

Biography: Roalds Dobrovenskis (Russian: Роальд Григорьевич Добровенский, born in 1936) is a Russian writer, translator, journalist and an honorary member of the Latvian Academy of Sciences since 2002. From 1954 until 1955 he studied at the Moscow Conservatory, and in 1975 graduated from Advanced Literary Courses in Moscow and started working as a journalist. Since 1975 Dobrovenskis has been living in Latvia and working as an editor, editor in chief and writer. Dobrovenskis is a member of the Writers' Union both in Russian and Latvia, and translates prose and poetry.

Synopsis: The Seven Lives of A Poet is more than just a melodramatic literary device. The life of Rainis, Latvia's preeminent poet, dramatist, statesman and thinker evolved in such a way that on numerous occasions his literary and political work brought him to the brink of almost total collapse, after which he was forced time and time again to start his life over. There was no need for him to wait for or invent complexities in his life – it was as if the plot for a story of epic proportions was laid out right before him. It was a case where fact was indeed stranger than fiction. The focus of the novel rests on the lives of people who had a profound influence on the 20th century, as the reader is taken up in a whirlwind of dramatic events that changed the course of history.

Excerpt

He spent eight semesters in St Petersburg, separated by seven recess periods. Initially, he diligently attended lectures given by both his own professors and those of others. The halls where Mendeleev and Korkunov, or indeed Behterev, lectured their subjects thronged with students from all faculties and courses; whereas the students attending professor Vreden's lectures could be counted on the fingers of one hand, and even those who were present sat

there yawning and grinning at each other. During his first year he would recount in great detail, both to his relatives and to himself, exactly how he filled his days. "I must study the very origins of law; the form it takes, why, where, for whom, from whence, where it starts and where it ends. Not merely as a diversion or pastime, but rather to gain an understanding of the essence of law; enabling me at a later date to pass a suitable sentence on every occasion, even in the absence of any reference to a similar case in the legislation, allowing me to ascertain whether the law in itself is fair and to draft a new, improved law in its place ... And so on and so forth; a whole host of fascinating issues I hadn't previously anticipated. It would appear that the further I go, the wiser I will have to become, because God and the devil alone have a grasp of what us lawyers are taught. The legal systems and national economies of ancient Rome and old Russia (which will provide a great topic of conversation for my dear father and I at Christmas, he will love it!), philosophy, statistics, criminal and financial courts of law and so on ... And when you have crammed it all in your head and digested the lot in your stomach, you can become whatever you want, be that an advocate or professor, clerk, politician or diplomat..."

He wrote taking pains to make these concepts clear for his mother, too, who was not so strong when it came to abstract issues. She needed the subject of their conversations to be something she could hold or touch. She knew hundreds of folk songs, but they all dealt with topics you could feel, or at least almost feel, with your hands.

He was an industrious student for the first three semesters, gradually becoming less so, however. Gatherings, endless impassioned debates *à la Russe*, books, the paintings of

Makovsky, Kramskoy, Repin, the Hermitage, the German theatre, ever increasing numbers

Published by Jumava, 1999

More information: info@latvianliterature.lv

of parties where there was always more cheap drink than cheap food - it all distracted him from his university studies, and again he blamed himself for being idle. But it was all work – Latgallian and Latvian books in the library, English and Sanskrit, Indian philosophy and the "Boris Godunov" translation, haughty streetwalkers in whose eyes it was so humiliating to appear ridiculous, which was exactly why they were haughty; because you were an anxious beginner and afraid.

One day, in his first summer as a student – July, 1885 – while at the Jasmuiža estate, he took up his long abandoned diary once more. "I am despairing over my weariness and idleness and still can't settle down to work. I've spent too long hoping that some friend or other will pull me out of it, give me purpose, inject some energy into me, make me happy. Bernhard is of the opinion that I am what is referred to as "lost". Stuchka, with whom I have formed a close friendship, is himself too weak; I can't get to the heart of the matter with him, he isn't earnest enough for it. My sister, in whom I had placed my fondest hopes, vowing to befriend her - also nonsense - is nothing but an old maid; at times a romantic, full of hot air, making too many promises, yet in actual fact, she is not sufficiently earnest either. Leo – kind, honest, but undereducated – he will understand none of it ... One night, the thought crossed my mind (and incidentally, I was quite taken aback that I wasn't surprised by it) that I might go mad, be driven to insanity by my melancholy. Wouldn't that be the best solution to this quandary?

Eternal friendship. He had formed a bond of eternal friendship with Pyotr Stuchka

(Pēteris Stučka), who was both "not earnest enough" and "weak". Oh, but how earnest he would become – and quite soon at that – this friend of his! How strong - in his own way – and steadfast. And the eternal nature of that bond, tossed in almost carelessly, would get itself noticed. The word was not sparrow-like; it exerted its own force which seized and marked you out, repeating as if hypnotised: eternal friendship.

