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Dear readers,

It has been 30 years since the fall of the Iron Curtain. In the Czech Republic, this event is known as the Velvet Revolution. November 17, 1989, marked the start of a new era— one of freedom and fundamental changes. However, the date has a much darker history.

On October 28, 1939, the anniversary of the founding of our country (at a time when it was occupied by the Nazis) citizens and students of Charles University gathered for a peaceful demonstration; however, the student Jan Opletal was shot and later succumbed to his injuries. On November 15, his funeral turned into a demonstration and two days later all Czech universities were closed. Nine students and professors were executed on November 17 and more than 1,200 students and professors were sent to the concentration camp in Sachsenhausen, Germany. In their memory, International Students’ Day was established in London in 1941.

Fifty years later, November 17, 1989, saw the start of the Velvet Revolution that brought down the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. Students had gathered to mark the day and commemorate Opletal’s death and suffered a brutal crackdown at the hands of the communist riot police. The crackdown shocked the country and led to demonstrations that would never abate and would eventually bring down the regime.

That moment— the moment Czechoslovaks regained their freedom and put the country back on the path to democracy— is still a reason to celebrate. Given the extent of the social, economic, and political transformation since, the 30th anniversary presents an important opportunity to evaluate how far the country has come; it is also a moment to address some of the challenges ahead.

We report the latest about the 4EU+ Alliance, bringing together the talents and resources of six prestigious European universities. The future offers numerous challenges and education is very often one of the main ways in which we can solve problems together. The 4EU+ Alliance is a key project for our university, aimed at bringing more students and more researchers together: it represents our vision of a free and cooperating Europe.

May we all enjoy this anniversary, remembering the courageous students who gave their lives for our freedom, and work together for a better future.

Tomáš Zima
Rector of Charles University

www.svobodnylistopad.cz
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Today we know how to handle freedom

Professor Jan Sokol's philosophy lectures have always been among the most sought-after at Charles University, and he himself has been connected to academia for decades. He also perceptively noted the transformation of the university and all of Czech society after the events of November 1989.

Story by Jiří Novák  
Photo by Vladimír Šigut

From today's perspective it seems that people were very united in 1989, and they held together with a fair amount of enthusiasm. This is always something of a dangerous optical illusion. Even though half a million people gathered on Letná plain, it's still a small figure – five percent of the population. You have to watch out for this illusion – that we’re “all for one”. Yes, a significant portion of citizens wanted freedom, but not all.

When were you approached to be actively involved in the events of the time? I had helped with something a couple of times, and after New Year’s I was working at the magazine Příběhy (Příběhy with Petr Pithart. Only before the elections (Editor’s note: which took place in June 1990) did my colleagues come to me to say that I had to run for office because there were too many communists on the Civic Forum’s candidate list.

In the end, you spent two years as a member of parliament, and in 2003 you were even a candidate for president. How did that happen? Representatives of the Social Democrats came to the faculty to ask me if I’d be willing to run. At the time I was the dean of a new faculty and I had the feeling that a person could do more there than at Prague Castle. Nevertheless, I felt a kind of social responsibility not to refuse such an offer. And I also didn’t want Václav Klaus to win. I knew him from before, and although I have a certain respect for him, I didn’t think he would make a good president.

In the end, Klaus won. What is your evaluation of his presidency? I am not here to throw dirt on presidents, but I have the feeling that it’s gone to the dogs. Of course Václav Havel’s personality would be hard to measure up to, but Václav Klaus understood it as being that he had to dispense Havel’s legacy, which seemed rather stupid. And his tug-of-war with the European Union was embarrassing. It damaged us a lot. As for the rest, the foreign policy of our last couple of presidents has been very strange. Klaus and Miloš Zeman have pretty much wasted the prestige we had abroad thanks to Havel. I would have easily overlooked all the pettiness and gaffes, but I’m bothered by Zeman’s courtship of Russia and China. That’s a serious and dangerous thing.

Is it President Zeman who is polarising Czech society? Yes, and he consistently supports it. And the personal assaults on people outside politics, on judges or journalists that the Castle tonnes out from time to time, that’s certainly not the role of a president.

