

**Biography:** Sven Kuzmins (1985) is a Latvian writer, artist, and actor. A fiction writer and journalist, he also experiments with various forms of visual arts and literature. He is actively involved in other media projects and is known to the wider public as one of the initiators and authors behind the *NERTEN* sketch theater project. His works have been translated into English, Russian, Lithuanian, Estonian, and Spanish, and published in various printed and online platforms.

**Synopsis:** Kuzmins' first novel, *Hokhmah* unfolds in Hokhmah, a small, quiet coastal resort town in western Latvia. Hokhmah's seemingly calm day-to-day life, history, and mythology intertwine with the life stories of its residents, revealing their inner conflicts, complex relationships, and long-held secrets. Hokhmah's stories are comical, tragic and at times surreal, though they are bound together by a conflict known to anyone who grew up in the countryside: a longing for one's hometown and a simultaneous wish to break off any connections with it forever, regardless of whether or not that is actually possible.

### Excerpt

This is Hokhmah. The small town where I was born that people are quick to compare with paradise or, in the winter, with an asteroid or an iceberg. "How do you even live there?" our neighbours often ask us, and we, the locals, answer: "Just fine, thank you," because there's actually nothing more beautiful and melancholy than an old resort town in the off-season when the throngs of holidaymakers have vanished – as if they'd been taken out by some epidemic – and the centre begins to resemble an abandoned movie set with empty streets and parks, bolted shutters on summer homes, and a beach bereft of any life gradually being

overtaken by a layer of ice.

This street takes you to the centre of Hokhmah and passes through the old Exposition Park, often just called the Expo. A pretty path. Chestnut-lined streets, stone fountains, an old bandstand. The pre-war architects knew what they were doing. Nowadays the Expo is quiet and peaceful, but when I was a child, we weren't allowed to come here even in broad daylight. The Expo was one of the most dangerous spots in the whole neighbourhood. During the wild part of the nineties the territories of several criminal gangs intersected here, but over there, by the gates of the park, that Soviet-era brick building with the collapsed roof was once the location of an infamous nightclub called "Halo". Men with shaved heads wearing tracksuits would resolve their differences in its car park. For some reason their differences couldn't simply end in mutual agreement. Every few nights they would have to be resolved again and that resolution could be heard echoing across the tops of the pine trees kilometres away. The acoustics of the seashore are unusual in this respect. In the first few years of independence, even the tiniest bang from a revolver would cause the windows of all the surrounding houses and apartments to brighten one after another like Christmas lights. But in time the residents of Hokhmah became used to these sounds of freedom and stopped paying any attention to them. It was only the bravest boys who would be down in the car park next to "Halo" the following morning collecting the scattered bullet casings, which were generally used at school in place of money.

And this is Acacia Square. The centremost of all city centres. In history class we learned that in 1778, before there was anything here except forest and sand dunes, the founder of Hokhmah, Theobald von Hertzberg – a committed freemason and Kabbalist –

hammered a stake into the ground and decreed that the town's streets would be planned geometrically around it. There is a story that, surprisingly enough, the baron's historic stake (yes, that's really what it's called) stood in that same place for many years and at some point even began to bloom. I don't think that's actually true, but photographs from the archives of the Museum of Local History show that in the 1920s and 1930s, despite the unstoppable boom in the construction of summer homes and health spas, there was no monument, sundial, or any other structure characteristic of a town centre, just a round patch of grass – unkempt except for a stand of acacias – with a wooden rod of varying size always at its centre.

The acacias were chopped down during the Soviet years, the round patch was paved over with asphalt, and in its centre, as was the custom, a stone Lenin was erected. But just a brief 50 years later, the entire town stood together in Acacia Square to witness him being removed from his pedestal. I remember it being a pleasant, sunny day and I was wearing, just like all the other children, a ribbon adorned with folk designs. There was conversation, laughter, and people weren't hiding the port and spirits they'd brought along with them from home. There probably was music. Everyone was happy, and so was I, even though I didn't really understand what this smirking little man had done to deserve this fate, but I still felt that something new and important was happening at that moment, and that I was a witness to that event.

