

## Velvet revolution

I am 18 years old and so I didn't go through the Velvet Revolution, of course. But my parents did. How much did they take part in the revolution, why or why not, how did they feel about it? Were they afraid of something? I have had a conversation about it with my father. I thought that it couldn't take a long time but actually, it took one hour and a half because my father really likes speaking about history in detail.

His narration starts in 1976 when he was 17 and listened to the radio "Voice of America". It isn't that important, but here we can see his interest in objective information about his country in young age. Then we can go on to autumn 1987, when the first manifestation took place after 18 years without any demonstration (in 1969 was the last demonstration which was harshly suppressed.) It was spontaneous and unorganized without speeches. Then on the 10th of December 1988 it was Human Rights Day and it was the first legal manifestation. There were several thousand people on Škroupa Square and Havel and someone else had a speech. The manifestation wasn't suppressed but the following ones weren't allowed. Then in January 1989 it was the anniversary of Jan Palach's self-immolation and Havel put flowers on Palach's grave. Because of that he was arrested and then two petitions were created to get Havel released from prison. My father signed the petition too and then his boss at work told him not to do it again. That week there was a demonstration on Wenceslas Square every day and every day the Police dispersed the protesters, 10 000 of whom came. Then on 17th November (International Students' Day) students organised an official march which couldn't be forbidden because the Union of Socialist Youth organised the march too. My father wasn't there because he told himself he wasn't a student anymore. He wasn't in Prague for several following days and so he was left without any information. When he came back to Prague, he went immediately to Wenceslas Square and the following days too and then liberation came...

At the beginning of the revolution, fear was the main feeling, but then in a short while it was euphoria. The people were afraid of quashing the demonstrations as in 1969, they were scared of losing jobs or the possibility to study. Then it was euphoria because something happened that the people had been waiting for for 40 years. Luckily, my father was never thrashed during the Velvet revolution.

In those days the people didn't believe that the communist rule could end and if so, not that quickly, but nowadays they see that the regime was loosened step by step. All the people who demonstrated were important. I believe that there must have been many individuals to make a mass together and change something. If someone asked me what I would have done in 1989, I would say something like my father. I don't know it exactly, because I don't live in that time, but I think I would have joined the demonstrations, but maybe not at the beginning.

## Velvet revolution – reflection

I would like to review the events of the 17th of November 1989 and a few following days from the viewpoint of “common people”. These days have changed our history - as everybody knows – because the totalitarian rule has been destroyed. I would like to sum up how was their attitude towards this date and I will try to think about it from my point of view.

Some people believed that everything would change, others didn't believe it and were scared. To do something unusual – even take part in a demonstration - was a very dangerous and risky activity. However, there are always people who behave bravely. This time, they used the 50th anniversary of the closure of universities by the nazis to demonstrate. In fact, the result of the demonstration wasn't clear until Christmas 1989. At the end of that year Václav Havel was elected president which was an important and positive signal, of course.

On the 17th of November 1989 there was a lot of people who must have been afraid they could lose their job or they could get expelled from universities. At that time my parents were on their way to Moravia because their friends were getting married. By the way, my parents wouldn't have participated anyway. They weren't sure - just like a lot of other people - about these demonstrations and they didn't believe that something could change. There have been a lot of similar demonstrations against totalitarian rule before, and without any result.

What I would have done – that is very a complicated question for me because I have never experienced the totalitarian rule and everything I know, I know from other people – from their stories and TV documentaries. But I could try to guess what I would probably do, if I was a student in 1989. I would be afraid of riots because the [Communist Party of Czechoslovakia](#) could have used violence or I could be somehow physically punished. If I was at the university, I would be afraid of losing my place there in the future. Everything would depend on my moral values then and if and how my friends would support me. I think I would rather be the person who is quiet. But no one can know what people will do when they are under pressure. It is also possible that I would like to emigrate as my relatives did.

## FREEDOM – THE VELVET REVOLUTION OF 1989 IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

The Velvet Revolution? Is it the real turning point between communism and the contemporary democracy? Or just a demonstration of the power of people? The people who took part in the Velvet Revolution often don't know what they should answer whenever I ask them what they think about the Velvet Revolution, which began on 17<sup>th</sup> November 1989. They went to the demonstrations, listened to speeches and to songs about freedom. They rattled their keys. A woman once told me that although she had been beaten up, she was not sure if the demonstrations were as powerful as we thought.