It was that same summer when Stuchka visited the Jasmuiža estate for the first time. Janis had wanted to bring him home for Christmas, but hadn't succeeded in doing so. Now, however, Stuchka had agreed to stop by at his friend's place on his way home to Koknese and finally meet his folks, who had spent the previous four years hearing so much about him.

From the memoirs of Dora, Rainis' sister:

"Following my brother's invitation, he spent a few days at my parents' place. With his cordial, authentic, cheerful, unassuming nature and his upright, noble character, endowed with endless good humour, he conquered both my family's heart and temper. My father, mother and eldest sister all admired him. His temperament was possessed of a certain charm, an element of attraction that Russians refer to as "*obajanije*", or charisma. I got to know him a year later, in 1886, and I had no reason to detract from the general warm attitude towards Stuchka and, indeed, to join in with choir of eulogies about him."

... Earlier, he had nourished hopes not only for friendship – but also for love, passion. "My

churning sense of doubt and despair was caused by the motherland, by virtue, freedom, the whole world and myself as well ... I worked but made no progress, I lacked the strength. My mind grasped the situation but my heart wasn't in it. And I was longing for love, hoping that some goddess would emerge for me too, filling me with purpose and force, and faith, all things new and fulfilling which would satiate the old emptiness."

"I need a lot of love," he would write a decade later to a woman willing to listen to him. He needed a lot of love and a lot of friendship, too; the demanding love of his father and the great, doting love of his mother, the childish admiration of Dora, the self-sacrificing attachment of Lizzy, the benevolent trust of Leluk and now, also Stuchka's promised eternal friendship – it was all greedily accepted, absorbed and then lost without a trace. His soul forever asking for more, expecting more and more; maybe the love of the Creator of heaven and earth would have quenched his thirst, but he had resolved not to believe in Him.

We know a lot and yet also strangely little about him. After reading "Anna Karenina", he writes "Happy families are all happy in the same way, unhappy ones are all unhappy in different ways. It is said that we must live for the day; by abandoning ourselves thus, all our most knotty problems resolve themselves. Then the day comes that the knot is undone along with some of the things we are either too lazy to solve or are incapable of solving. Thus, 85 years hence, I would still be unable to get any closer to the matter arising that Christmas; back then I didn't think I could live with it, that I would become a complete and utter sop - but now I just get on with living, still hoping never to turn into a sop. The masses live exactly like this, day by day. Thousands of people carry on, living their lives, without ever taking control of their actions or using their heads. Not the life of great minds but a

generic life, conditioned by shared time and pure chance. Man doesn't make the effort to reason, even just for one day, as to what to do on any particular occasion in order to achieve a certain outcome, which direction his life should take to obtain something or the other and to attain happiness." Janis writes about the same people again in another instance: "They live an instinctive life, the life of nature. They don't strive to get ahead of time and neither do they lag behind it, *they are time itself.*"

What occurred during those Christmas holidays on the Jasmuiža estate? What question did the young man find himself facing so intensely that he came to depend upon it - how to continue living and whether indeed it was worth living at all if he was to become a *trjapka* – a complete and utter sop (here, he uses the Russian word but written using Latin letters, creating an even more caustic effect). What could it have been? We have no indication. It was only many years later that "the second" crisis on the Jasmuiža estate is mentioned in the diary.

Meanwhile, the atmosphere around them in St Petersburg had grown so suffocating that it was almost impossible to breathe. Something was afoot. It was as if an already taught, invisible cord was being pulled forever tighter around the entire city and even places further away - in the hopeless vastness. Just how tight can a cord be pulled, and what physical matter can withstand such incredible tension? The cord was about to give way, tear asunder and wipe out half a kingdom.

On March 1, 1887, following the first (and obviously failed) attempt on the life of Emperor

Alexander III, those who either wittingly or unwittingly had come into the environs surrounding the conspiracy organisers felt a certain sense of relief, having been near the organiser's feverishness and pre-death mood. Was it really all down to the perseverance of St Petersburg student, Alexander Ulyanov, and his fellow students? Had they truly been led with such fatal relentlessness towards that day by their own volition? Prior to the first assassination in March 1881, some may have believed that this was the right path towards improving Russia's destiny; and yet the subjugation and oppression that followed, the fear that spread from top to bottom, left to right - poisoned the very air itself in the capital. Did the populace not realise that all the oppression, persecution and pogroms carried out by both state and people had not resulted in any increase in their degree of freedom, nor their level of happiness? As could be said a century later, arranged with the relentlessness of programmed robots and the manic doggedness –zombies set for a certain date by a certain force – the *narodovolzi* marched towards the next murder even if it wasn't the Tsar himself to be assassinated but rather the destruction of their few frail hopes and prospects.

