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**Osvalds Zebris** – Latvia

*Gaiļu kalna ēnā (2014)*

In the Shadow of Rooster Hill

Publishing House **Dienas grāmata**

### Biography

Osvalds Zebris, born in 1975, is a Latvian writer and journalist, holding a master's degree in economics. Zebris has worked in public relations and communications for Hill+Knowlton and McCann, and as an editor for various newspapers and magazines. He is also the author of three novels. Zebris' first book, a collection of short stories entitled *Brīvība tiklos* brought him instant popularity among readers and won him a Latvian Literature Award in 2010 for the best debut. *Gaiļu kalna ēnā* (*In the Shadow of Rooster Hill*, nominated for the Latvian Literature Award in 2015) was written and published for the historical novel series, *We. Latvia. The 20th Century*, focusing on the Latvian experience during 1905 in the Russian Empire. The novel *Koka nama ļaudis* tells the story of a strange wooden house in one of the oldest neighbourhoods of Riga. The wooden house is a breathing character in the story, influencing people living in it and initiating various mysteries. Zebris is a member of the Latvian Writers' Union.

### Synopsis

It is 1905 in Riga – the Russian Tsar is slowly losing power over his vast empire, and the city is being rocked by worker riots, violence and pogroms. Revolution is in the air. Pitting brother against brother, the chaos forces people to choose a side. Among this upheaval, a former schoolteacher becomes involved in the revolution, but soon realizes that war will take much more than he is willing to give. The following year, a dramatic kidnapping of three children has Riga's police on edge. Who did it? What was their motive? The answer will shatter the lives of two families, as they struggle to understand who is guilty in a revolution where all sides are victims. Osvalds Zebris weaves a powerful tale of a country's desire to become free against the backdrop of the 1905 Revolution in Tsarist Russia, an event that gave birth to some of the most dramatic events in the 20th century.

## *Gaiļu kalna ēnā*

### **Osvalds Zebris**

#### **Pirmā diena: pestīšana**

Salīcis, drukns vecis platiem soļiem snāj no Dinaburgas sliežu ceļa<sup>1</sup> puses. Palielo galvu nošķiebis, smagi un nevienādi elsdams, viņš šķērso krāšņo jaunās stacijas laukumu, tad ielu – ciets, daudzu gājēju pieblīvēts sniegs čīkst zem brūno puszābaku zolēm. Vīrs apstājas, paceļ nogurušās un dziļi iekritušās acis uz pēcpusdienas krēslā mirdzošajiem *Bellevue* viesnīcas<sup>2</sup> logiem un, galvu nodūris, turpina steidzīgo gājieni pa Marijas ielu. Dažas spītīgas brūnu matu sprogas laužas ārā pie cepures maliņas, tās šūpojas gājēja satraukto soļu ritmā, biežās ūsas no ātrās elpas padegunē sasalušas. Uz Elizabetes un Suvorova ielas<sup>3</sup> stūra pulciņos drūzmējas cilvēki, daži bezrūpīgi smejas, citi rimti izgriežas no Vērmaņa parka; vairāk dzird vīriešu balsis – dāmas salā ierāvušās kažokādās un mēteļu apkaklēs. Pirmsziemassvētku noskaņa ir jūtama Rīgā arī šogad, lai gan daudzos aizvien vēl mājō drūmas domas – rūgtums, ko nesis aizejošais 1906. gads, kā etiķi sagājis vīns ļaužu cerības apvērsis dziļā vilšanās sajūtā. Šodienas *Balss* raksta: “Tik daudz ienaida, posta un drūmu, draudošu mākoņu visā mūsu apkārtņē, ka negribas ticēt nekādai priecās vēstij. Un arī no nākotnes mums nespīd pretim nekāds cerības stars.”

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1 1860. gadā, pēc Rīgas–Dinaburgas dzelzceļa izbūves, ierīkoja arī šā dzelzceļa galapunktu Rīgā. Toreizējā nelielā divstāvu mūra ēka ar diviem peroniem bija Rīgas Centrālās dzelzceļa stacijas priekštece.

