

Biography: Franciska Ermlere (1968) studied at the Faculty of Robotics and Automatisation at Rīga Technical University, the Division of Television and Theatre Studies at the Latvian Academy of Culture, and the Division of Theatre Sciences in the Faculty of Philology at the University of Latvia. The author of several plays, scripts for TV movies, animated films as well as stories and novels, she was nominated for the Latvian Literature Award in 2006 for her book *The Jersika Covenant* (*Jersikas derība*).

Synopsis: *The Manuscript* is a part of the Riga Detective (*Rīgas detektīvs*) series, but can be read as a standalone work. It concentrates on the behind-the-scenes aspects and intrigues of being a writer, exploring Riga in the late 20th century, its society, events, and processes. The most valuable manuscripts of the Latvian Writers Union, unpublished during the Soviet years, had been kept by Professor Brants, found by investigators drowned in his bathtub.

Excerpt

THE BOUNDARY

'Those who change shall survive, those who change shall survive,' and Čaka iela underneath my feet transforms into Marijas iela. That is one of the transformations that I have never really understood. There is neither a turning, nor a hill, it's simply Čaka iela as far as the corner and then Marijas iela after that. An intersection. At least there is an intersection and that's no bad thing, and I turn off to the right. To walk along the boundary line, so to speak. I'd like to talk to the person who put together this network of streets...

Today is our day of boundaries. Little Georg went out into the big wide world and I've just got to laugh – he's such a man. He went out among people all on his own, without fear, since Jasmine, having stood around with the kindergarten group for a moment, came back out with me as well. Georg stayed. Jasmine even brushed away a tear because suddenly her little Georg is no longer hers alone. A boundary line has been stepped over. I wonder how I can offer support to Jasmine and walk into a flower shop to send her a bunch of flowers. Flowers tend to paper over cracks, however, as I write the note that is to accompany the flowers I realise that this is going to be feeble consolation. *Whenever ice breaks – spring will soon arrive* – that is all that I can write on this September day when the first frosts have blackened our dahlias.

And once again I am confronted by the Hamletian question: "To be or not to be?", where the "to be" so easily crosses over the boundary of "not to be". Nothing has changed. The only thing that has changed is my perspective of things, my perception.

Now that three years have passed by since my adventure at the theatre, my steps have suddenly acquired a new resonance. One, two, three... One, two, three... and so I march right up as far as Salevich's office on Alberta iela. The office secretary Ruta has opened the window, and my entrance causes a draught that sweeps off some papers from her desk. Ruta is unconcerned, she merely points me towards Salevich's door with a smile which means that I have to start with a visit to him. When I open the door, Salevich is bent over the desk and is trying to fix his desk lamp.

'To be or not to be – this question cannot be resolved. These two worlds will always be

alongside each other. All that we can hope for is to maintain that boundary between them.'

I begin to speak without even a greeting.

'Boundary between what?' Salevich doesn't understand at first.

'The boundary between good and evil. Ever since that theatre affair I've been tortured by the thought that evil will remain unpunished. We cannot prove that Huding is the guilty party, can we. All we can do is to maintain the principle of separating evil from good, just as light is separated from darkness.'

'The light from the dark...' Salevich breaks into a laugh and switches on the desk lamp to check the result of his labours. 'That kind of simplicity was appropriate in the days when there was no electricity, and even more so – when there weren't any candles and before Prometheus had girded himself ready to steal fire from the gods. Now everything is mixed up – they make light during the night, and during the day they lock you up in a dark cellar.'

'But if we know that it's a lamp and that it's a cellar,' I pursue my thought.

'Therefore you know the rule,' Salevich interrupts. 'It would have been better if Prometheus hadn't stolen the fire and if Eve hadn't bitten into the apple from the Tree of Good and Evil. But – what's done, is done.' Salevich grows serious. 'And we live with the Covenant, where in the beginning was the word, and not light or darkness. The word, which is a sound and hence rather difficult to paint in terms of light or dark.'

Indeed, life starts with a cry. I remember Georg's first squawk, however, we all probably started the same way. Life is separated from death by a cry, a sound, a word – that is the

boundary.

