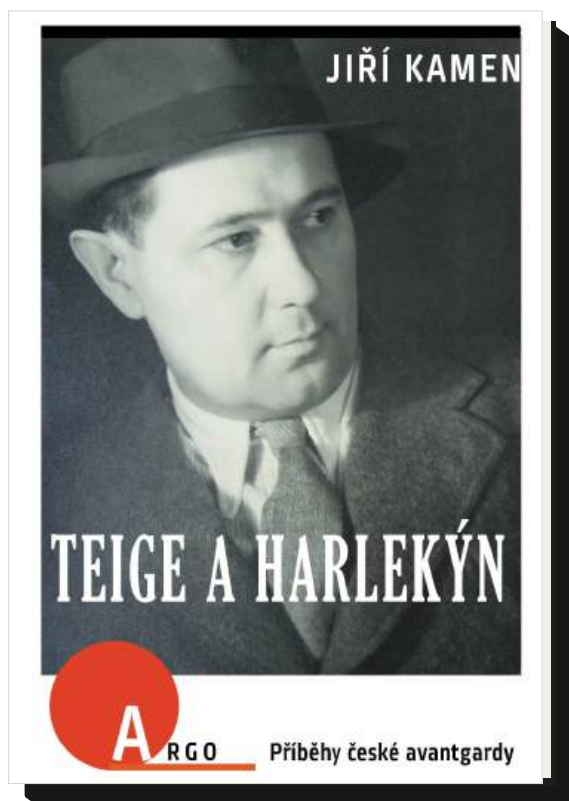




Teige and the Harlequin

by **Jiří Kamen**

Stories of the Czech Avant-Garde



The exuberance and tragedy of a generation that wanted to reinvent life

Prague, 1920. A generation emerging from the First World War is determined to invent a new way of living. At its centre stands Karel Teige: critic, designer, collagist and restless organiser, whose belief in poetry brings together artists, architects, filmmakers and writers.

From the exuberance of Devětsil and Poetism to the unsettling visions of Surrealism, Jiří Kamen follows a circle that includes Toyen, Jindřich Štyrský, Vítězslav Nezval, Jaroslav Seifert and André Breton. Their manifestos and quarrels are inseparable from friendship, desire and the women whose work sustained them.

But the dream of liberation collides with fascism, occupation and Stalinism. A man of the left who refuses to submit imagination to political doctrine, Teige becomes increasingly isolated. Drawing on diaries, letters, memoirs and artworks, Kamen creates a richly human portrait of an artistic generation: funny, unruly and inventive, then forced to confront the terrible cost of its ideals.

Jiří Kamen (b. 1951) is a Czech writer, cultural journalist and author of radio plays and documentaries. He studied at Palacký University in Olomouc and has worked for Czech Radio since 1975. His books move between fiction, biography and documentary writing. His short-story collection *Elvis of the Elbe* (2018) was nominated for the **Magnesia Litera**. With Pavla Horáková, he co-authored two books based on letters and diaries from the First World War. His lifelong interest in modern art and Surrealism informs this portrait of Teige and his circle.



Author photograph via argo.cz



THE INTERNATIONAL PITCH

A revolution in art. A generation at risk.

Teige and the Harlequin / Jiří Kamen

Karel Teige helped a generation imagine that art could transform everyday life. This is the story of what happened when history put that belief to the test.

In Prague after the First World War, Teige becomes the organiser and intellectual catalyst of an extraordinary artistic community. Poetry, typography, photography, architecture and cinema belong to a single adventure. Paris and Moscow offer rival visions of the future; friendship and desire make those visions personal.

Jiří Kamen follows that adventure from the playful experiments of the 1920s through Surrealism, occupation and the political terror of the early 1950s. The story turns on an increasingly dangerous contradiction: how can a revolutionary artist defend the freedom of imagination when the revolution itself demands obedience?

WHY THIS BOOK TRAVELS

An intimate entry into European modernism, connecting the Czech avant-garde with André Breton, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Oskar Kokoschka and the debates that shaped twentieth-century art. The lives of Toyen and the women closest to Teige open the story beyond manifestos, revealing the emotional and creative work behind a cultural revolution.

A BIOGRAPHY WRITTEN AS A COLLAGE

Diaries, private correspondence, memoirs, poetry and images meet in short, associative chapters. Kamen allows documents and recollections to illuminate and challenge one another. Comic anecdotes and erotic candour coexist with political catastrophe, giving cultural history the momentum and intimacy of lived experience.

Original title: Teige a harlekýn: Příběhy české avantgardy. Argo, 2026; 344 pages.

Reading material: complete Czech manuscript and English synopsis.

Translation rights: please contact Veronika Chaloupková at Argo.