The boys of the Russian revolution! Incorruptible and blinkered, enslaved to a cruel objective; crystal clear and poisoned by their incorrigible sense of justice! Oh yes, you sacrificed yourselves, but you sacrificed others too with equal determination. For a hundred years, you have been listed as Russia's national heroes, roads named after you, your names visible on street signs as your successors – the KGB - steely men in groups of ten drove to arrest near-sighted professors in homely slippers. The cruel hangmen with the sweet milk of their mothers not yet dry on their lips; excited, there entirely voluntarily. The trouble being that you truly considered the hangman's task a heroic act and oh, how sincerely you

confessed your hatred, so passionately and with your whole heart, just as love should be professed, with courage and a heart in trepidation. Go in peace. Eternal godless youths, stop standing like bronze elks in museums, stop aching like a splinter in the collective memory, still visible in the names of squares - depart from your miserable, false, boring, atheist immortality and finally die. We will not remind you of the hostages you chased around the world, of children with torn hands and legs, of warped women raped in the name of current ideas, by all accounts righteous and fair. Those are our problems. Let go, you are free to go, boys. "Finally free".

St Petersburg, March 26, 1887

My dear relatives! Thank God, we meet again, "all the unrest is finally over"; let us greet each other once more so that we might talk and chat again. The commotion at university has all settled down now, no one speaks of it anymore. Many of our students were involved; it is said that around two or even three hundred have been taken into custody. The first few days there was a lot of talk at the university, and many proclamations were made, but it all quickly came to an end; there were so many eyes on us again. When the Dean gave a whining speech there were many whistles and shouts of disagreement against a sermon such as his, however, towards the end, the majority applauded him and afterwards the Dean was actually carried out above our heads. Although now they're all saying that foreigners are to blame and our lot have all just been taken in ...To hell with the lot of them!

Please let my dear little one know that Pushkin is available at the price of 1 rouble and 50 kopeks. She might read Danilevsky, too; he is one of those writers who writes a lot, churning out nothing but historical novels one after another, and I can't guarantee it wouldn't be boring. To tell the truth, he is rubbish. But if you have nothing else to read, go ahead and read it. Better still, read Turgenev's "Fathers and Sons". This novel is better than "Virgin Soil" - the characters are stronger and more colourful, the plot itself better laid out. Best of all, read Tolstoy, Goncharov, Pushkin and Gogol.

He describes events linked with the assassination attempt of March 1 as if they were of no direct concern to him. But they did concern him. At least, the police were of that opinion. From an extract of the Police Department report on Kronid Malinovsky, "whose political views are dubious", it was stated that "His acquaintances include students from St Petersburg University: Pyotrs Timofejev Zorin, Alexander Iljin Uljanov, Semjon Vasiljev Listov, Leonid Ivanov Sarichev, Pyotr Ivanov Stuchka, Ivan Kristoforov Pliexshan (Jānis Pliexšāns - Rainis) and Ivan Georgijev Viddin."

The Vidin brothers (Vidding – their surname spelt in the most ridiculous of ways) were Pliexshan and Stuchka's namesakes, indeed the two Janises and two Peterises would often meet. Janis always sat between the two Peterises and Peteris between the two Janises. They used to say it was for good luck, although there was probably no truth in that since, in March, students Kronid Malinovskis and Ivan Viddin were expelled from university. A list was found naming 179 students - "in connection with whom the Police Department was interested in clarifying the level of political trustworthiness." Under number 106 the surname "Pliexshan" is listed, under number 142 – "Stuchka". Dora had, by chance, found

out that a letter sent by Janis to a mutual acquaintance of theirs, a young officer in Dvinsk, had been torn open. A concerned Janis requested Dora to inform him promptly should she ever notice anything similar in the future.

Like all other students, Pliekshan and Stuchka gave a written promise not to take part in any secret associations and groups and it would appear that they did indeed refrain from doing so. They did however take part in a cultural association of Latvian students, to whom Janis spoke about Donelaitis and read the translation of excerpts of his poems out loud (wasn't Anton Dirikis hiccupping at that moment. It was him that introduced Janis and Donelaitis). A year later, in 1888, Andrey Dirikis died in Caucasus from tuberculosis. Stuchka and Pliekshan were also accepted into a Latvian charity organization. This was not prohibited, either. Nevertheless, the two friends were aware of oppressive, observant looks following their every move: they are not allowed out of sight, who knows who, who sends what information where concerning every word uttered, every gesture of a hand raised to the temple and then lowered. Should they clasp their hand into a fist and show it to an empty space?

The university administrators want to get rid of senior students; it is thought that they will be made to graduate six months earlier than they should. "God willing," Janis writes home. "I have no desire to stay here, it is all becoming increasingly soldierly, our professors becoming ruder by the day, we are even made to stand to answer during exams!"

What uncouth behaviour, what arbitrariness. They ask students to stand while answering during examinations! Hmm, shouldn't one stop to think it over. Considering other, later

forms of arbitrariness... Hmm ...

Alexander Ulyanov, a twenty-one year old student, was executed on May 8, 1887, hanged at Shlisselburg Fortress.

