

Biography: Writer and journalist Arno Jundze (1965) was born in the Latvian town of Jaunpiebalga. He graduated from the Faculty of Education and has a PhD in philology. He has worked in Latvian television for over 10 years, directing various programs dedicated to culture and literature. Arno Jundze is an editor of the cultural news section for one of the biggest newspapers in Latvia, and helps in shaping the country's most important art and literary forums and outlets. He was a member of the council at the State Culture Capital Foundation and chairman of the board of its literature department from 2010-2012. Jundze has received numerous prizes for both his literary work and his work in television. He has also published several children's books.

Synopsis: The main character, Ronalds Bergs, returns at long last to his native Riga. His life to date has been spent firstly as a professional basketball player and then as bodyguard to a Russian oligarch; he was shot in the line of duty and is still recovering from his injury. It's high time for him to embark on a more peaceful life! In a department store, he runs into a former schoolmate. The two of them used to be inseparable and decide their chance encounter deserves a celebratory drink. Bergs learns that his old friend is now a professor and research scientist, working on an international, European project investigating old maps and researching ancient castle mounds and buildings.

Excerpt

March 14, 1945. The north tower of Wewelsburg Castle, the round cabinet office. Heinrich Himmler is smoking nervously. The expected outcome of the war is no longer a secret, although no one with any commonsense has, as yet, come forward to announce the terrible news publicly to Germany. Hitler, like a man possessed, still believes fervently in his miraculous weapon, whilst his ideological loudspeaker – namely the propaganda machine

headed by Joseph Goebbels – continues zealously to broadcast its silly fairy tale in an attempt to retain a semblance of combative spirit amongst the Germans. There will be no miraculous weapon, however. Factories producing enriched uranium are destroyed by bombing raids; the Vrilis, airborne wonder machines devised by the Schauburger brothers, are not made for warfare but are instead outlandish, completely useless devices. A suitable replacement for Otto Rahn has also failed to be found. Top-ranking Third Reich officials are desperately attempting to formulate some sort of strategic defence plan despite the fact that everyone, down to the last foolish Wehrmacht *oberleutnant*, knows the war is lost.

Adjutant General Wolff, faithful aide to the Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler, now also Minister of Internal Affairs and Deputy Chief of Staff, has been trying in vain on his superior's behalf for the past month to contact the Allied Forces in order to draw up a peace treaty and join forces against the greatest evil in twentieth century Europe – communism. That is Himmler's plan. But the West is taking a break - like a great actress, uncertain as to which suitor to take to bed. Himmler understands that the British and Americans need time to chew it over. However, time is no longer on the side of a war-torn Germany close to collapse. What is more, Western politicians would clearly have a hard time explaining to their electorate exactly why, suddenly, at the end of the war, such a rocade was necessary; joining forces with their former enemy to attack their erstwhile ally, one which had shouldered the brunt of the burden of war. Such a prolonged silence is not, therefore, a good sign.

With a heavy heart, Himmler has given orders to his adjutant, Heinz Macher, to make preparations to demolish Wewelsburg. It is his castle; his cherished temple, complete

with a cabinet office styled as King Arthur's round table, a Hall of the Holy Grail and ceremonial rooms for use by the chosen few. For now, detonation lines are being laid in utmost secrecy, but how long will they be able to keep it swept under the carpet? The secret section of the *Ahnenerbe* archive has been transferred elsewhere for safekeeping a long time ago; the SS Leadership School in the castle has practically ceased operating. Anyone capable of carrying a gun has been sent to the front. Thanks to his power and influence, Himmler has succeeded thus far in keeping all those involved in special operations under the castle roof. These operations have been long in the planning, their preparation taking years and quite impossible to halt at just a moment's notice; especially in view of the fact that all information pertaining to secret projects must be kept scrupulously under wraps. Under no circumstances must it get into the wrong hands. Himmler believes the organization he has created - following the blue print of the Jerusalem Knights Hospitallers and Teutonic Knights - will, at some point after the war, be reborn and assume a new form. He has made all necessary preparations to facilitate this; all the scholars have gone underground, deep in intrigue, huge sums of money have been deposited in untraceable bank accounts abroad, priceless collections of jewellery and property have been secreted away around the world.