2 Tagad Raiņa bulvāra un Marijas ielas stūris.

3 Tagad Krišjāņa Barona iela.

Šķērsojis Aleksandra bulvāri, iebraucējs apstājas pie pazemas sētiņas, kas apņem pareizticīgo katedrāles varenos sānus, un vēro Ziemassvētku tirdziņa kņadu Esplanādes laukumā. Viņa apģērbs ir par plānu, uz vakaru sals kļūst aizvien bargāks, nācējs nodreb un pārlaiž uzmanīgu skatu ļaužu pulciņiem plašajā tirgus placī. Iegājis pa pavērtajiem vārtiņiem, viņš paraugās pa labi uz zvanu torni un, krustu nepārmetis, kā ēna aizslid gar katedrāles sienu. No spoži izgaismotās jarmarkas puses viņu neredz – vīrieša tumšais stāvs ir teju izzudis vienā no katedrāles sānu nišām. Vairāki pajūgi nupat jau atkal pietur, kungi pasniedz cimdotas rokas dāmām, izceļ no kamanām dažāda vecuma bērņelus, tie skriešiem metas uz izrotātās egles un saldumu galdu pusi. Mazie spridzīgi smejas, spieto ap smaržīgajām vafelēm un ar spožām lentēm izrotātajām būdām, kur elektrisko spuldžu gaismā mirdz rotaļu lāču un leļļu melnās acis. Uzzibsnī arī ārpus gaismas loka stāvošā veča skatiens, tas cieši pavada atnācējus līdz pat nomaļākai pārdotavai, kur tie pie laimes akas sastopas vēl ar kādiem. Vērīgās acis pamana krietni apdilušu savulaik sarkanīgu koka zirgu un maza auguma karuseļa vīru, kurš, sagaidījis divus pēdējos pasažierus, sāk lēnu riņķa gājienu, tad pieliek soli, meitene skanīgi iesmejas, sīks cimdiņš māj, zirgi uzņem ātrumu, večuka velteņi pāriet vieglā skrējienā.

Vērotājs skaita minūtes, saliec un atliec pelēkajos dūraiņos sastingušos pirkstus, aptausta naudas aploksni iekškabatā un pamana vēl kādu bērnu. Puikam ir gadi seši septiņi, mazā roka uz karuseļa pusi velk garā, melnā mētelī tērptu kungu, kura apgārotajā, bālajā sejā jūtama atturīga nepatika pret skaļo kņadu cilvēku pārpilnajā placī. Ap viņa plānajām lūpām paceļas viegla elpas migliņa, veča lūpas atkārti elegantā kunga lūpu kustības: “Bet tikai īsu brīdi, Paulīt.”

Virš Rīgas turpina vilkties tumšzila krēsla, un pilsētai raksturīgie trokšņi decembra debesu klusumā izceļas tikpat asi, kā spoži izgaismotā Esplanāde gail aklajā nakts acs dobumā. “Bērni. Ziemassvētkos... tikai daži laimīgi mazie,” viņš čukst, dziļajā nišā ierāvies, vērotāju sakrata dobjš un sauss kāss, viņš nedaudz pieliecas un vēlreiz pārbauda iekškabatu – viss ir savā vietā. Nomierinājies tas atkal atgriežas pie gaismās mirguļojošā laukuma, piemiegtās acis atrod karuseli un eleganto kungu, kurš tobrīd ieinteresēti vēro trūcīgi, bet silti ģērbtu jaunkundzi ar pagalam nemierīgu zēnu pie rokas. Sieviete izliekas kungu nemanām, mazais izraujas no kalsnās rokas un droši diebj uz smieklu zvaniņu, izsaucienu un ņirbošu roku mājienu pusi. Puskrēslā stāvošais vīrietis ar prieku atskārš, ka šovakar ir pamatīgi vērīgs, nogurušās acis gluži vai ieguvušās spēju attēlu palielināt, līdz sīkām detaļām sasmalcināt. Viņš pārlaiž cimdu smaidā atplaukušajai mutei, tad augšup, garām paltajam degunam, acīm, pierai, paceļ jēreni augstāk un atspiežas pret baznīcas akmeņiem. Spējš atvieglotums, ilgi gaidītā pestīšana – vaina paliks tepat cietajā sniegā, taps iemīta līdz pat pavasarim, kad pēcpusdienas saulē tā izzudīs pavisam. Beidzot viss noskaidrots, ilgas šaubu mokas atkāpušās, viņš atkal ir drošs par sevi un nu ir gatavs tikties ar savu vajātāju. Piepeši smaidā iesilušās acis sastingst, tumšās skropstas tikko manāmi notrīs, viņš aiztur elpu, kļūst bālāks, platie arāju dzimtas pleci sakrītas.