Janis was actually quite close to the place when it happened. He imagined himself in Ulyanov's place: imagined the hangman strapping the collar around his neck with the cruelty demanded by the circumstances, being dragged up by a hook at his neck, his neck cartilage cracking in the process of breaking, his body falling under its own weight into the precipice. "The precipice ... being about two feet from the ground ..." What a God-given yet damned trait – this vivid imagination of his. He was able to picture certain things so graphically that they actually overshadowed reality; surrounding events and subjects faded into the background, sank into the shadows, he saw the invisible but ceased to see the visible ... And what could Ulyanov's parents possibly be feeling, if they are alive? And, if he had them, how must his brothers and sisters feel?

Really, how on earth did *they* feel? How did Vladimir Ulyanov (who had just turned 17) feel? And his mother? (His father had died in 1886). His eldest sister, Anna, at 23 years of age? His brother, Dmitry, aged 12? Nine year-old Masha? Over the following days and weeks, neighbours avoided the Ulyanovs like the plague. From her husband's memoirs, Nadezda Krupskaya tells how "Even the elderly school teacher who always used to drop in on them for a game of chess in the evenings stopped going." There was no railway line from Simbirsk at that time, so Vladimir Ilyich's mother had to take a horse and carriage to Sizran in order

to get to St Petersburg where her son was being held. Vladimir was requested to find a travelling companion, but nobody wanted to travel with the mother of a prisoner. Well, her son was no longer held in St Petersburg.

But now, let us turn our attention instead to Vladimir whilst in St Petersburg. In the eyes of the whole world, the young lad from Simbirsk was totally overshadowed by later events. Was he afraid? Did he feel hatred? Did he swear to take revenge? Was he frightened of being kicked out of his lyceum before completing his studies? Did he try to console his mother? Eat? Refuse food? Sleep? Or was he unable to sleep? What if it had been precisely those days and nights in May, 1887, that determined the fates of millions alive then as well as those yet to be born; what if the measure of "revolutionary fervour" and cruelty which would later characterize Ulyanov-Lenin, thirty to thirty-five years later, had formed within the lyceum student, Volodya Ulyanov, right there and then? Ever since Andrej Dirikis had given his lyceum students *Narodnaya Volya* ("People's Will") to read, Janis had known which side he was on. Pliekshan and Stuchka were not far removed from taking part in the assassination attempt. They were led to understand that they merely needed to express their wishes ... It could not be said that they failed to react in any way to this silent but undeniably explicit invitation. They thought about it, discussing the question late into the night, hesitating just a few steps from the fatal threshold and, even if they didn't cross it, they might as well have done so – and no-one more than them was aware of the fact.

Peteris wasn't afraid of the Tsar or his guards but he was afraid of his father; he was afraid for him but most of all for his mother, who had already lost her dear daughter - if something happened to him now, she would never get over it. Janis was afraid ... although he couldn't

decide exactly what it was that frightened him. He didn't recall ever feeling physical fear. Probably he would have made a good bare fist fighter: he wasn't afraid of pain of that sort, rather the mental anguish of the soul. His soul was tormented, twisted at that moment as if he himself had a hook around his neck; as if his very soul had a thin boyish neck just like that of Alexander Iljin Lenin, a student of twenty years, a close acquaintance of his acquaintances. No, Janis would not have been keen on dying just then, in that enormous and still, to him, foreign city. Since the age of fifteen, he has thought of death numerous times - in his mind's eye trying on its various guises, wishing for death more than once and, it seems, unafraid of the nothingness. The argument opposing these thoughts and the attraction of a truly voluntary departure was the impossibility of taking leave of life without first having achieved something. He had some kind of force inside him and it fought to break out. He knew neither how to let it out nor the nature of the force: what it actually was, where it was directed, how to use it. Quite possibly a man has the right to kill himself, but not to kill his child. This force inside him was a part of him - already a separate, living entity and he couldn't let it die - that would make of him a murderer. In some inexplicable, mysterious way, this force was bound to his language and nationality. In St Petersburg they used to refer to Latvians as *plemje*, namely a breed or stock. This constituted another reason not to get involved with the conspirators: the fact that the problems of foreigners were of no concern to them, all such trifles in comparison to their grand plans. What of the insignificant sorrows of Finns and Latvians? Why waste time considering the failures of separate provinces? They were about to upturn the whole of Russia, and then half the world, they were not to be importuned with such triviality! Despite not being said out loud,

it could nonetheless be sensed quite distinctly. And yet for Janis, a "triviality" like the plight of Latvians was worth half of heaven; the fate of his nation preoccupied him as sweetly as forbidden fruit, just as the mere mention of passionate love makes adolescents blush. Yes - love. He has not yet experienced love, and he would be a coward to depart from this world without ever touching upon this secret of secrets, awaiting under seven seals, under the cover of shame and the loss of shame, expecting you - you and no one else. Others will have other secrets but yours will die without you, ending without ever beginning. The things he learnt about love in St Petersburg where, for the most part, offensive both to him and to love itself; nobody could persuade him that love was the true object of his adolescent fantasies and dreams, the reason for the music that at times sounded louder than thousands of trumpets, trilling incredibly shrill tunes like a lark which had flown directly from paradise.

