

Velvet and Steam

by **Jan Novák**



Three days in Prague at the dawn of freedom

After twenty years in American exile, Jan Novák returns to Prague in December 1989, just as the country is emerging from decades of communist rule. *Velvet and Steam* records three intense days steeped in historic events, cigarette smoke, chance encounters, heated conversations, and an eager anticipation of what is to come. With wit, sharp observation, and a personal sense of distance, Novák captures a city suspended between the old world and the new. A vivid, intimate, and ironic portrait of Prague in the first days of freedom.

CARL SANDBURG AWARD (1985)
FRIENDS OF LITERATURE AWARD (1985)
MAGNESIA LITERA AWARD (2004)
JOSEF ŠKVORECKÝ AWARD (2007)

Jan Novák (b. 1953) is a prominent Czech-American author, translator and documentary filmmaker. His family emigrated to the U.S. in 1969, and nowadays he lives in Prague and Berlin. He gained recognition for his first novel *The Wyllis Dream Kit* (1985), which won the Carl Sandburg Prize and was in the wider **nomination for the Pulitzer Prize**. He later co-authored Miloš Forman's autobiography *Turnaround* (1994), which was translated into 22 languages, while his "true novel" *So Far So Good* (2004, 2018) was awarded **the Magnesia Litera**, the greatest literary prize in Czechia. Novák also collaborated with Jaromír 99 on two graphic novels, *Zátopek* (2016) and *So Far So Good* (2018), which have been translated into six languages. Argo has also published his partly autobiographical novels *The Wyllis Dream Kit*; *Grandpa and Underpaid, but Armed*; *Alaska*; *Commies*, *Thugs*, *Gypsies*, *Snitches and Poets* etc.

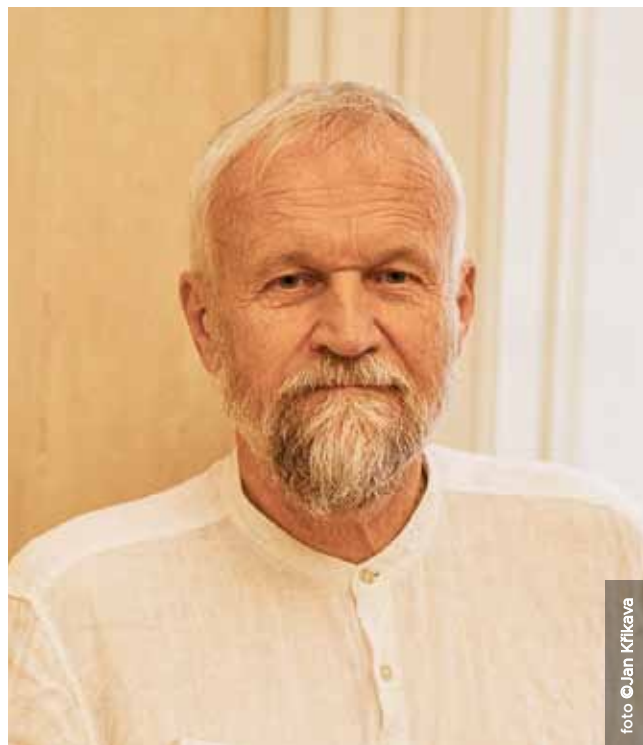


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Adult literary fiction / memoiristic prose

Prague, December 1989. A revolution is ending, a country is waking up – and one man returns to a home that no longer quite belongs to him.

After nineteen years in Chicago, a Czech-born American writer comes back to Czechoslovakia for three feverish days just as the Velvet Revolution is transforming the country. He left as a teenager, built a life in the United States, began writing in English and gradually stopped thinking of his old homeland as home. Now television images of packed Prague squares, jangling keys and political upheaval draw him back across the border – despite the fact that, on his previous visit ten years earlier, the authorities had effectively told him never to return.

What follows is neither a conventional political chronicle nor a nostalgic homecoming story. It is a restless, funny, intoxicated and deeply personal journey through a city suspended between two eras. The narrator arrives expecting history and finds something far messier: old friends, smoky pubs, exhausted revolutionaries, bureaucrats who have not yet realised that the system protecting them is collapsing, artists suddenly pulled into politics, emigrants carrying decades of resentment and longing, and a Prague in which the communist past and the democratic future seem to exist simultaneously.