– Mamm, tu? – vecis atraujas no sienas, pa sānu vārtniņiem iziet laukumā un, meiteni cieši vērodams, itin kā pret savu gribu tuvojas karuselim.

– Eu, raugi, kur sprendzies, – kāds viņam uzsauc, platais cilvēks no pustumsas spraucas cauri kņadai, garām kļiņģeru apaļajiem sāniem, kūpošām glāzēm un resnai, spiedzīgi smejošai jaunuvei, kas rāda uz viņu ar salā pietūkušu, sarkanu

pirkstu. Kāds viegli parausta plecus, cits pasmaida sirmā bārdā, sak, cilvēks ir un paliek ērms, ķēms no zvēra, bet citam pat šāda sīka pagrūstīšanās ievēl dziļas rievās šaurajā pierē – kauns, plītnieki pašā Rīgas sirdī, tādā svētā laikā. Bet, kamēr pilsēta ievēl plaušās dzestro gaisu, pamet rotaļīgu skatienu augšup spožajās zvaigznēs, piemin izsmēķi vai noglāsta jauniegūtas draudzenes mēteļmuguru, vecis platiem soļiem tuvojas karuselīm. Viņš apmet loku, iebrien nelielā kupenā smaidošo zirdziņu ēnas pusē un pastiepj spēcīgās rokas. Karuselis griežas lēni, un viņš saudzīgi noceļ bērnus vienu pēc otra. Vispirms mazais Paulītis, tad nadzīgais rezgalis un visbeidzot – viņa. Spēcīgās rokas nodreb, mammas siltās acis izbrīnā viņu uzlūko, bet lūpas nepaspēj izdvest ne skaņas. Spalgi iekliegties pagūst tikai vidējais puika, taču karuseļa otrā pusē spiedienu neviens nesadzird. Sieviete iespējami strupi rauga atcirst melnajā mētelī tērptajam švītīgajam kungam, kuram pēkšņi šis vakara izgājiens rādās noslēpumu pilns, īsti nesaprotami, acumirkli neaptverami daudzsološs.

– Paulīti, mēs tūliņ iesim pie tētas, tūliņ es jums... – vecis aizelšas, viņš abus puikas paņēmis pie vienas rokas, pie otras meitene. Mudīgi rauj bērnus pāri Totlēbena bulvārim,<sup>4</sup> pagriežas pa labi, un brīdī, kad no laukuma atskan vakara murdoņai neraksturīgi saucieni, savādā četrrotne jau nogriežas uz Nikolaja ielu,<sup>5</sup> tad vēlreiz pa kreisi un pa Troņmantnieka bulvāri<sup>6</sup> mēro labu gabalu pretējā virzienā – līdz pat novakares krēslā grimstošajam Bastejkalnam. Paulītis iešņukstas, otrs puika sparīgi rausta roku, meitene atgriež mazo galvu atpakaļ:

4 Tagad Kalpaka bulvāris.

5 Tagad Krišjāņa Valdemāra iela.

6 Tagad Raiņa bulvāris.

– Ū, uz šejieni, palīgā, – viņa sauc aizvilkdamās, taču smalkā balss izplēn pilsētas sirdspukstos, balsīs, važoņu izsaucienos, slāpētos smieklos. Pirms svētkiem ļaudis steidz noslēgt ilgi atliktus rēķinus un darījumus, satīties uz īsu sarunu, lai tad varētu mierīgu sirdi nodoties Ziemassvētku rosībai.

Savādais svešinieks nervozi iesmejas, velk mazos uz priekšu, vēlreiz pa kreisi, uz Aleksandra bulvāri, un tad jau viņi nonāk pie spoži izgaismotās *Imperiāla* viesnīcas<sup>7</sup> sāniem. Pie augstajām divviru durvīm stāv šveicars tumši zilā tērpā, zeltītajās pogās atspīd dzeltenīga elektrisko spuldžu gaisma, ko greznais nams vēlīgi izlej no platajiem vestibila logiem. Meitenei – viņu sauc Laimdota – šķiet, ka durvju uzraugs tūliņ ņems nejauko veci aiz krāgas, sauks pēc gorodovoja un viņa būs glābta, taču šveicars steidzas pie nule piebraukušām kamanām, lai paņemtu brūnā papīrā iesaiņotas pakas un pasniegtu baltu cimdu lapsu astēs dziļi iegrimušai dāmai. Vecis raujas iekšā pa platajām divviru durvīm, viņi pieklūp pie viesnīcnieka galda; pa labi dzird biljarda bumbu paukšķus, uzvēdī cigāru un cepta ēdiena smarža – puspagrabā iekārtojies restorāns, viena no Rīgas greznākajām izklaides rotām. Vakaros te ņirb apaļi zelta desmitnieki un papīra divdesmitpiecnieki – šo vietu iecienījuši pirmie tikko pie rocības tikušie latvieši, kuriem gribas aizgūtnēm tērēt, rādīt zobus vāciešiem un krieviem.