- Peteris, are you asleep?

- Uhu.

- You're not – Janis concluded – Do you think we have any schnapps left over?

Even if it is just the dregs?

- Look in the sideboard.

- Empty. Those bastards, as Vidin would have put it, have downed the lot. Shall I ask the landlady?

- At four o'clock in the morning? Are you out of your mind? She will ask us to move straight out in the morning.

- Oh, God! It isn't the first time!

- Exactly, it's not the first time.

So many rooms, so many digs have they already changed in St Petersburg. Janis has already lost count. His relatives, too, as well as Stuchka's. Letters have got lost more than once. Dora and Lize wrote to Sjezzenkas Street, but there was no longer any sign of the students there. "They have moved from Sjezzenkas Sreet, *sjejali!*", they explained good naturedly to the postman with a helpless shrug. At the beginning, they changed rooms because they were not happy with the landlords. Now, more often than not, they moved because the landlords were not happy with them. Two scrawny foreigners making too much noise, having too many visitors or else going out visiting themselves only to return in the early hours, waking up the whole house. Who wants tenants like that? Granted, they paid on time, but the rent wasn't enough to want to put up with them for too long.

A playful mention of beer often already crops up in Pliekshan's letters when still a young lyceum student. We come across beer, innocent beer, in his first letters from St Petersburg, too. But by October, 1884, a new word appears - schnapps. "We are taking turns with shopping; Stuchka has better luck buying bread, but I'm better at buying sugar, schnapps and especially candles (in this case, the shopkeeper always gives me a discount - I

have no idea why he holds me in such high regard)." Even his youngest sister is given an account of strong spirits – almost in passing and with a humorous tone. It is as if Janis himself no longer has time for humour. Compared to Peteris, he can't hold his drink: he doesn't know his limits, beyond which he is no longer himself. He becomes unpredictable in what he says, tricks he may play when he goes too far, and later he suffers for it. Stuchka drinks and certainly doesn't lag behind but he is much stronger, his nerves intact, he always knows and remembers what he may or may not have said. The only thing he doesn't have complete control over is his stomach, but maybe the poor quality food he consumes is to blame for that. They are already on the fourth woman they go to for a cooked lunch.

Janis is fighting against unforeseen danger, but it's long before March, 1887; before the gallows of Shlisselburg, after letters have been torn open, after oppressive looks that can't be shaken off even after returning home - he appears to have given up.

The private tutor going by the wonderful surname of Voltaire, about ten years older than Rainis, bearded, with a high forehead, is keeping a friendly eye on the young man. They are as good friends as is possible, considering the age gap. They first met in the library of the Academy of Sciences, where Edward Voltaire worked: he was curious as to who the young chap requesting such numerous editions in Latgallian dialect might be. Then he saw him. A Latvian student, skinny, pale – possibly due to poor health, possibly due to the air of St Petersburg and poor nutrition. Like him, Rainis also had a high forehead and, in the future, was also to have a beard. The young man was poring over Latgallian books, searching for the ancient origins, roots and hidden treasures of his language. The Latgallian land, its lakes and forests, were practically untouched, not ground away by the jaws of civilization; pure,

almost like "the Amazon rainforest". Folksongs and local traditions had also been preserved there, left untouched thanks to the fact that the area "lagged behind" - Voltaire inflicted this careless paradox, adding it like a seal. "Thanks to a certain degree of isolation, Latgale (Latgallia) is administratively, but partly also historically, separated from Vidzeme and Kurzeme (Courland), you know how it was." "The reserve effect," Voltaire corrects himself, "displaying both the good and bad traits characteristic of a reserve." Their conversations became ever longer, the topics wider and more diverse. Voltaire studied Lithuanian and Latvian folklore, primarily the peoples residing in Lithuania and the province of Vitebsk, which fell within the Latgalian compartment, and meeting Pliekshan was a gift sent from heaven for him. Janis would sing him the folksongs he remembered his mother singing in his childhood. "Write them down!" the private tutor urged him. "Waste no time! In our country, too, Lithuania, folklorists failed to do so when they could - the past is not spared in the new life, even language changes under the influence of new currents. The old songs, fairytales, traditions – they all go away, every day strips them of something, like a river it corrodes and swallows the layers of the sandy river banks. You Latvians have no time to waste."

The student grasped what was being said to him from the first. He was sure of himself to an extreme yet also extremely unsure, nervous, blue eyed. He appeared to promise far more talent than anything he had so far displayed: the extraordinary nature of his personality could be felt at every step despite not having borne any real fruit as yet. His smile was convincing, so too his eyes with their ironic wink and the look in them – from time to time, his conversation partners would detect a kind of eternal light source therein, they

were literally burning with "inspiration". The language was rich in unexpected comparisons, changes in direction which, against all logic, somehow led to exactly the desired place, whereas more usual logic would have taken a far more circuitous route. An animated young man - a kind of young Schiller or, perhaps, a Holderlin. No one knew what he would make of himself, but to Voltaire he was interesting back then, not because of things to come. Latvians are fortunate that he is not the only one of his kind. Nevertheless, the young scholar is worried of late about Janis Pliekshan.