I think the Velvet Revolution was the beginning of formal freedom in our country. I am very grateful for it. I realize that I can go to church, be a part of a church scout group, study at the Faculty of Arts. It was not as easily possible as nowadays.

People didn't feel free during the communist era, because their desire for truth was suppressed. Most people couldn't say what they really thought, they couldn't do what they wanted. They were pressed to do what the communist party wanted.

Do we feel free since the communist rule ended? We are under pressure from the world around us which influences us as well, but we don't realize that. We often think, too, that when we can do what we want, that we are free. But it is a mistake. Freedom relies on decisions for good and virtue. The good and the real responsibility make people free. The acts which we do not do with responsibility make us dependent and not free.

How can we live freely when the political system in our country doesn't influence us as personally as it did before? I think looking for the truth and the good is the most important thing. We should try not to be dependent on the fashion, on the opinions of other people etc.

In the end I should say that we can be happy that we have a country where we can try to be really free as the people imagined 22 years ago during the Velvet Revolution.

## 1989 - a turning point in history

First, I want to summarize the events which happened in the year 1989. This year is pretty important, I think.

So, here are the facts: During the years 1988 and 1989, demonstrations were held against the communist government. It was obvious that something was going to happen, but no one knew when. The "explosion" date was 17 November, 1989. On that day, a peaceful march was organized to commemorate the anniversary of Jan Opletal's death. But after the official part of the demonstration, students went downtown and were brutally stopped by police there. That was the beginning of the end of communism in Czechoslovakia.

Fortunately, nowadays I'm living in a free country and I can just imagine what I would have done (if I were 20 years older) during the last days of the communist era. Everyone says, "It's quite simple, I would have fought against the regime", but to be honest - would you really risk your job, family, future because of some demonstration? I can't be certain what I would have done. But we can say, "Who cares about one laggard person, if tens of thousands of people joined the demonstrations anyway." That's a wrong idea, because when everyone says, "They can do without me", no one is protesting.

Also, the opposition needs to have a leader. Someone who is respected. It could hardly be somebody from a pub whom no one knows. Such a guy is important, but this role can be played by more than just one person as well. As an example, we can speak about our Velvet Revolution- the opposition didn't have a real big leader. Yes, Havel, but he was the speaker of Charta 77 rather than a real fugleman. And all the demonstrations were organized by different people/groups, so we can see that the disappointment with the regime was general.

I spoke to people who did more than just join the demonstrations, who signed, for example, the document "Několik vět" (A Few Sentences) or even stood up publicly against communism a long time before the Velvet Revolution. As a response to my question, why they did it, they mostly said: Responsibility, longing to do something useful - longing for freedom. They surely were afraid of persecution but the need to do something for freedom was stronger. And they won in that fight. I'm very grateful to all these people for everything they did. Thanks to them, I can live in a free country.

## The Velvet Revolution and the Role Of an Individual In History

What was the Velvet Revolution like from the point of view of my parents? My parents took part in the canonization of Agnes of Bohemia, which took place in Vatican on the 12<sup>th</sup> of November 1989. When they had been leaving Czechoslovakia, no one had even dreamed of any revolution. But then, when they were coming back on the 17<sup>th</sup> of November and their bus was driving through Prague, they could see lots of people in the streets. Nobody in the bus understood, what was actually happening. Only at night my parents found out that what they had seen had been a big demonstration. My mum was ill at that time so she couldn't be involved in all the demonstrations, therefore she was watching all the events on TV and eventually a few days later she participated in one demonstration with my dad.

Some could say that it was needless that she went there. But from my point of view a man as an individual plays an important role in history. I think that for example the communist regime could last only until the time, when the people stopped being a "mass of people", when they assumed the responsibility each for himself and each of his own choice decided to fight the lack of freedom. This big number of brave individuals had surely inspired – by their behaviour – other weaker people and eventually, they could topple the inconvenient political regime together.

I don't know what I would do in such a situation. I think that at least at the beginning of the demonstration, when one didn't know how the situation would develop, it wasn't easy to decide to go against the communists. I'm not sure, if I would decide straight off to go in the streets if I had to choose now. Maybe somebody could say that "not to go" would be cowardice. But in my opinion it's impossible to say it so, because I know that during the communist government never only one person was affected by the punishment, but the punishment always involved all his family. I'm glad that in 1989 so many people summoned up courage to go and fight for our freedom and that therefore I haven't ever faced such a serious decision.