My dad had a childhood friend, a history teacher, named Horatio<sup>1</sup>, who said that

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<sup>1</sup> His full name was Horatio Pļeščevskis, an old style dissident, an intellectual and gentleman who read a great deal, always wore white trousers, smoked cigarettes resting in an ivory cigarette holder, and cleaned the lenses of his glasses using his fingers.

new eras always come with new symbols, and that day I saw the symbol of this new life and freedom in all its glory. A crane drove up along with a truck holding a wooden crate. There were no final words. They just put a rope around Lenin's neck, attached it to the crane, and began to lift him up into the air. His giant stone feet ripped loose from the pedestal to the sound of jubilant shouts and applause. Lenin rocked back and forth from the massive hangman's noose as he held out his hand in eternal greeting or, perhaps, frozen in place due to rigor mortis. The engines roared and Acacia Square appeared naked and empty without its longstanding central resident. But the symbol of the new era – the new master of the square – was already right there waiting in the wings.

He was grey-haired, dark-skinned, elegantly attired, and incredibly large – a poster featuring His portrait covered the entire exterior wall of the Hotel Acacia. His head was at least one and a half times the size of Lenin's whose stiff body was hanging helplessly right in front of Him like a worm on a fishing hook. Next to Him were the words "Uncle Ben's" spelled out in blue letters on an orange background, but below them in smaller print: "Perfect every time!" While I was standing there staring at the pleasing contours of Uncle Ben's face, the noose around Lenin's neck tightened too much and took his head clean off his shoulders with an impressive crack. It came to rest on some poor woman's leg and broke in half. The woman was shrieking at the top of her lungs: "Help! A compound fracture!" People rushed over to comfort her. Lenin's torso, meanwhile, slammed into the cab of the truck crushing it like a tin can. His hand had separated from his shoulder and was spinning wildly as it came straight toward us though seemingly lifted in a farewell wave. The screaming crowd parted and mom pulled me to the side, there was panic and Lenin shards

of various sizes all around us, but old Ben in his bow-tie and white shirt looked on at all of it from an unassailable height with such a smug grin that it was more than clear to both me and him who was now in charge of the town.

When Horatio spoke about symbols for a new era, he was probably thinking about national, ideological things – flags, coats-of-arms, poems, anthems, and also certain moments, which overflowed with inspiration, when members of a society – whether figuratively or literally – join hands in the name of some higher purpose, ready to sacrifice their lives and blood at any moment for a collectively cherished way of life. The most sensitive idealists and angriest dissidents of Horatio's generation had seen these symbols in their full splendour. But as children, from our down-to-earth perspective this new life was adorned with completely different decorations. Our days were centred around the fights in the Expo outside of the "Halo", shots ringing out in the middle of the night, self-confident youths in Bimmers and Benzes, textbooks with colourful pictures, Steven Tyler who "could stay awake just to hear you breathing", the TV show "Saved by the Bell", and, of course, the forceful and unstoppable torrent of commercials and ads on TV, in newspapers, magazines, on the street, in stores, and at kiosks:

*Enjoy Coca Cola!*

*Snickers. Hungry? Why wait?!*

*Wagon wheels — and you're a winner<sup>2</sup>.*

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<sup>2</sup> There was a boy named Māris who lived in our neighbourhood, who once bought a Milky Way candy bar, secretly borrowed his father's VHS camera, and convinced me to film him at the beach standing up to his knees in the water wearing nothing but his swimming trunks, eating chocolate bars, and dancing in the sunset. When I cautiously asked him why he was doing all of that, he answered: "Because that's real life!" Back then that seemed strange and a little suspicious, but now I can see that in a sense Māris had really tapped into the zeitgeist of our time.