- I am sorry, Ivan Kristoforovich, - he once said, embarrassed, almost panicking from what couldn't be left unsaid. – I know the atmosphere we are living under ... what can be said about that: we are living in the same city, walking along the same corridors. But, to my mind, your response and the response of your generation is not adequate. Maybe I have no right to interfere...
- Why not, speak your mind, - his conversation partner remarks wearily, without looking him in the eye.
- I will not remind you of your abilities, you know I value you highly. But, our memory, our brain is a fine, fine mechanism. It takes a rare person to understand just how fragile this balance is... Oh, I am not using the right words here - you surely know all this already. Don't drink, Janis. Don't waste your time as a hussar being a drunk. Leave that to those who don't look for the origins of their language in Sanskrit. Oh, God, I've always hated others lecturing me, and here I am now ...

The young man continued to keep quiet, not even trying to help his older mentor out. The

Lithuanian desperately finished:

- I am not talking just about you... Will you really, all of you, let yourselves be broken? Will bucket loads of spirits and epidemics of the clap be the only contribution of your generation to the development of your culture? Is this really your choice – more absurdity in response to the absurdity of life today?

Finally, his interlocutor glanced at him, his blue eyes darkening, almost becoming black.

- Not an adequate response, you say, Edward Alexandrovich? I beg your pardon, but are you aware of another, more adequate one?
- I know, - the private tutor said. – And you will get there too, one day. But I am sorry. I really had no right ... I really value our cooperation...our friendly relationship.

Oh, this delicate, extremely delicate point! How we love those that lie before the Pantheon of any motherland. How much we have always loved them; gradually stripping, adjusting and rounding them up. Torturing generations of schoolchildren with the unbearable perfection of writers and heroes, smothering them in thick red and white make-up. No matter. Schoolchildren will laugh at our zeal, adding a moustache to the clean-shaven faces and making horny, tailed devil of the bearded ones. Disrespect - a talent in itself, has a way of making the truth re-appear.

Come, boy, you who serve out the old Falernian,

Fill up stronger cups for me,

As the law of Postumia, mistress of revels, ordains,

Postumia more tipsy than the tipsy grape.

But water, be gone, away with you, water,

Destruction of wine, and take up abode

With scrupulous folk. This is the pure Thyonian god.^[9]

These lines of Catullus, translated into Latvian by Janis Pliekshan, were learnt by heart by members of the students' group and young Latvian artists, as well as all his Latvian-speaking acquaintances. Janis translated extensively – from Latin, English, German, Russian and Lithuanian. He dreamed about rendering the poetry of the entire world in his native

language one day. But it was precisely the above lines about Falernian wine which found resonance amongst the most grateful of listeners and sometimes a whole group of them, about fifteen people, would exclaim in unison -

Bacchus is our favourite god!

Taken from his diary. "Do I really belong with these...these hussars? Everything possible belongs to them, only not that which I carry inside. One must be an aristocrat, at least a real man who knows how to live in the world; most importantly having an acute mind as well as originality, genius. Without wit or genius there is no life for a freshman; he is no Vern, no Rodin - what is to add. Beastly drinking, a mind lost in drink is a humiliation to yourself, there is no fun in it. No, it's a silly, dull business that ruins your health. It is not merely the simple, careless distraction of youth, but a conscious abomination and abasement, at best the idiotic mimicking of others."

Ten years later. The draft of an autobiographical novel ...

"A description of my whole life. Three major parts, three scenes. Life, death and resurrection, or a new maturity in a couple.

These three parts could be extended to five.

1. Life - subconscious (also a prelude that describes the environment, times, perhaps also a certain place, the character of the nation, parents and their beliefs. It would explain the grounds of everything).

2. Life – conscious; here one should go through the national ideas. The religious issues. Literature – the classics: Homer, Horatio, Catullus, Tibullus, Alkinoj, Sappho, Sophocles, Aristophanes, Lucian. Literature – more recent classics: Goethe – "Faust", Byron - "Cain" and "Manfred", Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy - "Jevgenij Onjegin", Lermontov, poems, Nekrasov. To bind it all together, take from all nations. My project for Latvian translation, a selection of poetry, then Mark Twain, Dickens – our Bible, then satire as a weapon. A gradual anti-climax, weariness, the beginning of the end.
3. Dying – despair, cavorting with drink and women, weakness and repulsion. A new cry of despair, no work, inability to work. Sinking into oneself and reclusion. Glorifying oneself in front of others and destroying oneself when alone."