'Life is not only a play between light and dark, it is far more complicated and, at the same time, simpler than that. The only thing you have to remember is that this boundary line penetrates the human heart and there's nothing poetic about it. The boundary between good and evil has to be kept up every day and at every moment. In this battle there are no holidays, nor festive days.'

There is a moment's pause during which I suddenly feel like a schoolchild. I've never managed to get close to Salevich. There are occasions when it seems as if the distance between us, instead of shrinking over time, is increasing. Though I have to admit to myself that if it were any different I wouldn't work in his office, because I come here not only for the money and the job as solicitor. It's something more than that and I'm not entirely sure what it really is. My cry hasn't been born yet.

Salevich resumes:

'A librarian has made an appointment to see us today, and I would like you to take part in the meeting.'

This is a surprise, because the only book on Salevich's bookshelf is a volume of folk songs and I've never seen him reading or noted any interest on his part in books.

'She rang me last night and asked for a meeting, she was very agitated. Something about problems and needing help. Her name is Alise Blumentale and she's due to be here in half an hour.'

I go to my office. Now I've got something to think about. Why on earth has Salevich agreed to meet the librarian Alise? She comes from a world with myriads of cries and words, arranged in rows, on shelves and in cupboards. At least that's how I remember libraries – words locked in between the covers of books, confined to black ink and white paper, they can revitalise and they can kill. Words can be everything.

Half an hour later I walk into Salevich's office like a real pre-schooler: excited and consumed with curiosity. Salevich is also getting ready. He wipes the dust off his only book and puts it back onto the shelf.

'So what do you think, why did I decide to meet with Alise?' he asks me.

'I don't know,' I reply in all honesty.

'I've never been interested in books. I'm more interested in the stories told around a campfire, when there is a person talking, a person whose eyes you can see and whose voice you can hear. Books are merely imprints; old tracks left a long time ago,' Salevich is starting to become convivial.

'This librarian mentioned a surname. Professor Brants. I used to know him. He is one of the guardians of the tracks and the ancient treasure chests, a real bookworm.'

Salevich doesn't manage to say any more. Ruta is already opening the door to announce the visitor. Alise walks into the office. She is about fifty years old, and there is something ancient and solid about this creature. She is wearing a dark grey dress with an ethnic sash, her hair is bound into such a tight bun that not a single strand is out of place. Strictness and order

can be perceived in her stance and her clothing, but the belt twice wound around her waist is evidence that she is reserved not only in her manner, but also in her diet. Everything is neatly arranged and well maintained.

She introduces herself:

'Alise Blumentale, head of the department of ancient books and manuscripts.'

Without waiting to be invited, she sits down - which could well mean extreme anxiety.

Salevich, to help her along, pushes towards her a cup of tea which she drinks in silence, one small sip at a time. While drinking her tea she pulls herself together again, though it soon becomes apparent that Alise is not particularly feminine and doing five tasks at the same time is not her strong point. Pushing away her empty cup, Alise starts to relate her tale:

'Some time ago' – she corrects herself – 'five years ago, at a conference about the National Library project, I became acquainted with professor Brants. You could say that we even became friends. After the death of his wife he lived a solitary life and had stopped presenting lectures at the university, and so he had time to spare for me. I visit him at his home.'

After a moment's thought she adds:

'Professor Brants is eighty years old, and you must understand that in a country like ours, that is, where cultural issues and considerations are almost completely revised after every change of government, the main value is the human being and his memory. However paradoxical it may sound, in some private libraries there are books and manuscripts that

cannot be found in any state collections, where – in accordance with the instructions of each new regime – regular clean-outs have taken place. Luckily, in Riga we haven't gone so far as burning books. But they were thrown out, and the people who understood what was happening and were able to appreciate what was truly valuable did their best to save them. Professor Brants was one of these people and that is why he has a wonderful and unique library; he has signed an agreement to donate it to our establishment. We even began to put together a catalogue, in which professor Brants made every effort to indicate where he had obtained each copy. He is a member of the Writers' Union, and he has also worked in publishing houses as well as the university. In all of these institutions, from time to time – without any book burning or loud announcements – there were instructions to throw out books. The professor, as far as he was able, tried to rescue them and preserve them. Initially he hid them in the cellar of his summer house, but now he keeps them in his home library. The most dreadful purge, as he termed it, was the sale of items of the Writers' Union from the last period of independence. At that time, an enormous number of original works literature were lost, and this happened after a decision had been made to move out of the Writers' Union home in Benjamin's House. A number of manuscripts that the censor at one time had banned from publication were also kept there, and it was precisely these that the professor tried to save. He had even obtained a little cart for bringing the books home with him. During the sale you could buy books for ten centimes apiece. We haven't started to catalogue these manuscripts yet. We were carried away with a description of books from the 17th century which he had bought at the same sale – for just a few lats each. They are rare books, and we don't have them in our library. Quite unique editions.