Is Czech society really divided into “Prague café society” and every-one else, as Zeman claims? “Prague café society” is a typical cliche and more than enough people imagine snobs who don’t do anything. There’s a distrust for education hidden behind it. With these prejudices, Miloš Zeman encourages and attracts the truly non-educated, who have complexes about these things. Hence the resistance to education as such, which today is quite a dangerous thing.

How else has society changed since 1989? Aside from the immensely essential factual changes, I’m pleased with how society has miraculously learned to handle freedom. I’ve always been very concerned about that. Of course one greatly looked forward to what the bubble would burst. But at the same time I was worried how we would handle it because we weren’t used to freedom.

And do we know how to handle freedom, or do we no longer appreciate it? You know, I’m not a sociologist, and I have no idea how it’s perceived on a mass scale. But I’d say that if public freedom is taken for granted among people, that’s actually good. That’s how it should be. And if anyone tries to cut their freedom short, let the people protest loudly.

This is why I’m delighted, for example, by Miloš Zeman’s proposal for a special fund for the transformation of the university and all of Czech academia for decades. He also perceptively noted the significance and dangers of the universitas. Where young people figure prominently, the universitas is huge and very significant.

I am not here to throw dirt on president. How did that happen? At the time I was the dean of a new faculty and I had the feeling that a person could do more there than at Prague Castle. Nevertheless, I felt a kind of social responsibility not to refuse such an offer. And I also didn’t want Václav Klaus to win. I knew him from before, and although I have a certain respect for him, I didn’t think he would make a good president.

Could you name what has surprised you the most in a positive and negative sense over the past thirty years? For me the most striking manifestation of changes for the good would be how our cities look, how the houses, factories and stores look – how the environment we normally live in looks. The difference is huge and very significant.

What’s negative is probably the constant desire to gripe. I realised that many of my friends, including dissidents, think that their role is to constantly criticise something.

For many years you taught and lectured at the university. You were the education minister. What’s the state of Czech education? Education responds very sensitively to society around it. Teachers and headmasters have been given more leeway in recent years, and this of course is good. But on the other hand – the idea of education has been very differentiated, and it’s difficult to agree on something.

Take a little thing like math on the high school leaving exams. Although the subject is not popular, it’s essential for graduation, and for everyone. Of course it’s a little different at a conservatory or at a secondary medical school than at a gymnázium [college preparatory secondary school]. After all, neither a musician nor a nurse can get by without a trinomial equation [paids me, without an equation with one unknown], without percentages and statistics, without estimating quantities.

What’s troubling contemporary education? Above all, it’s the bureaucratisation and unnecessary recordkeeping of anything and everything. And I’m very disturbed by the mistrust shown by parents: they themselves are showing children that they don’t appreciate schools. When a father asks his little boy what he did in the “idiot factory” today, he has no idea how much he’s harming him. It’s interesting that most people will have incredibly good memories of their first teacher until the day they die. Why can’t we use that later? Where does it go?

Maybe the teacher himself should understand his authority a little differently. It’s similar to when you’re a parent – your children think you know everything until five or six years old. But then you have to show that you too don’t know things, otherwise you lose your authority.

For the last three decades you’ve been connected in various ways with Charles University. What has changed the most? I would say that the universities were significantly changed by the masses. The number of students grew in the West over many years, while in the Czech Republic it jumped from one year to the next and practically without investment. Also, the emphasis on research and examination, which the Commu- nists wanted to give exclusively to the Academy of Sciences. It came all of a sudden, and things are now evaluated only according to the criteria of empirical science.

A university is a remarkable organism that has been alive for nearly a thousand years through transformations. It is conservatism preserved by its nature. At the same time, young people are constantly entering it, and thanks to that it can be a very open and critical environment. And that’s good.
The events of November 1989 brought about a number of changes at Charles University. The foundations of a free and proud university, upon which Prague’s education stands to this day, had to be built in just a few months.

STORY BY Lucie Kettnerová, Martin RychlíkPHOTOS BY Jakub Langhammer, Charles University archive

During the November strikes, the leadership of the faculties behaved in different ways toward the students. The dean of the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics supported the students, the dean of the Faculty of Arts stood against them and the dean of the Faculty of Education even issued a ban on “posting any materials on Faculty premises, including the access path in front of the Faculty.”

