

Velvet and Steam

by **Jan Novák**



Three days in Prague at the dawn of freedom

After two decades in America, Czech-born writer Jan Novák returns to Prague as communist rule collapses. In smoky pubs, artists' studios and political gatherings, he catches a city still running on the habits of a regime it has just rejected.

Funny, sharp and unsentimental, **Velvet and Steam** turns a moment of collective triumph into an intimate story of exile and belonging. In the revised edition, a late discovery about a close friend reopens the past and unsettles the narrator's memories of liberation.

SELECTED AUTHOR AWARDS

CARL SANDBURG AWARD (1985)

FRIENDS OF LITERATURE AWARD (1985)

MAGNESIA LITERA BOOK OF THE YEAR (2005)

JOSEF ŠKVORECKÝ PRIZE (2007)

Jan Novák (b. 1953) is a Czech-American writer, translator and documentary filmmaker. His family emigrated to the United States in 1969, and he began his literary career writing in English. His debut novel, **The Willys Dream Kit** (1985), won the Carl Sandburg Award. He co-wrote Miloš Forman's autobiography **Turnaround**, translated into 22 languages. His novel **So Far So Good** won the Magnesia Litera Book of the Year award, and **Grandpa** received the Josef Škvorecký Prize. With Jaromír 99 he created the graphic novels **Zátopek** and **So Far So Good**. He lives in Prague and Berlin.

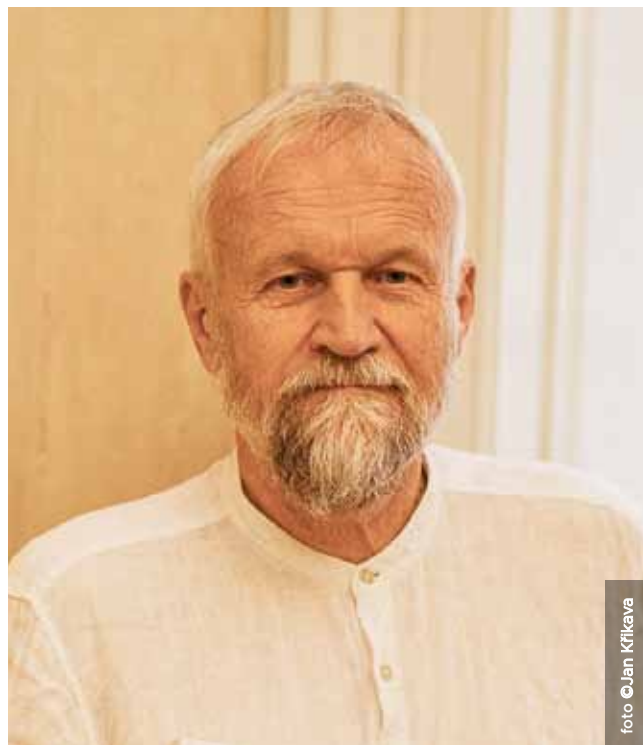


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THE INTERNATIONAL PITCH

Velvet and Steam

Jan Novák

He comes home to witness a revolution.
Years later, the story changes again.

Prague, December 1989. After twenty years in the United States, a Czech-born writer returns for three days at the dawn of a new political era. His friend, the artist Josef “Joska” Skalník, draws him into a city of smoky pubs, sudden reunions, revolutionary excitement and institutions still performing the rituals of communism. The visitor speaks the language and knows the jokes, yet carries an American life inside him. Decades later, an archival discovery about that friend forces him to reconsider the homecoming he remembers.

LITERARY PROSE / REVOLUTION, EXILE AND THE UNRELIABLE PAST

Novák brings the pace of reportage and an exile’s double vision to the Velvet Revolution. Public euphoria unfolds through private encounters: meals, arguments, hangovers, old loyalties and the shock of recognising a place that has become unfamiliar. His irreverent humour gives the historical moment texture; the revised edition’s final chapter deepens its questions of trust and memory.

WHY THIS BOOK TRAVELS

A compact, vivid entry into one of Europe’s defining political transitions, with an emotional centre that reaches beyond Czech history. The return from exile, the strain between two identities and a friendship complicated by new evidence will speak to readers of literary memoir and narrative non-fiction. Its three-day frame gives the story urgency, while the later revelation opens a larger question: how do we live with a past whose meaning keeps changing?

EDITION AND READING MATERIAL

Original title: Samet a pára. Revised Czech edition: Argo, 2026; 192 pages. The extended English synopsis follows. An English sample is available on request. [View the author’s rights page](#) · [View the Czech edition](#).