Lately, the professor has been feeling unwell. He is completely on his own. His daughter Ilze lives and works in Germany. Only a few people come to visit him, and I am one them. There is also a social worker who helps the professor come to grips with his housekeeping. The last time I visited, however, Brants complained that someone was secretly doing things in this home – books have been changing places or have been placed on different shelves. His eyesight has recently declined, but he was convinced that he would put a book on one shelf, yet he would find it again on another. He became very suspicious. Possibly they're just the quirks of an old person. Otherwise the professor has a completely sound and lucid mind, his memory is enviable. A couple of days ago Mr Brants called me: he'd decided that he would donate to the library a manuscript that he'd been thinking about a lot and had finally come to the conclusion that it should be made available to the public. The professor asked me to come to his house but when I went there, he wouldn't open the door. A whole hour went by and still he wouldn't open the door. That surprised me, because the professor is a very punctilious man. And then I phoned you,' Alise ends her account.

There is a pause while we dwell on her suspicions, even the worst. After a moment Salevich speaks up:

'You did ring him, didn't you?'

'Yes, several times. Then I called his social worker, but it turns out that she is on vacation for a week. They had come to an arrangement that the professor would make do without her.'

'And he's not answering the phone?' Salevich clarifies once more.

'No, while I was standing outside his apartment I could hear the phone ringing behind the door, but nobody answered.'

'And what are you expecting us to do?' Salevich is businesslike.

'You see,' Alise does not wish to say the real reason out loud – 'we need to break open the door and, you understand, I made enquiries about your office,' she looks at Salevich's single volume of folk songs on the shelf. 'The professor's library is tremendously valuable, and nothing should disappear. I am worried that the police won't understand that. Everything must be done correctly, legally and above board.'

'If I understand you correctly, then you are seeking for witnesses at the moment of the forced entry?' Salevich is precise.

'Yes, I suppose that you could call it that,' Alise is upset. Breaking in is a disturbance of order, and that to her is unacceptable.

'Did your parents ever read Lewis Carroll?' I ask her. I would like to help her gather her wits together.

'*Alice in Wonderland* was my father's favourite book.'

'I'm afraid that *Wonderland* on its own won't help us this time around. We'll have to travel behind the looking-glass,' Salevich is trying to be witty.

'I've never been on the other side of what is called a book,' I add.

Alise smiles kindly:

'You can read books in two ways – either as a mirror, or you can enter in the author's world.

The page of the book is the boundary at which you may stop, or else step beyond it.'

'We won't be able to remain on this side, we'll have to break open those manuscripts regardless,' Salevich is sarcastic.

As always, it turns out that he is right. If someone were to ask me later what this boundary looked like, I would say that it was like Alise's sash – white with a red pattern.

2

THE BREAK-IN

Having phoned the police, the three of us leave the office in order to make our way to professor Brants's apartment. It's on Matisa iela, not far from Ziedonis Gardens.

'As far as I know, he and his wife have lived in this apartment since the war. The apartment was rented by his late wife's parents, but the owners of the building left after the war and the wife's parents stayed on to look after the place. After we regained independence and the original owner returned to Riga, the tenancy agreement had to be renewed for the umpteenth time – for a temporary period, of course. But, as we know, nothing is more permanent than a temporary arrangement. Professor Brants married into the flat - as he likes to joke about it - and considers himself to be the most firmly established sitting tenant.

The owner of the building spent the years of the Soviet period in Great Britain, and there's a law over there that you cannot evict aged people from their fixed address. And that's how

professor Brants has been able go on living in a four-room apartment on his own,' Alise continues her story about the philology professor who is unknown to me.