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7 Ēka Brīvības bulvārī 21.

## *In the Shadow of Rooster Hill*

**Osvalds Zebris**

*Translated from Latvian by Jayde Thomas Will*

### **The First Day: Redemption**

A stooping, thickset old man strode with wide steps from the side of the Dvinsk railway track. His somewhat large head bent downwards, panting heavily and irregularly, he crossed the splendid square of the new station, then the street – the hard snow, packed down by the many passers-by, crunched under the soles of his brown boots. The man stopped, raised his tired and sunken eyes toward the windows of the Bellevue Hotel glittering in the afternoon twilight and, with his head lowered, continued his hurried walk along Maria Street. A few spiteful locks of brown hair pushed out from under the edges of his hat, they rocked to the rhythm of his nervous step, his thick moustache frozen under his nose. People in groups thronged the area where Elizabeth Street and Suvarov Street met, some laughing in a carefree manner, while others were tranquilly leaving Vērmāne Park; one could hear more men's voices than those of the ladies, who were wrapped up in their furs with their coat collars pulled up against the cold. The mood before Christmas could be felt in Riga this year as well, even though gloomy thoughts still dwelt in many – a bitterness that was brought by the last days of 1906, like wine that has turned into vinegar, with peoples' hopes having turned into a deep feeling of disillusionment. Today's issue of the daily newspaper *The Voice* read: "So much hatred, misery and bleak, ominous clouds all around, that no one can ever

believe in good news. And we have no ray of hope shining upon us from the future.”

Crossing Alexander Boulevard, the old man stopped near a low-lying fence that encircled the impressive walls of the Orthodox cathedral and watched the bustle of the Christmas market on Esplanade Square. His clothing was too thin, and as evening approached the cold became ever more severe; he was shivering and quickly scanning the crowds of people in the broad market square. After going through the gates that were slightly open, he looked to the right to the bell tower and, without making the sign of the cross, slid along the cathedral wall like a shadow. He wasn't seen from the side of the brightly lit-up annual market – the man's dark figure had almost vanished in one of the cathedral's wall naves. Several carts had already stopped again, the gentlemen offered their gloved hands to the ladies, and lifted children of various ages from the sleigh. The children rushed off in the direction of the dolled-up Christmas tree and tables laden with candy. The little ones laughed cheerfully, and swarmed around the sweet-smelling waffles and huts decorated with shiny ribbons where the black eyes of teddy bears and dolls twinkled in the glow of the electric bulbs. The old man's stagnant eyes also lit up for a moment, they closely followed those who had come to the shop that was farthest away, where they met at the well of fortune to fish out prizes with a few others. His observant eyes discerned a shabby, faded red wooden horse and a man of short stature in charge of the carousel who began to walk slowly in a circle while waiting for the last two passengers. Afterwards, he walked faster, a small girl burst out laughing, a small glove beckoned, the horses gathered speed, and the old man's felt boots broke into a light trot.



The observer counted the minutes, clenched and flexed his fingers frozen numb in the grey mittens, felt an envelope with money in his inside pocket and then noticed another child. The boy was six or seven years of age, his small hand pulling a man dressed in a long black coat to the carousel. The man's enlightened, pale face showed a restrained dislike of being in a square filled with the loud din of people. The light fog of breath rose up around his thin lips, and the lips of the old man repeated the movement of the elegant gentleman's lips: "But just for a short moment, Pauls."