## 1989 – A TURNING POINT IN HISTORY

Some of them had survived the Second World War and many of them had to live in fear again many years later. To survive all of these things was possible only with hope for something better. Yes, we are speaking about the heroes, who have changed our history, we are speaking about each person, who helped us to live in a free country.

I spoke with my parents about the Velvet Revolution many times and every time I observe them speaking about it, I can see their happy eyes. When I asked them last week – it was because of this homework – my mother was not able to answer all my questions. They engaged in the revolution as much as they were able to. My question, why they had decided to do it, was superfluous: „There was no decision making, it was our dream and we were really happy that it finally came.“ There was also no place for fear. My father stayed in the last smallest group on Wenceslas Square where policemen were beating them and I think that after living his whole life in fear, the fear wasn't the main feeling at that time. I know that they do not regret anything.

I ask myself quite often what I would have done in that situation. And I think that it is much easier to answer this question right now than to really do something if I had lived at that time or if something similar happened once again. But I really hope that I would be brave enough to do the same as my parents did. Someone could say that it was not important what I would have done – there were enough people, if there were one or two people more or less, it was not important. But I have a different opinion. If everybody had lived with this rule, the square would have been empty in November. Everyone is important in the world, everyone was important during the Velvet Revolution and everyone will be important in the future in situations like this. Everyone should realize his or her own responsibility for the world.

We should be open to everyone who is trying to teach us these things. These people know the history but the future is unknown – we are making the future, everyone of us, and we should realize what a big responsibility it is.

## Velvet Revolution

Ludmila Šolcová, VIII.B

The Velvet Revolution is one of the most important moments in the history of our country, which has been described not only in many books, films or exhibitions, but also in our history textbooks. I can say I know the historical events well. What I was really curious about was the story of someone who was right there.

When I asked my mother to share her experience of the Velvet Revolution, she didn't seem extremely happy. However, after a while I uncovered that she had met my father there. She had a friend who helped with the organisation at the School of Economics and my father worked in the same building in a food store.

I wanted to know more about her feelings, not only the romantic falling in love. I was interested, if she was scared, full of hope, waiting for something new... I was surprised, when she answered only: Scared? Not at all! We were just excited, we loved danger and we perceived it as a big exciting show...

I ask myself how I would react in a situation like that. I think it depends on the community of my friends and classmates. If my friends considered it dangerous, I'd be scared. On the other hand, if all of my friends were fearless and likely to go there, I'd be happy to join them. In general, I find such events as demonstrations or happenings (when you try to change something you don't agree with) exciting too, so I can understand the feelings my mother had. The atmosphere of a big group of people (especially young students) wanting to express their own disagreement must have been great. However, I personally don't feel comfortable in situations when many people are around me.

The worst thing about communism is, for me, the fact that nobody was allowed to be displeased with the regime. If you expressed your displeasure, you risked a punishment. And not only for you, but also for your family. This impossibility to express your opinion without fear means lack of freedom to me.

I admire the resolve of the people who joined the Velvet Revolution and gave us the chance to live in the Czech Republic as we know it now. I don't care if they were excited – the main thing is that we can live in freedom.

## The Velvet Revolution

### Dialogue with my alter ego

"I have been thinking a lot about the Velvet Revolution recently. I mean, you weren't alive at that time yet, but..."

**"You neither. You are a part of me, my alter ego, so..."**

"Never mind. I wanted to ask you about your opinion. What would you do, if you could take part in these demonstrations? Would you go to the streets with the crowds?"

**"Yes, I think so. Because if you are in multitude, it is not as dangerous for you as if you were alone."**

"So you wouldn't fight against the communistic regime even before the revolution..."

**"I would only quietly disagree – but probably I would do nothing more."**

"This is a kind of insincerity, isn't it?"

**"Maybe, but I would be afraid. Really afraid. It is much worse than if you are going through the wood at night."**

"That's obvious, but we look with a bit of deprecation on the people that had done nothing at that time..."

**"Not everybody is born to be a hero... Already Socrates said that if you want to achieve something in politics, you can't appear in public."**

"I don't understand. Politics without speeches and audience? That's not possible."



**“No, it isn’t. But he wanted to say something completely different. In this case it would mean that you would fight from the inside – secretly and effectively.”**

“A lot of people did. Many of them were arrested and punished, too. It wasn’t very safe...”

