

**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:** This novel focuses on the residents of Latvia in the 1990s. Medieval kings longed to get their hands on the Philosopher's stone, a substance extolled by alchemists for its promise of eternal youth, happiness, and wealth. In the 1990s, history repeated itself much more simply – without any secret teachings or veiled intimations. People started chasing blindly after red mercury; a product of the imagination of Soviet intelligence services, an implausible miracle potion capable of granting world domination to whoever had it in their possession. Yet these people were outnumbered by those who simply wished to get on with their lives, to be happy and to love. As the wheels of the epochs turned, dreams and illusions crumbled – it was no easy task holding onto both oneself and one's self-esteem in the ensuing turmoil. Latvia suddenly broke free, but not everyone had the strength to find that freedom within, as each and every one of us strove for survival. The novel depicts a broad spectrum of society. There are those from an older generation who received, with independence, an unexpected opportunity to finally meet their relatives who had been driven into exile. There are KGB agents, and there are the defenders of independence. The last Forest Brother comes out of the forest after fifty years spent in hiding as a result of his rejection of Soviet power. And there are also the very young who desire to be happy, but are oblivious to how heavily their first steps into the free wild world are about to test them.

## Excerpt

1991

OMON and an unspecified special unit

attacks the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the shooting in Bastejkalns commences.

Militsia Members Vladimir Gomanovich and Sergey Kononenko are killed,

Four others injured.

Edijs Riekstiņš and members of Juris Podnieks' film crew; Andris Slapiņš and Gvido Zvaigzne, also lose their lives, the latter in hospital where he was taken, gravely injured, following the night shooting.

Žanete. 21 January

It's still very early morning, not yet six o'clock but the communal apartment is already empty. The neighbours have drifted off to various different places to celebrate New Year's Eve and are yet to return. Like rats running from a sinking ship. Žanete is standing in the bathtub, water spurting from the end of the old-fashioned steel pipe. It runs down her naked body; its warm flow has a calming effect, helping her get her thoughts straight on the events of last night. There's no logical explanation for it. Pure madness! Žanete, you madwoman! How could do something so crazy?

Ever since the barricades started, Žanete has been volunteering on shifts in Vecrīga. It seemed the obvious choice. Žanete had to go. The People's Front had appealed on the radio for medical staff and besides, she lived right there on Kirova Street, just by the station.

Why not help? The most courageous lecturers at the Academy of Medicine supported these

activities, undertaken by final year students. This is a good opportunity for you! The lecturers, too, were kept busier on the barricades than behind their lecturing desks of higher education, where even thesis discussions during exam sessions frequently developed into agitated political disputes. Life was boiling like a volcano, brimming over with lava, after all.

The doctors' shifts were planned down to the very last detail. Chaos played no part in the process, if not during the very first hours of the barricades. It took no more than a day for the experienced doctors to devise a well-scheduled system. Everyone knew where they had to go and what they had to do, if necessary. With the help of the housing council, they surveyed available apartments in Vecrīga which were then prepared, in secret, to accommodate casualties, should the terrible need arise. A first aid centre was set up in the Dome Church. First aid assistance could also be dispensed from other places of worship in Vecrīga. Anyone in need was welcome. It's no joke spending the whole night out with the January frosts, taking it in turns at the positions near the fires. Especially on the Daugava River embankment where the wind blows sharply even on warmer days.

At first, guarding the barricades might have appeared to some like a romanticized adventure, a game. Singing round the fire, cups of hot tea and a drop of booze. Like the in film, "The Devil's Servants", where simple folk defend the city of Riga. But after the futile murder of Roberts Mūrnieks at the hands of OMON members on the Vecmīlgrāvis bridge, people grew edgy with fearful expectation. The tension was immense. Were the terrible events of Vilnius to be repeated here? Had OMON absurdities or the army opening fire on the unarmed become an everyday option?

It was quite late when Žanete wended her way across the small square at the end of Smilšu Street, over on the canal side. She was zig-zagging through the narrow maze of passages around sandbag-filled trucks and buses, carefully positioned by the engineers organizing the barricade, before heading off to the barricades by the Council of Ministers, when all hell broke loose. First came a series of dry, sharp-sounding snaps which caused the entire flock of Bastejkalns jackdaws to take flight, terrifying the peace-loving canal ducks who, fed by the denizens of the city, had not the slightest thought of migrating to warmer climes. Despite once having done target practice at school, she failed to register the snapping sound as gunshot. It just sounded like an ordinary firecracker. Even when the individual snaps grew into a series of barking shots, she still hoped, goodness knows how, that it was no more than some boyish prank.