University rector Zdeněk Češka decided to resign at the beginning of December under pressure from the student and civic movements. At the faculties, a preparatory academic council was created to bring together students, teachers and employees; they sent four representatives – two students and two teachers – to select a new rector. The election took place on 19 January 1990 between two candidates – two students and two teachers – to select a new rector. The election took place on 19 January 1990 between two candidates – Zdeněk Lojda, a professor of pathological anatomy at the Faculty of General Medicine, and Associate Professor Radim Palouš – and Palouš was chosen as rector. Following his proposal, on 26 January the Academic Council elected five vice-rectors.

The university gets back on its feet

A number of difficult tasks awaited Charles University’s new leadership. A free academic life had to be created from scratch and a sense of belonging began to be built. The role of the university at the time was quite negligible because before 1989 the faculties had considerable powers. The professional level in many fields, especially the humanities and social sciences, was poor and research activities at a number of workplaces were largely neglected.

Other personnel issues also had to be resolved. The university sought to quickly purge institutions and teachers tied to the totalitarian regime – it abolished the Institute of Marxism-Leninism and rehabilitated unjustly persecuted students, teachers and employees.

Prague education also had to regain its position in the international university community, which was very accommodating to representatives of the oldest university in Central Europe.

“In 1990, a world rectors’ conference was held in Helsinki with more than 500 participants, and Charles University was honoured with the first place alongside the Finnish rector who organised the event,” recalled Radim Palouš, the first post-November rector 10 years ago, for Forum. The university was also viewed positively at dozens of other universities around the world. “It was enough to say, ‘I never guessed, never dreamed I’d see you face to face’ and I, a representative of a university that until recently was cursed behind the Iron Curtain, was immediately welcomed,” he added. Palouš, along with Czech Technical University Rector Stanislav Hanzel, were at the creation of the Rectors’ Club of Czechoslovakia, later renamed according to international convention to the Conference of Rectors of the Czech Republic.

Property returns to universities

From the very beginning, the Prague university owned dormitories and faculty buildings. But a fundamental change came with the Higher Education Act of 1950: university buildings and student club property were nationalised and the universities became users only.

“The property, including real estate, was...”
A very long and bright history. “We have had this charter drafted and ordered that it be confirmed by the seal of our Majesty. Done in Prague, on the Seventh Day of the Month of April of the Year of Our Lord Thirteen Hundred and Forty-Eight, in the second year of our rule (King Charles IV.),” states the Foundation Charter of the Charles University.

In the 1990s, the university was forced to leave a total of 12 buildings due to restitution (for example in Prague, buildings on Dlouhá, Řeznická and Černá streets, the Svavava villa, the Lobkovic chateau in Neratovice, a building in Hradec Králové – Šebíř a building of the deanery in Plzeň). On the other hand, it managed to gain the area of the former College of Political Science of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in Prague 6, the so-called Sorbonne in Vokovice. Today it is the location of the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport, which until then had previously operated in the Tyrš House in Malá Strana.

The university acquired other buildings through purchase, such as a building on Černá street, buildings in Jinonice and the deanery of the Faculty of Medicine in Plzeň. The university also cared for smaller buildings as well, such as greenhouses in the Botanical Garden of the Faculty of Science at Na Špáři, an animal facility in the hospital area on Karlovo náměstí and a laboratory on Viničná street. A number of sports facilities have also been rebuilt.

A reconstruction was also carried out at the Carolinum on the occasion of the university’s 650th anniversary. The modernisation focused on the technical safeguarding of the building and the establishment of barrier-free access to the first floor; in the basement areas a permanent exhibition of the university’s history was installed, the new Emperor’s Hall was added to the building’s ground floor, and several Carolinum monuments were restored.

More varied, open and modern

The atmosphere at the university changed significantly and today, with 17 different faculties, Charles University draws far more international researchers and students. The number of foreign students increased tenfold over three decades, going from just 913 in 1989 to more than 9,000 today! They bring new ideas, a fresh outlook and a cosmopolitan approach that we could only dream of during the turbulent days of the Velvet Revolution. Thanks in large part to investment and EU structural funds, the school laid the foundation for new infrastructure, including new laboratories, serving not only Charles University but society as a whole.

Modern Facilities are attractive for Scientists

Charles University prides itself as a research university emphasising excellence in science. Over the last several years for example, CU opened new state-of-the-art facilities at faculties in Plzeň and Hradec Králové. Charles University, together with the Czech Academy of Sciences, is now a leader in basic research, ranking higher than any other Czech university on the prestigious Nature Index, measuring publication output in top scientific journals.