The Reichsführer's stream of thought is interrupted by his secretary, Ludtke.

- Herr Reichsführer, Obersturmbannführer Siegfried Wurz is here to see you! He asks to be received.
- "Damn, hasn't he fallen at the front yet?" Himmler thinks to himself, saying out loud, "Tell him to come back in a quarter of an hour!"

The unsuccessful search for the Testimonial Ark is one of the greatest failings of Himmler's secret artefacts programme. Despite promising initial progress made by the *Ahnenerbe* Institute in the Thirties, it disappointingly all came to nothing. Staging Otto Rahn's suicide had been a mistake. They should have tortured him with electrodes, pushed needles under his nails, beaten him senseless, anything to make him speak and divulge all he knew! Hindsight is a wonderful thing, Himmler reflected bitterly. Back then, when the Second World War was yet to begin, he had decided otherwise. Who could have guessed that Otto Rahn would take them all for a ride, and so skilfully at that, even in his research notes! After a year and a half of painstaking work, Otto Rahn's diaries, when finally deciphered, revealed nothing but mumbo-jumbo. The mystic Karl Wiligut was of no use to them, either. His involuntary early retirement had only worsened his carefully hidden nervous disorder – Wiligut now being the only one other than his doctor able to withstand the rantings of his delirium: Reichsführer Himmler most certainly had no time for it.

The three replacements groomed to take Otto Rahn's place had failed to fulfil expectations. The brightest of them, Udo Hecht, had been hit by a random bullet during gunfire between the local police and Italian partisans in early 1943. Another, the over-eager idiot Baldur Moll, had got covered in shit like a baby, paying for information passed on to him by a cheating Jew in Jerusalem who, astutely, was working for the Russian secret service. A game of pure disinformation played by Stalin! When it all came out, Himmler personally gave the order for Moll to be eliminated on the quiet. To say nothing of that Siegfried who had initially been

allocated Scandinavia and the Baltic countries – a region offering few prospects of success. He was of no use at all!

Fifteen minutes later, the storm unit leader, Obersturmbannführer Siegfried Wurz is shown into Himmler's office and starts to greet the German Minister of Internal Affairs according to protocol, with full honours.

- Herr Reichsführer...
- Alright, slow down, Obersturmbannführer!– Himmler crushes Wurz's zealous dedication – We are not on military parade! Stop shouting and state your business!
- Herr Reichsführer! I am on the right track! I am not certain whether it is actually the track to the Ark itself or something else, very closely linked to it. If you only give the word, I am ready to rise to the challenge, I would give my life ...
- Hold your horses, Wurz! – Himmler says dryly, thinking to himself, "Where were you two years ago, Obersturmbannführer?"
- Herr Reichsführer! I have finally managed to crack Otto Rahn's notes! The key to this was the discovery that the most important section required the use of a double code, so the decoded text needed to be decoded a second time. Very clever! I have just discovered that he kept secret the location of both the Testimonial Ark itself and related artefacts. According to his notes it appears that, in the thirteenth century, these artefacts were divided between the three leading Orders: the Teutonics, the Maltese and the Templars. The artefacts were hidden in different places. One section of Rahn's notes, which I have deciphered by means of a special key of my own recent devising, provides indication on the hiding place where one of them is

kept. You will never believe it, Herr Reichsführer! It is Courland! All the time Rahn spent there was not in vain!

- Good work, Wurz! –a smile spread over Himmler's face. – Excellent! You are aware of what is happening on all fronts. I cannot simply assign you a special unit and all necessary accoutrements. We will proceed as follows – I shall expect you at eleven o'clock this evening, here in my office. We will look at it all together and decide where to take it from there.

As Obersturmbannführer Wurz, flying high on the wings of such praise, heads off to prepare the necessary paperwork, Heinrich Himmler calls for his adjutant.

- Ludtke, who is head of security this evening? – he inquires.
- Second squadron! Obersturmbannführer Pototsky!
- Tell Pototsky, when he starts his shift, to ready a stretcher. Shortly before midnight, he will need to bring two guards to my office to carry an officer's body down to the basement. You, Herr Ludtke will need to do me another favour. At twenty-three hundred hours, Obersturmbannführer Wurz is expected, with a report. Ensure that no one is loitering in the vicinity at that time. When I ask you to bring us some tea, you will enter my office and shoot Wurz in the head. He will fall for his Führer and country. I trust you will not delude me, Herr Ludtke! Yes, and afterwards ensure that the second squadron, including Pototsky and his brave men, are sent no later than the end of the week to whichever front is the bloodiest.
- You have no reason to doubt me, Herr Reichsführer!