**“No, but as soon as someone began to talk too loud, the state silenced him by force. The quiet fighters could maybe achieve more.”**

“But when someone laid information against them and they were arrested, no one knew them. On the contrary if someone was punished who was well known from for example public speaking, it could raise hate for the regime.”

**“That’s true... So maybe all the tree types of people are important – at first those who are leaders and speak in public, then those who quietly propagate their thoughts and finally those who are afraid to participate, but in the end they join the others. It is like during the Velvet Revolution, when the crowds went out into the streets.”**

“So you think that crowds move the history...”

**“Not only. I think that it is like an engine for changing the world. Someone has to construct it – these are the leaders – and someone is the fuel that moves it – and these are the crowds.”**

### Velvet Revolution

Jingling keys, singing the national anthem, waving the national flag in the air above your head, all of these are attributes of the Velvet Revolution in the Czech Republic in 1989. Thousands of people were holding each other's hands, standing up against the unjust government. Like many parents of the present-day young generation also my parents went to Wenceslaus Square to express their disagreement. But what made them go there? Where did their courage come from?

I think that only a few people gave them most of the courage – people who were absolutely convinced that defending freedom is much more important than a possible punishment. These people were something like symbols, icons to them. To become this icon for thousands of people you have to be gifted or you have to do something so great that people would think about it. I have in mind especially a young student named Jan Palach. He was very convinced about the unfairness of the former government and he wanted to point it out to all people, so he burned himself to death. Can you imagine it? He sacrificed himself just to make people notice the evil of the social environment which they were living in.

We can imagine actions like this as thunderbolts, which are supposed to wake people up and direct them to the right way of thinking and this is exactly what everyone should do in the case of injustice, (not burn himself) but to be a light to those who cannot see, to be a thunderbolt to open their eyes. I am really glad that this nation disposes with so many thunderbolts, which were ready to act.

Not me - and I think neither anybody of my generation - can fully imagine the feeling, which the participants of the Velvet Revolution must have felt (the moment, when the power of human courage and resistance won over the power of oppression and also an enormous feeling of unity among the whole nation), but I hope and believe that everyone of the present young generation – if need be - would stand up and join the nation in its fight for freedom.

### ***Velvet Revolution***

In the late 1980s my grandmother was working as a literary adviser in a theatre in Prague. Although she was not in the city on the Friday of November 17<sup>th</sup>, on Sunday she rang with her keys in Wenceslas Square. There were meetings partly organised by her in the theatre during the following three weeks, and during the general strike, too. There was always a fear of the troops from the Soviet Union or “only” members of the local army or police, but the events of the whole year 1989 gave hope to the Czech people, and the power to the crowds. Though the communist regime did not persecute all the people directly, the sense of the lack of freedom was lying hard on the people. The people were willing to risk being arrested at a demonstration if there was at least a little hope to get free.

I think if I were there – and were the same age as I am nowadays – I would be sitting afraid at home during the first days, but at the beginning of the week I would probably go to the demonstrations with my keys, because all my classmates would be there, and it would be exciting and interesting for me. Then I would be grateful for the newly gained freedom – but the happiness would not probably be as extremely high as that of the older citizens, because I have not lived under oppression for such a long time.

Big revolutions are almost always a result of the pressure of a mass of people. But a leader of the people must be present – or, better to say, a brave man, who encourages others, and despite being punished he persuades the people, that being bold and rebellious (in the better sense of the word) pays off. In the Velvet Revolution Václav Havel took this role, and succeeded – there was a bigger and bigger circle of other brave people around him, but they probably would not be so active without Havel. As Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy in his book “War and Peace” says: an important turn in the history of a nation needs a ripe time and a strong personality at the same time.

## **Year 1989- from an ordinary man's point of view**

Let's start with describing the situation and specifying the area, I'm going to write about.

In the 80's no one would have thought (no one from the USSR block) that the era of Communism could be over one day - and because of that, many people simply tried to live with this fact and "adapt". That's why the year 1989 was a big surprise for almost everyone - some people told me that the revolution was inevitable, but no one would ever have imagined that it would come one day - the political system controlled simply almost all the media - and the communists were really good at that.

I think that the most important consequence of the end of the USSR was the actual ending of the Cold War-and people all around the world didn't have to be afraid any more.