Number of students in 1989

21,091

Number of students in 2018

48,475

Number of foreigners studying at Charles University in 1989

913

Number of foreigners studying at Charles University in 2019

9,094

1990 brought a change in the names of the Prague medical faculties resulting from significant changes in their focus. According to the new faculty statutes, they use the following names: 1st Faculty of Medicine (formerly the Faculty of General Medicine), the 2nd Faculty of Medicine (formerly the Faculty of Pediatrics) and the 3rd Faculty of Medicine (formerly the Faculty of Hygiene).

The new Higher Education Act of May 1990 confirmed the incorporation of the theological faculties as part of Charles University. The ceremonial admission of all three faculties to the university took place on 24 September 1990 at the Carolinum.

After a series of negotiations, the Faculty of Journalism was closed in May 1990, and the Faculty of Social Sciences was established in its place.

The Faculty of Humanities, founded on 1 August 2000 from the Institute of Liberal Arts and Humanities (IZV), is the university’s youngest faculty.
In November and December 1989, students visited Václav Havel in his flat on the former Engels (now Rašín) riverfront, or went to see him at the Laterna Magika theatre, the headquarters of the Civic Forum. Havel visited the university a couple of months later as the president of Czechoslovakia.

TEXT BY Lucie Kettnerová
PHOTOS BY Charles University archive

Václav Havel visited Charles University on a number of occasions since 1990, whether it was a student meeting at the Faculty of Arts or Law, or as part of lectures he prepared in the academic year 1999/2000 for the Institute of International Studies of the Faculty of Social Sciences. There were 12 of these lectures, and they were intended for doctoral students and advanced master’s students. In them, Havel considered key issues of Czechoslovak and Czech foreign policy between 1989 and 1999.

The last time he visited the Carolinum was in November 2009, to present an honorary doctorate to his friend Adam Michnik. Spontaneous, long and sincere applause greeted him when he was introduced at the beginning of the ceremony.

President Václav Havel receives his Dr. h.c. at the ancient hall of the Carolinum (1990).

Doctor honoris causa
The title of honorary doctorate (doctor honoris causa) has been awarded by the university with the agreement of the ruler as a certain type of honor since the early 19th century. It is awarded to prominent personalities in scientific, cultural, political and social life during public graduations in the Grand Assembly Hall of the Carolinum.

After 1948, the honorary doctorate somewhat lost its value because it was awarded to political figures who visited Prague. It regained its dignity and respect after 1990. Václav Havel was the first person to receive it at the free Charles University. He appeared before a crowded Grand Assembly Hall with the other recipients and gave a short speech, which in his case was very personal.
Dear Rector, my dear friend Radim Palouš, esteemed guests,

All my youth I dreamed in vain of becoming a student at this most famous Czech university. My mother, to the end of her days, dreamed that I would get a doctorate here. God, or destiny, or history wanted me to be a doctor here, even if I didn’t properly study here, and it’s been several years since my mother passed away. If there is a heaven — and you dear Radim, have no doubt that it exists — then my mother is having one of the most joyous days of her heavenly life. It’s probably more joyous than 29 December of last year, when I became the president of this country. On that day, on the contrary, it was probably my father, who — like all men — knew and honoured the gravitas of public office.

... Our rebellion against violence and totalitarianism was guided from the very first moment by the idea of truth and love. That same idea is inseparably linked with this university. Was it not its most famous rector, Master Jan Hus, who had himself burned at the stake rather than give up his truth?

If today philosophers go straight into the lecture halls and academic functions of this famed university from the underground and police cells where they suffered for their truth, they only dignify the moral tradition that made this university famous.

Please allow me, distinguished guests, to conclude my remarks by expressing my great desire and my great hope. Indeed, the desire and hope that the state, which was founded by a philosopher and which we are starting to build again today, will be a truly spiritual state, a state which philosophers are again helping to rebirth, a state that does not stand on ideological foundations but on moral and spiritual foundations. If we succeed in building such a state, we will be repaying the world a great debt created by our long-term passivity. This installment will be the inspiration we give it. Let us try to indicate to everyone around us that the dangers of planetary apocalypse today can only be faced in one way, which is a war of spirit, responsibility, tolerance and kindness against brute force, violence and the cult of material interests.