When Ludtke has closed his office door, Himmler lights an unfiltered roll-up.

"Unfortunate for Wurz, of course!" he reflects. "But better a bullet from your own people than falling into the Allies' hands at the end of the war and giving away the *Ahnenerbe* secret programme. I might have sent Wurz to Courland, of course. But would there be any point? Now, when the war is lost? Let that ridiculous Goebbels carry on with his nonsense about a secret weapon, he doesn't even believe it himself anymore. Given that most undercover arms factories in Germany have been bombed, there are no grounds for harbouring such hopes. If this highly significant artefact has lain hidden for so many centuries, surely it is preferable to leave it there a while longer. What matters is that I, Heinrich Himmler, will now know where to look for it."

However, the Reichsführer cannot foresee what the future holds. A month later, Hitler is informed that Himmler has instructed his faithful aide, General Wolff, sidestepping the Reichstag, to commence secret negotiations with the Allied Forces. The Reichsführer manages to make his escape and go into hiding, evading arrest by the henchmen of an enraged Hitler. But the good fortune of this sickly-looking man, who had started his career as a humble agriculture student, would be short lived. Soon after the end of the war he would be detained, carrying false documents, by the British Allies. His true identity would be established, yet despite trying to strike a deal, something goes awry for Himmler. The official version of events states that, realizing that the game was up, Himmler bit into an ampoule of cyanide and took Otto Rahn's secrets with him to the grave.

On Tuesday afternoon, not having eaten since the previous evening, we headed for the Doge's Palace to get tickets. Our abstinence had nothing to do with Weight Watchers – wouldn't it have been great if, whilst sitting it out in our hidey-hole in the prison, one of us had to use the bog? I had grabbed a bottle of mineral water and a few chocolate bars so that neither of us would swoon with hunger at the crucial moment. More importantly, Linda had found a wig so that, if need be, she could transform into a platinum blonde at a moment's notice. The colour actually really suited her, but she was having none of it!

We bought our tickets at the palace ticket office but still had plenty of time to spare so went for a long walk through the narrow streets of Venice. As the day grew even hotter, we were occasionally aware of how the city stank of algae from the canals, slightly marring that feeling of perfect bliss. An hour and a half before the Doge's Palace museum was due to close, tanned and exhausted, we made our way back to St Mark's Square for a tour round the palace halls, their main attraction being the unique carved ceilings and frescoes. For a while, we circled around the palace gradually getting closer to the Passage of Tears leading to the unwelcoming prison cell.

As always, my partner made a show of herself as she went through a side passage into the prison cell I had chosen as our hideout. Unfortunately, she got wedged in the narrow dead-end just like Winnie the Pooh. What an admirable

woman! You would be forgiven for thinking that God had glued her together from two disparate parts. Her brain was like a computer and you couldn't call her unattractive, indeed at times she was quite appealing and charming. But Linda's other half was prone to act like an utter fool. Clumsy, awkward, slow – a complete goose. And I was set to break

into one of Europe's most famous museums with her as a partner!

I worked up a real sweat pulling Linda out of the side passage. I still don't understand how she managed to get stuck in it. We were lucky that there were no museum guards around just then, as we were in an area reserved for museum personnel only. We eventually made it to our hiding place, where I had to shove Linda into the stone niche in the prison cell wall, just like a bag into the overhead locker on a plane. I couldn't resist telling her she needed to start working out. Irritated, she just hissed at me to shut up.