But event(s) of one year - no matter how strong or awful - can't change everything that happened during sixty years before. The events of the year 1989 occurred in the best possible way, but the horrible experiences of entire nations will remain - at least for a few generations - it's ridiculous, however, how rapidly and drastically the lifestyle in former totalitarian countries has changed.

From what I've heard from older members of my family - the fact that the revolution was so peaceful has big pluses, but also (sometimes bigger) minuses. One of the biggest pluses is that no one got hurt and the state (as an institution) persisted - but that's also a pretty important minus - by a "normal" revolution the whole political representation would have been changed - but in "our" revolution most of the old communists (though in new political parties) have stayed in power. That means that the revolution wasn't "effective" enough - but it was necessary to keep the state going...

Anyway, disregarding what was good and what was bad, according to many people who were at the 1989 demonstrations, it was one of the most beautiful years of their lives.

I'm sure we will get rid of the heritage of the communist era eventually - but to get to that point we need to accept our history (to talk about what happened and not just say: "it's over, let's move on") and try to correct the mistakes we've made and sometimes apologize for them.

## 1989

In the year 1989 I wasn't born yet into this world, so I do not have any experience from the events of that year, but my parents do. I know the whole history of the communist rule in our country and so I honour all the people who played part in the events of the Velvet Revolution. I listen to my parents' stories of that time quite often, because they were also interested in the Revolution. They were at Wenceslas Square just like thousands of other people, shouting all the slogans, which was also a reason for the fall of the communist party. My sister, who was 2 years old at the time, sat on my father's shoulders saying „Ať žije Havel“...

Like a lot of people in the time before the Velvet Revolution, my parents also considered escaping from the Czech Republic. I definitely have nothing against the people who emigrated, but I also respect people who were under pressure from the regime and managed to stay. In our case, the main reason was that my mother didn't want to leave her family in such difficult times.

If I lived in those times, I probably couldn't stand the horrible state's persecution and I would try to escape too. The question is, whether or not I would succeed. If I did stay in my motherland, I'd try to do my best to fight back against the restrictive socialist regime. For instance, I would try to convince as many people as I could, that the communists are dangerous to our country and its citizens. In the year 1989 I would for sure participate in the demonstrations. I believe that the individual can make a big difference and can change a lot of things. Of course, the individual is at a high risk of being persecuted but we have a lot of examples of people who weren't afraid to stand up against the regime. I believe people participating in the demonstrations were risking a lot too – not just that a lot of them were beaten, but in case the revolution failed, they could be getting into a lot more trouble. They also had families. I think many people of that time weren't afraid of what could happen to them but what could happen to their families. I wish, if I lived in those times, for the moral strength to stand among them.

## **Remember remember the seventeenth of November – Velvet Revolution 1989**

Have you heard about Velvet Revolution ? No, I really do not want to give you a talk about history, but I want you to think about some questions. What can one person change in history? Can one person do anything or do we need a lot of people to make big changes? What was Velvet Revolution? Why did people attend or not attend the Velvet Revolution?

Velvet Revolution was a very big revolution in the year 1989, which overthrew the communist government.

“We want to be free!”, “Communists go to hell!” people chanted these words and a lot of others in Wenceslas Square on 17th November 1989.

Have you seen the movie V for Vendetta? It is about a totalitarian government in Great Britain. One man, who wore a mask, started the revolution, which overthrew the totalitarian government. This man was called Anonymous and he said one sentence “Remember remember the fifth of November” So, we can say “Remember remember the seventeenth of November “ because this sentence refers to the real event! Velvet Revolution really was!

I think, when people really want, they can do impossible things and I think, one man can change the history when he awakens people from lethargy - and they can for example overthrow the totalitarian government or other impossible things. But people have to want! In this situation do not exist sentences such “I am afraid” “We have no chance” “ I am weak, small, silly, poor...” That is only a pretext! Everyone of us can do something impossible. But we have to want. And we must be brave and have courage.

Remember, remember the seventeenth of November. If people, who were in Wenceslas Square in 1989, had stayed at home, we would not be free now but would have a communist totalitarian government.

And what about me and the Velvet Revolution? That is a very hard question, because I am nineteen now. If I had been born twenty years earlier, I would have attended. Because I’m a bit of a rebel and because my parents went to Wenceslas Square. And if I say “I am afraid” I feel stupid.