Novák frames the book as a report drawn from memory – while openly admitting that memory itself may be only another form of imagination. The three days he spent in Prague in early December 1989 become the backbone of a narrative in which the present is constantly interrupted by recollections of childhood, emigration, exile and previous encounters with communist Czechoslovakia. The result is a book less interested in the official story of a revolution than in what history feels like when you happen to be standing inside it.

The narrator enters the country through Rozvadov, where the old regime is still mechanically performing its rituals. Border guards demand documents that suddenly feel absurd, officials continue enforcing rules no one has yet officially abolished, and the narrator is reminded that revolutions may happen overnight while institutions change much more slowly. Once across the border, the familiar landscape immediately destabilises him. It is recognisable and alien at once: the country of his childhood, seen through almost twenty years of American experience.

Prague itself is wrapped in smog, alcohol, exhaustion and revolutionary excitement. The narrator moves through apartments, studios, theatres, galleries, pubs and political gatherings, meeting people who until recently belonged to the underground and who are suddenly being pulled towards the centre of public life. His closest guide is the artist Josef “Joska” Skalník, a friend deeply involved in the revolutionary ferment. Around him, the old hierarchy is disintegrating with extraordinary speed: people who spent years on the margins suddenly find themselves close to Václav Havel and the emerging structures of power, while those associated with the old order begin searching for ways to reinvent themselves.

Yet *Samet* a pára repeatedly undercuts the grandeur of historical change with the absurdity of everyday life. The revolution coexists with hangovers, unpaid restaurant bills, cigarettes, bad coffee, chronic shortages and private anxieties. Even moments of collective euphoria are observed through the

narrator's sharp, sceptical eye. At a packed concert, he experiences the extraordinary emotional force surrounding Marta Kubišová and Václav Havel, and for a moment is swept completely into the feeling that history has turned. But the book never allows that exhilaration to become a simple heroic narrative.

At its centre lies a more intimate question: what happens when you return to the place that formed you after you have spent almost half your life becoming someone else?

The narrator is both insider and outsider. He understands the language, humour and codes of the country instinctively, yet he also sees it through American eyes. In Chicago, Czech gradually disappeared even from his dreams; back in Prague, memories return with almost physical force. His old and new identities overlap but refuse to merge neatly. The novel becomes a portrait not only of a society between political systems, but of a man suspended between languages, countries and versions of himself.

Stories of other emigrants deepen this theme. Some adapted successfully to the West; others remained emotionally trapped between two countries, unable to feel entirely at home in either. Their histories of escape, separation and longing form a counterpoint to the public optimism of 1989. One man remembers crawling through barbed wire to escape Czechoslovakia and later building an outwardly ordinary American life, while the trauma returns in dreams decades later.

The new 2026 edition adds another layer. Novák revisits the text more than three decades after writing it, now once again living in Prague and writing mainly in Czech. He deliberately preserves the younger narrator's misjudgements and *naïveté*, but adds a final chapter that radically complicates one of the book's central relationships. Years after the revolution, archival documents identify his friend Joska Skalník as a secret collaborator of the communist State Security under several code names, including "Gogh". The revelation does not produce an easy moral verdict; instead, it forces the narrator to reconsider memory, loyalty and the stories people tell about themselves and one another.

That late discovery changes the emotional temperature of everything that precedes it. A book originally written in the immediate aftermath of liberation becomes, decades later, also a meditation on how fragile historical certainty can be. Heroes and collaborators, victims and survivors, idealism and compromise refuse to separate cleanly. The past keeps changing because new facts emerge – but also because the person remembering it changes.

Fast, irreverent, intimate and politically charged, *Samet a pára* captures the Velvet Revolution not from the podium but from the street, the pub, the kitchen table and the mind of an exile returning home. Blending autobiography, fiction, reportage and memory, Jan Novák transforms three extraordinary days in Prague into a larger story about exile, belonging, friendship and the unreliable nature of the past. It is a book about a revolution – but even more, about the unsettling moment when history suddenly becomes personal.