Lying in the dusty niche in silence was absolute agony. We couldn't talk or play any sort of game as the glowing phone screen would have given us away. And we could hardly go to sleep, what if, heaven forbid, one of us started snoring – what if someone heard? There were several suspenseful moments when museum guards patrolled round, checking the space. The adrenalin rush was even stronger than those times in a basketball match when the two teams were neck-a-neck and one basket would decide the game. Linda sat as quiet as a mouse and, this once, luck was on our side – we went undetected. Around eight o'clock in the evening everything quietened down; the Passage of Tears was most likely locked up and we were able to

relax a little but, half an hour later, the noise started up again. Three people – two men and a woman judging from their voices - were discussing something animatedly, going first to one side and then, carrying something heavy, to the other. At the first, we thought they were coming to get us but then, thankfully, it turned out they had another reason for coming here. I understood just two words from the whole conversation – *Antonio* and *idiot*. It sounded as if someone had forgotten to do something.

Then, I heard the iron bars across the Passage of Tears clanging shut. The prison was plunged into silent darkness. We patiently continued our wait, having agreed to start moving at midnight. When the time came, I clambered out of my hiding place, stiff and aching from my protracted stay and, in the darkness, felt my way to Linda. Ms. Mīlā, quite contrary to our agreement, had fallen asleep. Thanks goodness she didn't snore! I woke her up, covered her mouth with my hand and whispered in her ear not to make a noise as it was time to get going. Unlike myself, she looked quite sprightly. Crawling out of her niche she stretched, brushed the dust off and switched on the computer with the receiver. I guessed something was not working properly when I saw the rather worried expression on her face, lit just by the screen in the semi-darkness.

- The walls are too thick here,- Linda whispered finally. – There's no signal! I've got it on full power, but it's not enough.
- We need to get closer to the transmitters! – I whispered back to her. – Follow me!

As it turned out, we didn't have to go far. As soon as we came out of the cell into the corridor, the signal was fine. Linda stored her equipment in a niche in the wall and, one by one, started disconnecting the surveillance cameras, replacing their recordings with those from the previous night. To avoid any slight variations, she used the recording starting at half past twelve. In fifteen minutes, all was done.

- Now the guards are carefully watching the recording! – Linda gave a satisfied smile. – thinking the CCTV cameras are working just as usual.

We were a third of the way through our task. Opening the Passage of Tears with a crowbar was a doddle. I quietly eased open the barred door and we looked at each other.

- Let's go and get what we need, - I whispered.

We returned to the cell where I removed the plate of armoured glass, fake bone, tube of glass glue, small trowel, ultrasound resonator and tranquilizer-filled syringe from the hiding place. We stopped stock still in the hall just outside the guard's quarters. The crucial moment had come! Linda now had to get changed and transform into an irresistible sex goddess. I was counting on her now to pull out the purposeful Linda, capable of handling anything, and not the silly goose liable to upturn every pot on a flat surface. I glanced at her –it seemed improbable. Linda was so edgy she looked ready to pass out any minute. I quietly put my armful of things down and hugged her.

- You can do it, pull yourself together!

She pressed her body against mine, and for a while we stood perfectly still. I felt her trembling.

- It will be fine!—she whispered after a moment and pushed me away. – I have to change!

We had agreed that, before Linda's grand entrance, I was to crawl quietly across the corridor leading past the partially glazed guards' booth. The glass window in its wall was set about a metre and a half from the ground. If that had not been the case, my plan wouldn't have worked. I took the syringe which, erring on the side of safety, I had filled with enough tranquilizer to floor five people, and headed towards the unknown. Luckily, this part of the palace had flagstones instead of the squeaking wooden flooring elsewhere. The corridor leading past the guards' booth- installed like a bird cage on the left side of a once wide passageway - began at the end of the hall on the other side of the wall. This wall, just like the booth itself, must have been built quite recently; its sole function that of concealing the booth from museum visitors' view. No doors, no bars, I simply unhooked the red velvet cord and headed into unfamiliar territory.

I had done it! I crawled unnoticed past the doors to the guards' booth and beneath its glass covered section, then silently got to my feet and hid in the niche on the furthest side of the room. The guards didn't notice me: their murmured exchanges and the sound of a football commentary reached me from behind the door. Not bad! They were watching the game while on duty! Now I had to wait for Linda to make her entrance. Three minutes went by, five, seven... Time seemed to cease passing abstractedly but somehow went straight

through my brain. Every heartbeat echoed in my temples like a drumbeat. There was still no sign of Linda.