'He was lucky enough to find himself in a favourable zone,' Salevich concludes. 'During the war some people's houses were bombarded and destroyed, but others survived without losing a single teaspoon or fork. Why for these few everything was left unscathed – remains an unanswered question.'

Alise pinches her lips together but doesn't say a word. We walk along in silence until we get to professor Brants's home. It's the usual Art Deco building typical of Riga, except that in this neighbourhood the Art Deco buildings are distributed in a different rhythm – one house in classical style, the next in Art Deco style, quite like musical notes in a bar.

'We were evicted,' Alise suddenly announces. 'When the owner came back from the States in 1991. I guess life and the law over there is harsher,' she adds. 'In Riga the warring will probably never end. The consequences of every war are counted and counted once again, and all it does is increase the number of victims. It turns out that a person can be blown up by an old mine, fifteen years after the war is supposed to have ended, and until the last soldier is buried the war is not over. The professor's flat is up on the second floor,' Alise indicates with her hand. 'It's those three windows above the main entrance.'

As we come inside into the stairwell we are met by a policeman and the locksmith of the building with his case of instruments. The policeman has made an effort and has written up a statement which we all sign, and the locksmith starts work on opening the door. The lock gives way easily. Professor Brants has not bothered with any security devices and the flat

does not have an alarm. Having done the job, the locksmith stretches out his hand. Salevich presses a banknote into his palm. The policeman pretends not to have seen anything. It's now just the four of us. No-one hastens to enter the apartment. Finally, Alise is the one to go inside first. It's a genuine old-time apartment with high ceilings, a ceramic stove and bas reliefs of flowers running along the ceilings. When we leave the entrance hall to go into the various rooms it has to be admitted that they all have the look of a library – enormous bookshelves everywhere, extending right up to the ceiling. There's even a small stepladder so that you can reach the very highest shelves. In the largest room - probably the living room – stands a large, black, old-fashioned grand piano.

'The professor's daughter is a pianist,' Alise explains.

We walk into the bedroom. There are huge bookshelves here, too, but unlike the others, however, these have glass doors on them.

'The professor explained that these are really the kinds of shelves that the books should be kept in,' Alise reveals the idea behind the furniture.

I look up at the ceiling – in every room there is a different bas relief with a different floral design: in the bedroom its poppies, in the sitting room – lilies.

'It's like being in a museum,' says the policeman.

'A real flower garden,' remarks Salevich. 'During the Soviet period it was almost impossible to keep possession of something like this.'

'The professor had registered all his country relatives here, so that they wouldn't be forced

into having communal apartment status,' Alise explains.

The professor himself is nowhere to be found. Not even in the kitchen, where there are some bookshelves as well – with cookbooks. At least as far as I can read on their spines. I open the door to the daughter's room. That room also is packed to overflowing with books, piled up in stacks on the floor.

'This is where the professor keeps his single use books, as he calls them – books not worth reading again,' Alise continues with her guided tour through the professor's apartment.

Matchsticks and wood shavings protrude from some of the 'single use' books. Once again Alise explains:

'That's how the professor marks a memorable phrase or expression. He collects well-turned sentences.'

Meanwhile the policeman has opened the door to the bathroom. There, the light shining upon him and with his head down in the bath which is full of water, lies the professor. You could even say – floating. It is a corpse, quite clearly. He is fully dressed. It looks as though he may have accidentally slipped over and fallen into the bath, but why should a clothed person get into the bath? Together with the policeman we lift the professor out of the bath; the water is completely cold. We carry the remains of the professor into the kitchen and lay him out on the table. Alise is hushed and subdued:

'That is professor Brants.'

He is thin, fairly tall and extremely neatly dressed. His whole appearance exudes old school

ways. His trousers have sharp creases in them, and his socks are clean, and his hair is perfectly trimmed, but on his right temple there is an enormous bluish bruise with a small square-shaped indentation at its centre.

'The professor slipped over and he accidentally fell into the bath,' the policeman hazards a guess. The statement hints at a wish to classify this as an ordinary accident, because who would want to undertake an investigation when it might look as if it is likely to be just another unsolved case of death which will be bad for statistics. 'The tiles were wet. It's a common thing that happens to old people,' the policeman continues to expand on his view.