A few years later, he returns to these plans. "I am reading to the students... Drinking scenes. For the first time, out of boredom, a sexual love ... All just fantasies, our hero is otherwise very shy. Shy, despite having been through all the vulgar staff. The same little bird longing for the crumbs of love. "

Aspasia is already in another century; in her years twilight she has published a novel – "Autumn Nightingale". She features as one of the main characters - Arta, along with a young Rainis who takes the name of Jarmut Armin, his sister Dora (Thea), Jan Janon (Jean

Anson) and Peteris Stuchka (Stanka). As a novelist and memoir writer, Aspasia is too subjective and, when getting to know the heroes created by the energetic strokes of her pen, readers would also do well to take her temper into account, as well as the strength of her likes and dislikes which essentially kept Aspasia under their sway. Despite this, as mentioned previously, her memory is sharp and on many occasions her testimonials are believable and give no rise to objections.

In the novel, Jarmut confides to the talented actress, Arta: "I studied law and, at the same time, also carried out research in linguistics, in which I was actually more interested, particularly the folklore. I worked with a Lithuanian professor and we dug through all the libraries of St Petersburg. There were moments of despair when we thought that we had gained nothing. Then I started to succumb to drinking. Along with fellow students Stanka, Sirmais, Vidin and others besides, we all drank and behaved scandalously and were threatened with being expelled from university. I remember once, after drinking pure spirits, I was later told that I had crashed to the ground unconscious with spirit fumes evaporating from my mouth..."

"So, you too, Jarmut want to join the list of drunkards who have already caused me so much pain!"

"Ah, no! It was but a short period in my life. Exams were approaching. I had to catch up all I had missed in the space of just three weeks. I studied fifteen hours a day and I made it."

"I heard you were also awarded a candidate's degree."

"It's of no importance," Armin replied. "I just wanted to say that you should cross me off your list of drunks as I haven't had a drop since then ... I had other desires by then developing in my breast, although I didn't dare let them out. Maybe they had something in common with the music which hounded Socrates day and night, never mind the fact that he didn't know the first thing about music ..."

All that is left to compare are these separate references; the lines from a novel against the very specific prose style of police records. These notes have been preserved in Ivan Vidin's personal file in the archives of the University of St Petersburg.

"To the curator of the Academic District of St Petersburg,

The head of the first district of the Island of Vasilij has forwarded to me a copy of police records regarding a brawl in house number 39, Great Nevsky Embankment and Kadets byway, which occurred on September 17, perpetrated by inebriated fifth year students from the Law Faculty of the University of St Petersburg: Ivan Pliekshan, Pyotr Viding, Pyotr Stuchka and fifth year student from the Faculty of History and Theology: Ivan Viding. Leaving the above to the disciplinary competence of Your Excellency, I have the honour to add that Ivan Pliekshan, Pyotr Stuchka and Ivan Viding are in receipt of Imperial scholarships and reside in the College of Alexander II.

Students' Inspector,

M.F.Civilkov."

Civilkov also sent a copy of the records to "His Excellency, the Dean of the University of St Petersburg."

The protocol stated:

" At 9 o'clock in the evening, September 17, 1886, at N.39, Great Neva Embankment , reserve soldier, Alexander Mihailov Slobodskoj of the Second Military Telegraph Regiment brought the following students of the Imperial University of St Petersburg in to the District Department office: 1.____Ivan Hristoforov Pliekshan, 2.____Ivan Viding, 3.____Pyotr Ivanovich Stuchka, 4.____Pyotr Viding, and reported that, while visiting student Pyotr Viding, they had become inebriated and begun to behave raucously in the residence stated above. When Slobodskoj requested that they stopped their rowdy behaviour they assaulted him, hitting him several times over the head whilst ignoring repeated requests to cease their noisy behaviour. They continued misbehaving thus, resulting in Sloboskoj turning to the police for help; namely *gorodovoj*, or police officer Dobrovolsky. Upon Officer Dobrovolsky's arrival, along with that of janitors from residence N. 39; Stepan Lushin, Fjodor Afanasjev, Leontij Larin, and the janitor from the residence in the the 9th row, N.41, Andrej Bonajev, the perpetrators were transferred to the offices of the District Department. *Gorodovoj*

Dobrovolsky stated that, upon answering a call from the house administrator, he had arrived at the venue where he had been assaulted by the students and stripped of his police insignia, specifying that student Ivan Pliekshan had hit him twice. Janitor Bonajev stated that student Ivan Viding tore his waistcoat and shirt, and janitors Lushin, Afanasjev and Larin stated that they had been assaulted by all the above named students.

Further to these protocol records, it should also be noted that all these students were heard to shout in the building's yard and byway; "Get him, hit him, hurrah," and so on, physically assaulting the police officer, janitor and members of the public. The students' shouts and cries attracted more than three hundred bystanders. The scene was witnessed by nobleman Pyotr Arnoldovich Idelson, who resided in building 4, apartment 15, row 9. Pliekshan and Viding displayed inappropriate conduct when held in the police station. Ivan Viding purposefully broke a glass.