Our state will inspire others if we ourselves are inspired. Inspiring it is the task of scholars and therefore of this university.

It is a great honour for me and a great obligation that I may continue to consider myself as part of it as a bearer of its honorary doctorate.
How Václav Havel turned into a Leader

For thirty years, Vladimir Hanzel was Václav Havel’s personal secretary, including his entire term as president. They met in 1986, brought together by a shared love of music. They also lived through the turbulent days of November 1989 together, which Hanzel recalled.

How did you experience 17 November 1989?
Václav Havel intentionally remained at his cottage at Hradčany because he didn’t want to be “preventively” arrested again, and he asked me to report on the situation. I’d planned on it anyway, so I went to the student demonstration on Albertov Street.

Could you feel a different atmosphere among people at the time?
Certainly. If only because so many more people came. Older people were there along with the students. Some had banners that were bold for the time, and various speakers addressed the crowd at Albertov. For example, the academic Miroslav Káčer (Editor’s note: Charles University rector from 1953–1957) gave a speech full of phrases and he was real. The atmosphere was completely unusual at the time, and people just didn’t let us go forward. The SNBs [the National Security Corps] got an order and started beating indiscriminately. Really brutally.

How did people in the march react to that?
By then there was a more militant atmosphere, and people just didn’t let themselves get passively beaten. One cop had his helmet knocked off. I ran with them to the theatre, where a theatrical play, The Garden Party, was supposed to be performed. But a few hours earlier, the theatre decided they would join the strike.

At the time, speculation swarmed around Martin Šmíd. What was something that meant a lot to him?
I knew Havel as a rather shy introvert. He had a “Hall of Fame” in the hallway near the bathroom in Hradčany where he hung all of his honorary doctorates, including one from Charles University in May 1990. How did he perceive these awards?
He appreciated all of them very much. But he approached them with humility and a certain sense of perspective. He told me a “Hall of Fame” in the hallway near the bathroom in Hradčany where he hung all of his honorary doctorates, diplomas and awards.

It moved forward slowly. We were surrounded and were being squeezed more and more into a small space. Were you there until the end? I was there until about half past eight. At nine I was supposed to call Václav Havel at home. As soon as I got home, the phone rang. I described to Václav everything that happened. We still had no idea of the brutal crackdown. We found out about that later.

How long did it take for the two of you to see each other in person? The next day, as we’d agreed. Václav came to Prague and in the evening we went to the theatre, where a theatrical collage that included part of Havel’s play, The Garden Party, was supposed to be performed. But a few hours earlier, the theatre decided they would join the strike.

At the time, speculation swarmed around the death of the student Martin Šmíd. Yes, it was a complicated time and various whispers were going around – for example about several dead who were secretly taken God knows where and their bodies secretly cremated and so on. The situation was unclear. On top of all that, Michael Zantovský, who worked for Reuters, came into the theatre saying that the student Martin Šmíd had been killed. But his mother, Jana Šmídová, was also in the theatre, and she told us it was nonsense, that Martin was sleeping at home. But there was another Martin Šmíd (Editor’s note: He wasn’t among the victims either, nevertheless, this rumor accelerated the situation).

Did Václav Havel meet with the students before the revolution? Students came to Havel’s apartment often, and after the events of November, of course, contacts greatly intensified at the headquarters of the Civic Forum (OF). Havel himself demanded that he take part in the negotiations with the government at the time, as well as in internal meetings of OF. It was important that we pull together.

Among the student leaders at the time, who stood out the most? Martin Mejeřík [at DAMU [the Academy of Musical Arts’ Theatre Faculty] was very revolutionary, and Simon Pánek [student from the Faculty of Science at Charles University] was more moderate, but at the same time he was also bold. Martin Klíma from Matfyz (the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics at Charles University), and Jan Bubnok [a student at the Charles University Faculty of Medicine] both stood out, and Monika Pajerová [Charles University Faculty of Arts], Igor Chasun (the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts) and Pavel Žáček, a journalism student, were here. There were many more of them. And it was the students who were crucial in what was going on at the time. Not only because they started the entire course of events, but they also travelled with popular actors to more remote places in the country and helped break the information vacuum that was prevalent in many places.