"Linda, what's going on? Pull yourself together!" I thought to myself, terrified, remembering Linda's desperately trembling body. Could she really have fainted from fear? But, no! Here she came at last. Bright red lips, brassy make-up, virtually naked except for a few gaudy strings with two, bright yellow fake flowers and an equally gaudy bra which served only to make its contents stand out even further. A right little minx!

- *Hello boys! Want to have some fun?* – she beamed, waving to the guards behind the glass just like a porn queen.

I didn't see what went on in the guards room. The low hum of conversation and match coverage came to a momentary halt, followed shortly afterwards by a loud crash and the sound of two considerably surprised male voices.

At that point, Linda pulled a trick out of the bag that I hadn't expected of her. With the grace of an Indian belly dancer, she traced her hand temptingly across her chest and unhooked the front of her bra, graciously opening up both cups.

This was greatly appreciated by both guards. And by me. Mumbling excitedly in Italian, the two of them lunged out of their booth towards the delicious, blonde, almost naked *donna* before them. Like two tomcats after catnip. Two silently administered darts and they both got a shot of the sleeping drug. The tranquilizer's effect was almost immediate. A second later, both men lay on the floor at Linda's feet.

- Don't look at me like that,- Ms. Mīļā stuttered, going as red as a beetroot and doing her utmost, to no avail, to give some semblance of order to her alluring

appearance, – I had no choice. When the curly-haired one saw me, - she pointed to the dark haired guard lying on the floor, - he fell off his chair. I was frightened the other one, - Linda indicated the guard with the short cropped hair, - would press the alarm button, so I opened my bra. It helped. You men are all such primates!

The whole time Linda was talking, I couldn't keep my eyes off her fingers as they adjusted her skimpy scraps of clothing.

- Will you stop staring at my chest!? Shame on you! – Linda exclaimed angrily. – You should be thanking me for getting the guards out of their booth!
- Linda, you are a genius! – my voice thick with sincere admiration. – An absolute Venus!
- To my mind, you're not thinking with your brain just now but with something else entirely! - Linda grinned. – I'd better go and get changed, or I fear that you, my dear basketball player, will start steaming at the ears! I'd like to cram this bloody wig down over your eyes!

These were her words but her actions belied them as, turning to leave, she swung her hips so seductively that I wondered if it could possibly be the same woman who a few hours earlier had squatted like Winnie the Pooh, wedged in the narrow dead end in the prison cell passage.

However, this was no time to get philosophical. While Linda was getting dressed, I dragged the sleeping guards into their booth and sat them on the chairs at their desks. Let them sleep it off, dreaming of the gorgeous blonde. Now we had two hours at our disposal. I opened the cupboard. Everything was in perfect order. I glanced at the security control

panel. It turned out to be a model I knew well. Even better! From the look of things, some of the rooms, including the basilica treasury, were hooked up to an activated alarm system. After a moment's hesitation as I tried to ascertain whether the control panel was regulated by another system, I decided to risk it anyhow and switched the alarm off in the interior rooms, taking the keys with me. Linda came back at that very instant, carrying all her stuff.

It turned out that St Mark's Basilica was quite well lit at night, albeit rather spooky. The bright street lights in St Mark's Square did most of the job; the light coming in through the windows casting different shadows and semi-shadows. We had no problem finding and unlocking the treasury. Using a suction cup, I fixed the ultrasound resonator onto the armoured glass, set the power on the lowest setting, gave Linda some earplugs and put some in myself. Then, I motioned to Linda to follow me and, just to be on the safe side, we left the tiny room. I pushed the button. A dry cracking sound, despite the earplugs, stung my ears unpleasantly. I don't know why that was, as ultrasound is supposed to have a frequency beyond human hearing range. We went back into the treasury. The result was excellent! The small piece of glass (measuring thirty by forty centimetres) hadn't shattered into tiny shards but just four bits. It took a second to pick them up. I removed the relic from its niche in the wall. Squeezing some glue onto each corner of the new piece of glass, I then placed the fake bone into the niche. It was fractionally larger than its predecessor, but I concluded that the difference in size was too insignificant to be noticeable. Then, I carefully glued the new glass into place. I had seen this done several times in Russian garages. Nothing complicated – the most important thing was not to smudge glue where it wasn't needed and not to get any on your hands. "Push it in hard, hold it in place for five seconds and

don't slam the car door too hard for twenty-four hours," the mechanic had said. I held it for almost a minute then carefully wiped the glued seam in the glass with the T-shirt which had previously held the glass. It was perfect. No one would notice the difference.