'But what could he have bumped against?' Salevich poses a logical question and looks towards me.

I understand that that is a boundary line. It is a boundary and I have to choose the correct side to stand on.

'He couldn't have received a mark like that from crashing against the bath. Nor the handbasin. That is the mark of a blow left by a small object.'

The policeman goes off to summon the investigating team who will search for this wretched item and, more importantly, the hand that wielded it. Salevich and I stay behind in the kitchen. Salevich points to two small teacups which are sitting at the edge of the sink, they appear to be dry. Salevich takes a tea towel and carefully lifts up a cup – there is a ring of water underneath it.

'That means the cup has been here for no more than two days, otherwise everything would

have been totally dry. Whatever, but before his bath the professor had a visitor who, most likely, helped to start him off with his swim, someone who was cold-blooded enough to do the dishes afterwards.'

Alise has gone through to the sitting room, and, having taken out from her handbag a list, is checking it against the rows of books. So either she had come prepared for this course of events, or, more likely, she was ready for precisely this. She doesn't leave an impression that she is helpless and I have a strong suspicion that for Alise books are more important than human beings. At least, as it turns out, their life expectancy is longer.

'Any results?' Salevich addresses her, but Alise does not respond. She walks into a room which must have been the office, because there is a huge desk in there. And here Alise screams out loud, because finally in her world something altogether unanticipated and horrendous has occurred. She waves at the empty shelf with her hand, and in this apartment - where every shelf is populated with books all crammed in together - this really does look strange. It takes a while for Alise to speak:

'This is where the professor kept all his manuscripts – the ones he removed from the Writers' Union library. As he used to say, they were mainly the elaborations of graphomaniacs, yet there was one which was valuable. The professor had put it into old covers, wooden ones I believe, covered in leather that was worn in places. We never got as far as this manuscript and writing a description of it. The professor was always procrastinating about it, and I have a feeling that this was the manuscript that he phoned me about.'

'Do you really have no idea at all as to what may have been inside those covers?' Salevich asks.

'The professor never opened them, he would only pick them up and then put them back onto the shelf. I couldn't afford to be tactless. I just couldn't...' Alise is utterly miserable.

'Was the manuscript as old as the covers?' I, too, venture to show my interest.

Alise blushes and then replies:

'No, it was a 20th century work. The paper was thin, like the kind they started producing only in more recent times. I could see how the pages were lying inside the covers.'

'But do you really have no inkling at all about who may have been the author of the work?' I ask.

'No,' Alise draws herself up straight. She has not attempted to worm her way into forbidden territory. She's not one of those who would peek through keyholes.

The empty shelf looks like a black hole in the professor's universe. A policeman comes in and draws our attention to the fireplace in the sitting room:

'Perhaps the professor has been warming himself by the light of the intellect?'

And indeed, there it is – a whole heap of neatly stacked up paper burnt at the edges. Alise kneels down at the heap, pulls it out of the fireplace and begins to shake out each page.

'No, the manuscript isn't here, and neither are the ancient covers.'

'But how can you know that, if you haven't seen the manuscript?' Salevich expresses a logical assumption.

A flush seeps across Alise's face. There is no other option but to confess:

'Yes, I did open up the covers, but only the once. The work was called *Mark of Cain*. That's what was written on the title page, and along the bottom of each individual page. The name of the author wasn't there, though. There was another inscription on the title page – Riga, 1988.'

Leaving the singed pile of paper in the living room, we return to the office and start examining the desk.

'He was surely keeping a diary,' Salevich continues with his analysis.

I recall the neat and tidy shirt and the person we left lying on the kitchen table. Yes, he would have definitely been writing a diary. Everything about him was carefully arranged, and that means an ordered mind, but, if you use sponges and brooms to keep a house in order, then for keeping your thoughts in order you use pen and paper. Each day, lines would be drawn and knots would be tied for arranging his thoughts in order.

We cannot find anything in the desk drawers. They are suspiciously empty.