Did Václav Havel change during those revolutionary days? I knew Havel as a rather shy introvert with a sense of humor, polite, modest. In November he suddenly started to function like a general. For him, November was the result of something he’d been working toward for many years. Suddenly everyone turned to him and expected a decisive response from him. And he had to be decisive, giving orders and instructions. He felt the great responsibility that fell to him unexpectedly.

Havel received several honorary doctorates, including one from Charles University in May 1990. How did he perceive these awards? Of course he appreciated all of them very much. But he approached them with humility and a certain sense of perspective. He told me a “Hall of Fame” in the hallway near the bathroom in Hradčany where he hung all of his honorary doctorates, diplomas and awards.

What was something that meant a lot to him? The Peace Prize of the German Book-sellers Association in Frankfurt, just before the Velvet Revolution. He couldn’t go there in person, but he wrote “Words on Words” as his acceptance speech, which was read at the award ceremony by the popular actor Maximilian Schell.

What’s more, Chancellor Helmut Kohl and President Richard von Weizsäcker were at the ceremony.

Does Václav Havel’s legacy still resonate in society? I think so. A survey was recently published in which a large percentage of people consider Havel to be the best post-1989 president. I personally prefer to avoid these judgments because after all, I live in my social bubble, and it wouldn’t be completely objective of me. Many of the things Václav Havel advocated, for example in the field of human rights or the considerate treatment of nature, are timeless. I am deeply convinced that many people will be inspired by him in the future, and that these things will continue to be beneficial.
Out of shadows and injustice into the free world

Charles University’s post-revolution rectors emeriti look back on the miraculous year of 1989 and events inside the university during their service.

STORY BY Martin Rychlík
PHOTOS BY Jan Smít, Vladimír Šigut, René Velčík

“A real revolution”

“We had to change the system and deal with totalitarian injustice,” recalls Karel Malý, a professor of legal history, who led Charles University’s teaching from 1994 to 1999 as the 505th rector in its history. November 1989 was a fundamental change for Charles University and for myself, a real revolution. My life, as well as the life of my entire family, has been closely linked to the university. I was personally affected by all the interference of the power of the party into the life of the university and I shared their bitter life in the era of normalisation. As a lawyer, I was afraid of the party’s interference in the university’s life and I tried to break free from the closed circle of totalitarian life by working with foreign colleagues.

November 1989 opened the way for fundamental changes and I had the good fortune to play a significant role in them. We not only had to change the conditions of awarding scientific degrees and titles, to remove the residue of party merit and ideological demands, but also at the same time to deal with the legitimate requests to eliminate the cruel injustices that affected an unbelievable number of teachers and students who were deprived of the ability to research and study.

While discussing requests for rehabilitation, what opened up before us was a glimpse into the depth of injustice and suffering. At the same time it was necessary to establish democratic order at Charles University, to create new rules for the activity of academic bodies – to fundamentally transform the university into a democratic institution and fulfill the requirement to incorporate it into the system of the world’s free universities. Numerous inter-university agreements made international cooperation accessible and again included Charles University into the network of global universities.

I think that the culmination of the university’s post-November developments was the celebration of the 650th anniversary of its founding (in 1998), which was preceded by the difficult relocation of the Carolinum building. It was then that our community presented itself as united, conscious of its mission, its role in society, in education and in the world. At a meeting in the Vladislav Hall in Prague Castle, after a speech by President Václav Havel and in the presence of a large delegation of foreign rectors, I gave a lecture on sum-
Thirty years later the events of the revolution must have intermingled somewhat for you. At the time we got by on very little sleep, maybe three or four hours per day, and that affects your perception. So we were in a bit of a trance. But how many times in your life does it happen that Communism falls? The same Communism which destroyed the lives of your family, when a couple of months earlier it appeared that you’d never get to see anything other than a couple of socialist coun-

don’t choose the date of 17 November randomly. It was International Students’ Day, and we said that because of that the Communists would have a harder time banning it.

You actually managed to organise just one demonstration – 17 November 1989. How did you manage to attract so many people to it? Because it was permitted, and we were able to publicly get word out about it in advance. We also Stuha’s participation in the demonstration. Václav Havel told them: “No, don’t go there. Let the students do it.” It was certainly an expression of his humility.

