels to West Germany several times a year, and whenever he selects goods for import to Czechoslovakia, he always returns with gifts for his daughters. Simona's teammate has, without exaggeration, everything from Adidas. And it's all the real deal—no imitations from the Poles at the market, like what others wear. Marta was initially jealous of her, but thanks to all the branded clothing Daddy gets her from the West, she doesn't consider Adidaska serious competition in their friendship.

David

This April, Gorbachev flew to Prague. We all watched him carefully and made fun of that spot on his forehead. There were all sorts of dumb jokes making the rounds, but

I think he's a likable guy—definitely more so than the uncles who were in charge before him, and the bigwigs running things here. He shows up everywhere with his wife, who's beautiful and elegant—nothing like those caked-up, fat socialites strolling around Wenceslas with suitcases, buying up everything in sight. We actually kind of like him. He preaches perestroika and glasnost. The adults say it's about time, but they don't really believe anything will change for the better here. Our coach said that Gorbachev supposedly refuses to talk to our modern-day nobility. Meaning Husák, Štrougal, and all the rest of them. When he was in Prague in April, I watched his speech on TV from the Palace of Culture. He explained that he hadn't gone to some meeting because he had a cold. And that apparently his critics claimed he had a "politicheskij nasmork." To prove it wasn't just an excuse, he pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket on stage and blew his nose. Dad had to explain to me that "nasmork" means a cold in Russian. It was probably the first time I'd seen a bigwig make a joke. I've liked him even more ever since. We were a bit jealous of the kids from Prague 6 who got to hang around Leninka and wave at the six-thirteens when they drove by from the airport and back. Fleets of black six-thirteens roll through Prague pretty often. Dad always says that's the party and the government on the move.

Gorbachev isn't as old as those who came before him, and he's much more spry. The Ruskies must've realized they couldn't afford another embarrassment. When Brezhnev died, it was a shock. They played funeral marches on the radio, only showed serious stuff on TV, banned comedies in cinemas, and at school, we had to observe three minutes of silence. Brezhnev, Husák, and Reagan had been around as long as anyone could remember—or at least as long as I could. They turned up in every joke, their names came up on the radio and TV every day, and suddenly, one of them was missing. We watched the funeral on Red Square with our folks on TV. We were real startled when the coffin slipped. As if it proved the clumsiness of the whole Soviet regime. They couldn't even get the funeral right without some kind of scandal. When Andropov died a year and a half later, it felt strange. So soon after the other, we hadn't even gotten used to him. We didn't know him well, so it didn't hit us the way Brezhnev's death did. Again, we had three minutes of silence, but we didn't really care at that point. And when Chernenko died the following year, we were

cracking jokes about it. Not that anyone's death is funny, but the Ruskies deserve this kind of international embarrassment. We observed the three minutes of silence for a third time, but had to hold ourselves back from bursting out laughing at this oh-so-grave situation.

At the end of May this year, there was another uproar. A boy from West Germany landed in a small plane right in the middle of Moscow. Just like that—supposedly, he just wanted to give it a try. No one can figure out how he managed to fly across half the Soviet Union without getting shot down. People are laughing and making up jokes. "A white bird flew to Red Square, someone stepped out and said, Guten Tag."

There are tons of political jokes going around, and they're good. I wonder who comes up with them. Then again, there are plenty of dumb ones too. Those are the ones they print in Dikobraz magazine or air on that Slovak show Funnier Wins. People submit jokes, actors read them out loud, and whichever gets the biggest applause earns the sender a hundred-crown note. There's a character on the show called Oskar Vtipkár, but they recently changed his name to Mišo Vtipkár, which sounds totally stupid since it doesn't even rhyme. Maybe they did it 'cause Amadeus by Miloš Forman won eight Oscars, and they didn't want that name popping up on communication channels. Or maybe it was some other similarly ridiculous reason. Anyway, we all still say Oskar Vtipkár when someone tells a joke that falls flat. If there were a contest for the best political joke, it would be called The Golden Bars—and the winner would be carted off to jail on the spot.

A lot of Amadeus was filmed in Prague. We went to see it at the cinema with our folks, and they'd point at the screen every time they spotted a familiar nook. I couldn't keep up with it 'cause I was pretty small and didn't know Old Prague. When I was even younger, Barbra Streisand filmed here too. I don't really know her and haven't seen her movies, but our folks recognized her right away. That winter, we took a walk around Prague Castle, and Mom and Dad were whispering and pointing at a lady in a fur coat and hat, saying it was Streisand. She was with a group of people, and they were showing her St. Vitus Cathedral. These little things give me hope that this place isn't entirely dead.

Grants for publishing Czech literature abroad

Deadline 15th May and 15th November

Ministry of Culture Czech Republic (gov.cz)

Veronika Chaloupkova
Argo Publishers
Prague, Czech Republic
e-mail: veronika.chaloupkova@argo.cz

www.argo.cz/foreign-rights

cell phone: +420 608 069 396