- What are we going to do with these bits of glass? Linda asked.
- We'll take them with us and chuck them in the canal! If they're found here they might attract unwanted attention. Gather our stuff together and we'll get back to the prison!

We checked around carefully to make sure we hadn't left anything behind, even wiping over any surfaces where we might have left finger prints, before locking the door and heading back. Both guards were still lost in a dreamworld. To be doubly safe, I wiped over anything in the guards' booth to erase any possible finger print traces and switched the alarm back on.

- We should go to the bathroom, no chance of a comfort stop in the prison, - Linda suddenly suggested, like an old granny. So we did.

About half an hour later we were back in our cell. Just in time! The computer screen was already signalling that the battery had just fifteen minutes of life left. The recorded programme obviously took up more power than the usual operating setting. Linda quickly switched the surveillance cameras back to their usual direct transmission setting. The moment of transition from the recording to direct transmission was marked by nothing more than a slight darkening of the screen lasting a tenth of a second.

Sitting against the cold prison wall, we waited for dawn. It was a rather nail biting

interim – what if the guards came around and kicked up a commotion? But

everything went precisely according to plan. I could only imagine that the men, when they came to, rushed to check all they needed to and concluded that everything was as it should be. They wouldn't have found anything unto ward on the CCTV recordings – not a blonde in sight! Although if the recording was to be examined frame by frame, they might have discerned an inexplicable strap, but that certainly wouldn't have been detected while rewinding the recording. And besides, CCTV cameras have been known to play tricks sometimes. It became apparent that, after checking the recordings, the guards must have calmed down and decided they'd do well not to mention anything about the half-naked blonde girl, assuming they remembered anything about her themselves. Who would ever believe them? Most likely, they would say they had nodded off on duty, dreamt the whole thing, they might even end up being teased about it.

At eleven o'clock the next morning, dead tired but without having attracted any unwelcome attention, we left the museum under the cover of a group of German tourists. As inconspicuously as possible, I threw the shards of glass and the CCTV transmitters into the canal. Afterwards, of course, we went back to the hotel. Within moments, the shin bone of Saint Procula, also known as Claudia, lay on the table in front of us.

- It's a shame, but we're going to have to break it, - Linda sighed.

I took the ancient bone in my hands and, as one might see in the sort of religious literature I had read more of over the past two weeks than at any other stage of my life, a flicker of illumination descended upon me.

- Sorry Linda, but I'm a Dutchman if this bone has anything to do with the wife of Pontius Pilate, - I said, picking the bone up by both ends and twisting my hands in opposite directions.

And I was right. The bone cracked and the central section rotated under the force, splitting in two. Inside was a yellowed, rolled-up parchment. The perfectly smooth rims on the bone's edges were a testament to the mastery of workmanship of whoever had created it.

- So simple! – Linda exclaimed and carefully unrolled the parchment. There was no denying that what lay before us was the second part of the map. We also noted, to our dismay, that it was in rather poor shape.

Luckily, however, it was just about possible to make something out on it.

- We should scan it!
- Certainly! But we should take a photo of it first, before it disintegrates entirely. Then I wouldn't mind getting something to eat!
- What are we going to do with that? – Linda, unsure, waved towards the fake bone of Claudia.

Well, unless you want to keep it as a souvenir, I suggest throwing it in the canal on our way to a restaurant, - I said. – In my view, even if it is a real bone, its history is of no relevance to its owner. That's obviously no sacred relic! There's no way that a devout Catholic would have made a card-holder out of the shinbone of Saint Procula, wife of Jesus' procurator! Whoever hid this map was a mastermind. Times change, churches undergo renovations, but relics are eternal. No one doubted their verity, even if they sometimes merited further

Arno Jundze "Bergs & relikviju mednieki" [Bergs, The Relics hunters]

Excerpt

Translated by Žanete Vēvere-Pasqualini

investigation. I'm also guessing that my plaster-cast imitation will be long revered and stored with due respect. Linda, do you realize, we have just carried out the perfect break-in at St Mark's Basilica? To my mind, we deserve to share a bottle of good wine.