A dark blue twilight continued to drag itself above Riga, and the characteristic noise of the city in the silent clouds of December stood out so sharply, like the brightly-lit Esplanade glowing in the blind eye socket of the night. "Children. At Christmas... only a few happy little ones," he whispered to himself, shrinking into the deep nave. A deep, dry cough shook him as he bent over slightly and once again checked his inside pocket – everything was in its place. Having calmed himself, the old man once again focused on the square glimmering in the light, his squinting eyes finding the carousel and the elegant gentleman, who at that moment was observing with interest a young woman who was dressed poorly, but warmly, with a fidgety boy holding her hand. The woman pretended she did not notice the man, the boy broke away from her thin hand and bravely ran toward the laughter, bells, shouting, and flickering gestures of hands. The man standing in the twilight realized with pleasure that tonight he was very alert, his tired eyes almost gained the ability to zoom in, to reduce the scene to the finest details. He passed his hand slowly over his mouth, which had burst out in a smile, then up, past his long nose, the eyes, the brow, and raised his sheepskin cap higher and leaned against the stone wall of the

church. The sudden relief, the long-awaited redemption – the guilt would stay right in the hard snow, it would be pressed into it until spring came and then disappear completely in the afternoon sun. Finally everything was cleared up, the protracted torment of uncertainty had receded, and he was once again sure of himself and now was ready to meet his tormentor. Suddenly, his eyes that were warmed by a smile, froze. The dark eyelashes quivering ever so slightly, he held his breath, grew paler, and the broad shoulders of this country boy drooped.

“Mommy, is that you?” Observing a girl that had just come onto the square, the old man whispered and broke away from the wall. Emerging from the side gates, he approached the carousel as if moving against his own wishes.

“Hey, watch where you’re going!” someone shouted at him. The old man could not care less and so carried on through the bustle, past the sides of large pretzels, steaming glasses and a rotund young woman with a high-pitched laugh who pointed a finger, red and swollen from the cold, at him. Someone lightly shrugged his shoulders, while another smiled in his grey beard; ah yes, a person is and remains a strange, freakish beast, but for another even that kind of jostling leaves deep wrinkles in their narrow forehead – the shame, revellers right in the heart of Riga, at such a holy time. But while the city drew the cool air into its lungs, threw a playful glance up to the glimmering stars, stamped out cigarette butts and caressed the back of a newly-acquired sweetheart, the old man approached the carousel with wide steps. He went around, waded into the small snowdrift towards the shadow of smiling horses and stretched out his strong arms. The carousel was turning slowly, and he carefully lifted the children off one by one. Starting with little Pauls, then the nimble troublemaker,

and finally her. The old man's strong arms were shaking – the mother's warm eyes glanced at him in astonishment, but not a sound emanated from her lips. It was only the middle boy that made a high-pitched scream, however no one heard the screaming on the other side of the carousel. The woman was giving snappy answers to the smartly-dressed man in the black overcoat, for whom this evening's walk suddenly appeared to be full of mystery, quite incomprehensible and immensely promising.

“Pauls, we'll go over to Daddy's now, now I'll...” the old man said, running out of breath. He held both boys with one hand, and the girl with the other. He hurriedly pulled the boys across Totleben Boulevard, turned to the right, and, at that moment when shouting, uncharacteristic of the evening groaning, rang from the square, this peculiar group of four was already turning off onto Nikolai Street, then once more turned to the left and went a good way along Crown Prince Boulevard in the opposite direction – all the way to Bastion Hill, which was sinking into the evening twilight. Little Pauls started whimpering, the other boy energetically trying to pull his arm away, while the girl kept turning her head back:

“Hey! Over here! Help!” she shouted ardently, however the thin voice died in the heartbeat of the city, in the voices, among the shouts of the cart drivers, in the muffled laughter. Before the holidays, people hurried to settle long-postponed scores and transactions, and meet for a brief chat so they could devote themselves to the bustle of Christmas with a certain peace of mind.

The odd stranger smiled nervously, dragged the little ones to the front, and once again to the left, onto Alexander Boulevard, and then they were already coming to the shiny, well-lit

facade of the Imperial Hotel. The doorman in a dark blue uniform stood next to the high double door, the gilded buttons of the uniform reflecting the light bulbs' yellow glow, which the luxurious building generously poured out through the broad windows of the lobby. To the little girl – whose name was Laimdota – it seemed that the door guard would take the bad old man by his collar at once, call for the police, and she would be rescued, but instead the doorman hurried to the sleighs that had just arrived in order to take packages wrapped in brown paper and offer a white glove to a lady submerged in her foxtail coat. The old man rushed inside through the wide double door and to the reception desk; to the right one could hear the pop of billiard balls, as the smell of cigars and hot food wafted in – there was a restaurant that was situated on the basement floor, one of Riga's most luxurious entertainment spots. In the evenings, it was the round gold 10 ruble coins that sparkled along with the 25 ruble notes. The first Latvians that had just gained the means favoured this place, those who wanted to eagerly spend and bare their teeth to the Germans and Russians.



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