How did you see the future for Czech society in November 1989? Of course I thought it would all be easier. Firstly because we didn’t have any experience in building a functional democracy and market economy, which if possible would be for everyone. Logical-

Thirty years later the events of the revolution

changes, and thanks to a singular turn of fate, you get to be there. You even have an intense feeling when you’re one of the people bringing about its end, which was really true at that specific moment.

Is there any powerful moment that sticks out, even after all these years? Definitely the consultations with Václav Havel. That was when I saw him in person for the first time, and it wasn’t just me that he impressed with his undisputed charisma and clear leadership role in the Civic Forum. I also can’t forget my appear-

After the change you estimated future developments as being more of an evolution than a revolution. What phase do you think we’re in now? If you ask people in Ukraine or Georgia how we’re doing, they’ll tell you that we’re a model for them. We ourselves may have far more skepticism in us-

On the other hand, what have we failed at? I’d say that we have greatly underestimated educa-

Jitka Jiřičková

PHOTO BY Luboš Wišniewski

Interview

Forum Special Issue

On 17 November 1989, Šimon Pánek organized one of the best-known protests against the communist dictatorship in Czechoslovakia. Paradoxically, he did not participate in it personally due to a temporary job in Šumava. It didn’t occur to me that it would be Stuha’s first and last event. Only later did we learn that the dissidents were discussing their participation in the demonstration. Václav Havel told them: “No, don’t go there. Let the students do this event themselves.” It was certainly an expression of his humility.

Yes, it’s a paradox – I’m one of the student leaders, but I wasn’t on Národní třída. I left for a tempo-

Certainly was a university degree, and I didn’t have that. After ‘89 I interrupted my studies. I did go back to school, but in the meantime we founded People In Need, and I started to travel the world. It took me very far from my diploma thesis. The data accumulated seemed outdated to me, and so I said it would be better to end it. Of course I was a little sorry. At the same time it probably saved me from a career as a senior official in the European Union. When we entered the Union, a couple of people from formerly Communist countries received offers to join their bureaucratic apparatus. But the condi-

A little, yes. One should bring things to comple-

You studied for four years at the Faculty of Science. What did you learn? Above all to deal with problems exactly, which I’ve found useful both in my work in People In Need and in life in general.

Šimon Pánek is the co-founder and executive director of People In Need, an organisation that has operated since 1994. In 1988, he was the main organiser of the first pre-revolution humanitari-

When we entered the Union, a couple of people from formerly Communist countries received offers to join their bureaucratic apparatus. But the condi-

After the change you estimated future developments as being more of an evolution than a revolution. What phase do you think we’re in now? If you ask people in Ukraine or Georgia how we’re doing, they’ll tell you that we’re a model for them. We ourselves may have far more skepticism in us-

On the other hand, what have we failed at? I’d say that we have greatly underestimated educa-

Definitely the consultations with Václav Havel. That was when I saw him in person for the first time, and it wasn’t just me that he impressed with his undisputed charisma and clear leadership role in the Civic Forum. I also can’t forget my appear-

Our first and last demonstration

On 17 November 1989, Šimon Pánek organized one of the best-known protests against the communist dictatorship in Czechoslovakia. Paradoxically, he did not participate in it personally due to a temporary job in the Šumava forest. What he didn’t expect was that it would have such an impact on society.
The Velvet Revolution
...as seen by our 4EU+ Alliance partners

STORY BY Martin Rychlík

University of Warsaw
After the end of World War II, the countries of Western Europe enjoyed demo- cratic freedom and the free market economy, whereas countries of Central and Eastern Europe had to face crimi- nal communist regimes. The years 1956, 1968, 1981 and finally 1989 demonstrated that their spirit of freedom could not be broken and that the regimes had to fall. Poles, who were already enjoying the first non-communist Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, watched the “Sa- mertasová revoluce” with great interest and supported it wholeheartedly. I myself remember keeping my fingers crossed while listening to Václav Havel’s speeches and hoping that our Czech and Slovak friends would succeed. We also cannot forget about the role of universi- ties in the transition of 1989. I can bold- ly state that the changes of 1989 could not have taken place without Charles University. The years 2009, bringing together scholars and some of the main protagonists of those events, such as Václav Havel and Lech Walesa. The rector is also glad to announce that today, in order to remember the Velvet Revolution with its profound cultural impact (starting with Havel’s legacy), the University of Milan will in- stall a “Václav Havel bench” in its main building. The artwork will be composed of two wooden armchairs alongside a small table next to a tree. The initiative, part of a large commemorative project launched all over the world, represents an invitation to further dialogue and shared reflection. We would indeed like to continue the path of educational and scientific collaboration, at every possible level, made possible by the extensive EU framework of projects and agreements as well as by the input of our respective universities, both marked by the idea of combining tradition and innovation in a creative way.