EXTENDED SYNOPSIS / 1 OF 2

An artist among artists

From a private diary to a collective dream

The story opens with a family photograph and a portrait of Teige's father, Josef, a Prague archivist. Unlike many of the modernists who defined themselves through rebellion against their fathers, Karel grows up with encouragement for his artistic ambitions. His childhood and adolescent diaries reveal a precocious, opinionated boy: eager to paint, impatient with received wisdom, absorbed in books, theatre and the possibility of a different future. The First World War presses upon these private experiments, while dreams and daily observations already suggest the imagination that will shape his later work.

After the war, Prague becomes a laboratory for the young. Devětsil, founded in 1920, brings together writers, artists, architects and performers determined to change both art and everyday existence. Teige emerges as its organiser, theorist and tireless intermediary. His authority is intellectual, but it is also intensely personal: friendships, conversation, editorial work and a talent for connecting people help turn a loose circle into a movement. Kamen's narrative moves between its celebrated achievements and the jokes, rivalries and improbable episodes that made up its daily life.

Teige's encounter with Paris and his collaboration with Vítězslav Nezval help give rise to Poetism. Poetry is to escape the printed page and enter ordinary experience through dance, film, circus, travel and visual invention. The cinema and the music hall can be as important as the museum. Teige's typographical experiments make the book itself a place of artistic collaboration. Around him move Jaroslav Seifert, Konstantin Biebl, Jindřich Štyrský, Toyen, Roman Jakobson and many others, whose lives connect Prague with the wider European avant-garde.

Yet the carnival has its tensions. Teige's architectural thinking insists on practical function and the transformation of living conditions, provoking disagreement among fellow modernists. His study of the minimum dwelling connects design to social emancipation, including freedom from conventional domestic arrangements. The same desire to abolish inherited restrictions shapes his thinking about love. The promise of a new world is tested in apartments, working relationships and intimate attachments as much as in artistic manifestos.

As the confidence of the 1920s fades, Surrealism offers a new field of discovery. Dreams, desire and the unconscious unsettle the earlier celebration of modern life. Nezval's friendship with André Breton strengthens the connections between Prague and Paris, while Teige's collages bring bodies, architecture and found fragments into disturbing new combinations. The harlequin, an artist's double and a recurring figure in Štyrský's work, carries the memory of the carnival into a darker imaginative landscape. The fragments of art begin to echo the fractures of the world around them.



EXTENDED SYNOPSIS / 2 OF 2

The cost of creative freedom

The political crises of the 1930s force the avant-garde's contradictions into the open. Teige and his friends are committed to the left, but Stalinism makes the relationship between revolutionary politics and artistic freedom increasingly untenable. The Moscow trials divide them. Nezval's accommodation with Soviet power brings him into conflict with Teige, who refuses to accept political orthodoxy as a measure of art. Their quarrel exposes a fracture within a community that once believed its artistic and social hopes were inseparable.

Under Nazi occupation, public experiment gives way to threatened, often hidden work. Teige is forbidden to publish under his own name and concentrates on writing, correspondence and collage. The deaths of artists and friends shrink the world of the earlier avant-garde. At Toyen's apartment, where the Jewish poet Jindřich Heisler is in hiding, creative solidarity also becomes material assistance: Teige brings food and continues to discuss art. Imagination persists within a daily life marked by censorship, danger and loss.

The private history is carried by Jožka Nevařilová, Eva Ebertová and the painter Marie Pospíšilová. Their letters reveal love and jealousy, intellectual exchange and collaborative work. Teige insists that affection need not be exclusive and imagines relationships founded on both freedom and shared creation. But the arrangements he devises do not remove the pain of unequal needs. Jožka's writing and interests in housing, Eva's research and translations, and Marie's painting belong within the story of his work. Eva's imprisonment in Terezín brings the violence of the occupation into this intimate circle.

Liberation does not restore the promise of the 1920s. After the Communist takeover of 1948, the culture of official conformity turns the independent avant-garde into an enemy. Závěš Kalandra is executed, writers are imprisoned, and Teige faces escalating denunciation as a supposed Trotskyist. E. F. Burian's play Pařeniště turns figures from the former artistic circle into hostile caricatures. Old friendships survive unevenly, compromised by fear, ambition and attempts to find a place within the new order.

Teige dies suddenly in 1951. Jožka and, shortly afterwards, Eva take their own lives. Papers are burned, hidden, handed to friends or seized; the struggle over his legacy begins almost immediately. Kamen follows the repercussions beyond this death, through Biebl's tragic end, the fates of imprisoned writers and Toyen's later life in Paris. The avant-garde survives in scattered works, memories and relationships, even as the world in which it first imagined freedom disappears.

In a personal epilogue, Kamen traces his own encounters with this history: the youthful discovery of Surrealism, conversations with Olda Kokoschka, the search for Marie Pospíšilová's paintings and the unexpected connections opened by research. Teige's books, letters and pencilled annotations remain active presences. The biography ends as a meeting between past and present, with the collage still capable of generating new associations and new ways of seeing.