Obscenities in Russian and shouts followed. Someone was yelling, 'They've just killed a man! Help, we need doctors!' Two men running towards Žanete called out to her, 'Go back to Vecrīga, girl! There's shooting going on!'

But Žanete remained, frozen to the edge of the pavement, watching as bright chains of bullets cut across the dark sky. The sophisticated realization that they had been tracing cartridges would only come later, while she is watching TV. For now, they are just fiery stripes in the dark sky and it is all happening right before her eyes. Real and terrifying. A funny little van heads in the direction of the Drama Theatre, travelling along the boulevard which has only recently regained its historic name of Bastejs, for many years previously referred to Soviet Boulevard. It has yellowish curtains at the windows, a little like in that "Dālderī" song, "They reflect sunflowers heads and are made of sunbeam threads, yellow,

yellow curtains they are." The little bus stops at the curve and three men, rifles in hand, jump out and run towards the theatre. And then, more shooting. Just like a film.

People are running away from Bastejkalns as fast as their legs will carry them. A young man amongst them, his face covered in blood.

'Help! Doctor! I need a doctor!' he calls out, seeing the first aid bag emblazoned with the red cross on Žanete's shoulder.

The scene unfolding before her shakes Žanete to the core, her sense of inertia disappears instantly.

'Are you able to walk? What happened?'

'I don't know!' the man screams, his voice sounding otherworldly. 'There, on the other side, the shooting started and I felt something warm running down my forehead. Seconds later my whole face was covered in blood.'

The injured man is having some sort of panic attack. Žanete examines him there and then behind the barricades under the closest street lamp. He is bleeding heavily but the wound does not appear to be too deep; the brain is unscathed. The bullet or piece of shrapnel probably just caught his forehead then whizzed off into the darkness. Behind the cover of the barricades, Žanete pulls some gauze wadding from her bag and carefully cleans away the blood.

'What's your name?' she asks.

'Mine? Māris.' The man is shaking as if he has a fever.

'Right, look here, Māris! Calm down and listen to what I'm about to tell you. If the bullet had got you in the forehead, you would be lying dead in the street and not stood

here, talking to me. Don't worry. Listen to me and you'll get through this. Near here on Vaļņu Street there should be an apartment set up as a first aid centre. Let's head over there and see what can be done.'

Žanete knows the address. There are no lists as such, but she has carved the various addresses indelibly in her mind. The closest one should be just round the corner. All she needs to do is locate the right door. Žanete makes the wounded man walk ahead of her, urging him all the while to keep the wadding pressed tightly to his wound.

The voice of her professor, recalled from the lecture hall, pops into her head: 'Doctors must instil calm in agitated, nervous patients.'

The trouble is that Žanete has never, not once in her entire life, had anything to do with firearm injuries. Her only knowledge is theoretical. She hopes that she will be up to the task. Climbing the stairs, she casts her mind back to her days of medical training at the Academy, hoping against hope that she will find a more experienced doctor upstairs. Žanete is terrified.

The apartment is on the fourth floor. Unfortunately, no one answers the doorbell. It turns out that the key is under the mat. There is no one more experienced than Žanete on duty tonight at the first aid centre and neither will there be. She will have to do it all herself. Žanete unlocks the door and feels in the dark for the light switch. They find themselves in a tiny, one room flat. Black paper has been pasted over the windows so that no light is visible from the outside. One of the stratagems used at the time of the barricades. Some attentive, caring hand has provided all that is needed to administer first aid. Bandages, basic medicines, syringes, disinfectants. Someone has even thought of bringing a kettle and

electric ring for boiling water, along with tea, sugar and two packets of *Šahs* biscuits. It is quite cosy despite being scantily furnished: a table, some horrible-looking stools, two fold-out beds, a stretcher and an old sofa. The apartment has clearly not been lived in for some time but the central heating is working. After the shooting, the room appears quiet and peaceful. The walls of the old building are thick; almost no noise can be heard. It is like a different world in here.