Marc-Philippe Weller
vice-rector

University of Milan
The 1989 Velvet Revolution, with its twofold character of strength but also moderation, has consolidated among Italians a positive image of Prague and its artistic, cultural and political herit- age. The election of a poet, writer, and philosopher like Václav Havel as a guide of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1990, was perceived in Italy and in Europe as a major signal that a new era was begin- ning, marked by increasing dialogue and cooperation.

The 30th anniversary of the “Velvet Revolution”, Heidelberg University most warmly congratulates Charles Univer- sity and expresses its solidarity with her Czech partners.

Serge Fdida
vice-president

Heidelberg University
On the 30th anniversary of the “Velvet Revolution”, Heidelberg University most warmly congratulates Charles Univer- sity and expresses its solidarity with her Czech partners.

The significance and implications of this historical event which began as a student revolution and resulted in the peaceful transition of power in what was then Czechoslovakia, are particularly well appreciated in Heidelberg and Ger- many as a whole.

Indeed, in November, Germany will also be celebrating one of the most impor- tant events in post-war Germany: the peaceful fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 No- vember 1989. Just one week before the “Velvet Revolution”, and set in a very similar political context, the fall of the Berlin Wall marked the beginning of a reunited Germany.

Heidelberg University is honoured to share with Charles University not only a similar recent history but also a bright future, especially as partners in the recently founded 4EU+ European University Alliance.

The rector of all six universities in the 4EU+ Alliance at a meeting in Paris.
CU’s rector, Tomáš Zima, is at the end of the row, on the right.

Antonella Baldi
vice-rector

The universities of Europe have al- ways been interconnected, even dur- ing their time of separation. Almost like a family. We were established with the same purpose and we share the same basic ideas: that research and re- search-based education are essential for the development of people and societies. We are even formed by mutual organ- isational inspiration; the University of Copenhagen was initially formed by inspiration from Charles University. So, in the bigger picture, we are tied to each other like siblings. During the Cold War, these ties weakened, but like real sib- lings, who were separated by destiny and then reunited, we have quickly found each other in fruitful cooperation within-

Serge Fdida
vice-president

Marc-Philippe Weller
vice-rector

University of Copenhagen
I grew up in post-war Europe. During my childhood, the division of Europe in two blocs, East and West, was a fact. It was just the way things were. The Cold War, and especially the fear of a devastating nuclear war, was a common theme in adult conversations. But it was also implicitly understood that a divid- ed Europe was not how “things used to be”.

During my student years at universi- ty, I visited several Central and Eastern European countries. The differences be- tween our systems were striking, but so were the similarities between our people and our shared cultural heritage. In September 1989, one year into my PhD, I attended my first scientific con- ference. It was in Warsaw. A Solidari- ty-led government had just taken office a few weeks earlier. It was an overwhel- ming experience to meet young scientists from Poland, who were both exhilarat- ed and anxious. A reunited Europe was suddenly a possibility, but it could not yet be taken for granted. However, a few months later, thanks to the Velvet Rev- olution in the Czech Republic and the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was clear to all that the process was irreversible (...)

Henrik C. Wegener
rector

Heidelberg University
The Velvet Revolution was a wondrous display of liberty. It was a relief after the terrible events of ’68. It was a triumph for values we hold dear: democracy, human rights, free-thinking, and free expression.

It started with student protests, an amazing and humbling reminder of our role in society: universities are places for ideas to grow, for the youth to challenge the status quo – and we should keep nur- turing such drive in our communities.

It evoked our collective European spirit, hardening back to the Age of Enlighten- ment, and paved the way for a united Europe, founded on solidari- ty and harmonious cooperation among peers. Universities are at the forefront of this project.

Indeed, the memory of the Velvet Revolution should inspire us all – as institutions and individuals – to keep fighting, together, for the values we share.

Marc-Philippe Weller
vice-rector

Sorbonne University

Henrik C. Wegener
rector