A visitor to his own past

In December 1989, the television images of crowded Prague squares, jangling keys and political upheaval draw a Czech-born American writer back to Czechoslovakia. He left as a teenager and has built a life in Chicago, writing in English and gradually losing the instinct to think of his old country as home. His previous visit, a decade earlier, ended with the authorities effectively telling him never to return. Now he crosses the border for three days, arriving while the consequences of the Velvet Revolution are still taking shape.

At Rozvadov, the old state continues to operate almost automatically. Border guards ask for documents and officials enforce rules that already seem absurd, even though no one has formally abolished them. The gap between revolutionary change and institutional habit is the first of many contradictions he encounters. Once inside the country, the familiar landscape unsettles him: it is the world of his childhood, seen through two decades of American experience.

Prague is full of smog, cigarettes, alcohol, exhaustion and expectation. The narrator moves between apartments, studios, theatres, galleries, pubs and political gatherings. People who until recently belonged to the underground are suddenly approaching the centre of public life. His principal guide is the artist Josef “Joska” Skalník, an old friend involved in the revolutionary ferment and close to the emerging circles around Václav Havel. Their encounters give the visit both a personal route through the city and a view of how quickly its social hierarchy is changing.

The three days provide the book’s frame, but memory repeatedly interrupts them. Scenes of childhood, emigration, exile and earlier encounters with communist Czechoslovakia enter the present without settling into an orderly account. Novák describes his undertaking as a report drawn from memory, while acknowledging how closely memory resembles imagination. Each recognition in the city brings with it another version of the person he used to be. The homecoming becomes a way of measuring what has changed in the country, and what has changed in the visitor.

A revolution in everyday life

Revolutionary excitement shares the streets with the practical details of everyday life. Cigarettes, bad coffee, unpaid restaurant bills, chronic shortages and hangovers keep intruding on the grandeur of the moment. In conversations and chance meetings, Novák catches the humour, confusion and self-interest that accompany a sudden shift in power. The intimacy of these scenes lets the reader feel history as it is lived before anyone knows how the story will end.

At a packed concert, the presence of Marta Kubišová and Václav Havel releases an extraordinary emotional force. For a moment the narrator is caught up completely in the sense that an era has ended. Around him, artists and former dissidents are being drawn towards public responsibility, while people associated with the old order begin searching for new ways to present themselves. His scepticism remains alert even at the height of collective enthusiasm. The city's liberation can be felt in the crowd, but its future is still being improvised in private conversations.

The narrator's position is especially unstable. Czech language, humour and social codes return instinctively, yet he observes them through the life he has made in America. In Chicago, Czech has faded even from his dreams. Back in Prague, memories become almost physical. He belongs to the place and feels foreign in it at the same time. The country's transition between political systems finds a private counterpart in his movement between languages, loyalties and versions of himself.

Other emigrants carry their own accounts of escape and separation. Some have adapted to life in the West; others remain emotionally caught between two countries, feeling at home in neither. One man recalls crawling through barbed wire to leave Czechoslovakia, then building an apparently ordinary life in America while the experience continues to return in dreams. Such stories complicate the public optimism surrounding the revolution. Freedom can transform a country without undoing the damage carried by the people who once had to leave it.

EXTENDED SYNOPSIS / 3 OF 3 / INCLUDES THE REVISED EDITION'S ENDING

The past opens again

The 2026 edition brings a second vantage point to the narrator's three days in Prague. More than three decades after writing the original text, Novák revisits it while living in the city again and writing mainly in Czech. He preserves the younger narrator's mistakes and naïveté, allowing the reader to encounter the visit in its original uncertainty. At the same time, he adds a final chapter that changes the meaning of a friendship at the centre of the book.

In that chapter, Novák recounts a later discovery in archival records identifying Joska Skalník as a collaborator of the communist State Security, under code names including "Gogh". The discovery forces him to return to the friend who guided him through the revolution and to ask how much he understood at the time. Affection, loyalty and shared experience now coexist with information that cannot simply be set aside.

The revelation does not resolve into a neat moral judgement. It exposes the difficulty of reading a life through either personal recollection or official documents. The narrator has to reconsider the stories friends tell about themselves, the stories others tell about them, and his own part in accepting those accounts. Earlier scenes retain their humour and immediacy, but they acquire a second emotional register. What once seemed secure in memory has become open to doubt.

The revised edition therefore holds two historical moments together: the liberation of 1989 and the later effort to understand the society that made it possible. Public courage, private compromise, survival and ambition emerge in combinations that resist easy sorting. New facts change the past's apparent meaning, while the person remembering it has changed as well.

Fast, intimate and irreverent, Velvet and Steam brings the reader into the streets, pubs and kitchens of a city at a turning point. Its three-day homecoming opens into a larger story of exile, friendship and belonging. The late chapter makes memory an active problem rather than a settled record: the narrator must keep living with people and experiences whose meaning he can no longer take for granted.