'The diary has probably wandered off to its real reader,' Alise speaks up, 'because the desk is empty. Someone has taken away everything. The real reader – at the library that's what we call the person for whom the book was written. Readers like that usually attempt to

steal the books they regard as theirs. Once you become aware of this strange habit, you

know at once that you need to keep an eye on that reader. You mustn't let them out of your sight, because sometimes it can happen that they're not even interested in the book in its entirety, just a few pages of it and they'll tend to rip those out without any pangs of conscience.'

Salevich listens to Alise's account and states coolly:

'Yet the professor probably didn't know this. And now all we're left with is a Torricelli vacuum.'

Right at the very back of one of the drawers, however, there is a cutting from a newspaper.

It is an obituary dating from 1987:

JANIS PAIDERS (6 June 1960 – 11 September 1987). Tragically departed from this fair life, the poet and translator Janis Paiders. An enlightened and industrious life, full of hope, has been cut short. Janis Paiders began his literary career in 1980. In 1984 graduated from the Faculty of Philology at Peteris Stucka Latvian State University. In the same year admitted as a member of the Latvian SSR Writers' Union. Worked as editor at Liesma publishing house. In 1982 made his debut with a collection of poetry, A Fly in Amber.

A second collection of poetry was published in 1987. It was only last summer that we were watching an interview with Janis Paiders on All-Union TV – as the youngest ever delegate to the Latvian SSR Writers' Union congress.

A talented poet and translator of poetry, an intelligent and thorough cultural practitioner, sociable and friendly as a person – Janis Paiders was an example to us all. He was and will

remain an example. Always.

The Board of the Latvian SSR Writers' Union

After I have finished reading out aloud the obituary, a deep silence falls over the room; it is broken by Salevich:

'Janis Paiders was drowned too. Twenty four years later, on the exact same date – 11 September – professor Brants also passes away, likewise in proximity to water. It's strange that he kept this press cutting in his desk drawer as some kind of plan, a programme. At least that's what it comes to, if you look at the course of events *post factum*.

The emptiness of the desk, nonetheless, is surprising - just like the empty shelf, it leaves the impression that the matter is not so simple. Salevich assesses the items standing on the professor's desk. He draws my attention to the desk calendar, open at 11 September. Obviously it's the last page that the professor turned over himself. Alise has compared the dates.

'The 11 September is also the anniversary of the death of the great writer Rainis.'

'We're not venturing behind that looking glass,' Salevich is categorical. 'Especially since the real date in question is the 10th.'

Salevich turns back to the previous page which is one for 9 September.

'The page for 10 September has been torn out because it probably contained some kind of unwelcome note. Most probably about the meeting with the person who brought in the

new order here. The fact that we have been left with the page for 11 September is a clue that this instigator of the new order is an intelligent person, and, one would think, well acquainted with the anniversaries and dates pertaining to Latvian literature, and what's most unpleasant of all, someone who is completely cold-hearted, you could even say cynical.'

The policeman reappears in the office and announces that the investigators have arrived. He notices the press cutting that I've put down on the table and his mood darkens:

'Water is a dark and slippery business. I'd only been in the police force two months when Janis Paiders drowned. Then times changed, and the case was never solved.'

There are matters which are impossible to unravel, because at their foundations are myths, and myths, as we know, are the most enduring edifices. Even when shattered and exploded by incontrovertible facts and proof, they continue to exist. Even more so! Children and grandchildren are begotten and brought up on the foundations of myths; more thoroughly and profoundly than on logic. Like acquiring language – it starts before you learn to read. It's much more enduring, because sound lives outside that which can be perceived by the eyes and the mind that is tied to them. Sound evades the barriers of the mind and enters into the essence of a person much more deeply.

Books in among this sea are merely nets with which, if you're lucky, you may catch a fish or two, and nothing more. Yet this fish, too, is a necessity for feeding the mind – the same which, if left to starve, begins to pander to passions and cause turbulence, until it blows up a major storm. It's been heard that there are those who strive to create islands in this sea.

Islands upon which one can weather the storms and stay alive. Yet to make an island, words on their own are not enough. The value of words is decided by thought, and something more is needed so as to work out which ones of those who write words are building islands, and who are simply muddying the waters. I have not succeeded in establishing this. If a correct course has not been set and there is no chart, then it follows that it is best to remain in the safety of the shore, as does Salevich with his volume of folk songs.