Guard of the Princev Subdivision."

Correspondence flowed: the Dean wrote to his superior, the Curator, the Curator then wrote to the City Head of St Petersburg, the City Head, or Lieutenant General, then replied to the Curator who in turn wrote to the Dean, and so on. The students were accused of a breach of the peace and of assaulting a police officer and the janitors; it all came to an end with the ruling of a magistrate. Pliekshan was sentenced to a month in custody, Pyotr Viding two weeks, Ivan Viding and Pyotr Stuchka a week. Furthermore, the District of Studies Curator decreed that three of the four students (all except Stuchka) were to be expelled from University.

It certainly wasn't customary to assault police officers, not in St Petersburg and not in Russia in general. It was apparently easier for terrorists to shoot general governors than to "offend" a *gorodovoj*. You could sneer at them, preferably from a safe distance, call them "pharaohs", consider them dull, lifeless tools operating in the hands of the state - but the insignia of the *gorodovoj* was akin to a "Do not Touch" sign. And no one did. Only the pick-pockets or prostitutes they picked up might have tried to move them, with their tears or in some other way but, generally, it was a rare occurrence that anyone got any sympathy out of a *gorodovoj*.

The fact that a student, and a Latvian at that, in the company of three fellow Latvians and with their encouragement, actually hit a *gorodovoj* twice was absolutely extraordinary. Seen as an act of rebellion, a month's imprisonment for the main culprit was clearly insufficient as punishment. In this instance – the University of St Petersburg was extremely lenient! What indulgent university heads and professors, what had they been thinking? Exactly to whom had they given shelter and granted Imperial scholarships!

However, the events could also be viewed from a different angle; namely, as a lot of nonsense. It was unthinkable that any adult in a sound state of mind would attack a *gorodovoj*. The underlying reason may have been that their group essentially belonged to a different nationality: foreigners almost. They obviously didn't realize what they were doing and, in their ignorance, perceived the fight initiated with the representatives of power simply as derring-do.

The first version of events carried a real risk of scandal. It would have implied that

the University continued to be a hotbed for rebels, enemies of law, order and the Tsar himself. All things considered, certain measures could have been taken ... although it does not bear thinking about what they might have been. Which is why University administrators did everything in their power to hush the whole thing up: putting it down to a misunderstanding, a silly jape. Of course, the boys had to be punished, even just for their ignorance – look, they've discovered where and when and with whom to mess around – but let's not make a fuss, no need to expel them but all evidence needs to be wiped out, making it impossible to find, no matter how hard one tries.

In this same file, another very interesting document is preserved; quoted only in part here due to lack of space. "If the guilty party had started the recent brawl in a public place the Department could have considered prosecuting them further, but the disorderly behaviour started in the apartment of their fellow student and could easily have been quietened if the students had not been dragged out onto the street to be escorted to the Department. Obviously, such humiliation, also in view of their inebriated state, could have provoked anger that then provoked a desperate act of resistance and total oblivion. According to the information gathered, the students in question have never been known to commit any other reprehensible acts, and their outstanding merit is proved by the fact that three of them have been granted Imperial scholarships ... as the saying goes, "the drunk sleeps through his madness, the fool - never." However, it is still to be verified whether the detained students are indeed drunkards. Should one not consider the sincere confession they made to the Dean, as reported in the police station, stating that their inebriated state was due to the fact that they had never touched alcohol before? Could it really have been

the first and only time in their lives? It is well known that many students don't dry out for the entire academic year, or even present themselves at University inebriated, and they all go unpunished. If we are to start chasing after such innocent, youthful pastimes, might we not stir up and provide good reason for political sensitivities through excessive of austerity? ... Among the student body we also count mendicants, flatterers and spies, even thieves of personal and state property, so should we be so shocked by four of them who, taking bread and salt to their fellow student, went on, misguidedly, to have a party? Therefore, in my view, the District Department should not only decrease the punishment served to them by the magistrate but also humbly recommend the Curator to lessen the most severe punishment that His Excellency has imposed on the three of them following the initial notification of the foursome's offense, almost as if it were a political crime. "

Signature: V.Vasiljev.

Pressure was applied to the City Head and the magistrate. As a result, Ivan Hristoforov Pliekshan was given ten rather than thirty days imprisonment, the Viding brothers paid a fine and Pyotr Ivanovich Stuchka got off with nothing.

This all took place five and a half months before the assassination attempt on Alexander III. If instead it had occurred not before but after March 1, 1887, the four students, beaten up by the same janitors or enraged crowd, would surely have been given hard labour or sent to the frontline. If that had been the case, the biographies of Janis Pliekshan, Peteris Stuchka and the others would have read entirely differently. Quite possibly also the recent history of both Latvia and the Latvian people.

Roalds Dobrovskis "Rainis un viņa brāļi" [Rainis and His Brothers]

Excerpt

Translated by Žanete Vēvere-Pasqualini