

**Biography:** Vizma Belševica (1931 – 2005) is a Latvian poet, writer and translator. She was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. She spent most of her childhood in prewar Riga, the capital city of then democratic Latvia. Riga is often featured in her works, especially her famous autobiographic trilogy, however, the time she spent at the countryside with relatives also had a lasting impact on her writing. Despite growing up in a poor family, she spent much of her time reading classical literature.

**Synopsis:** Bille is the nickname of the novel's main character, Sibilla Gūtmane, who observes an era filled with tragic events, and much of which was hard to understand, even for adults. Bille, unlike most other children portrayed in Latvian literature, is a city girl. The author avoids any nostalgia about the lost paradise of childhood and, using her actual memories, shows life in the workers' district of Grīziņkalns and the life of the Gūtmanis family during the late 1930s and early 1940s. The result is 75 separate stories told in chronological order. Bille goes to school and visits her country relatives; as the regimes change, Bille grows up and, with the adults, she must endure periods of starvation, she helps people imprisoned in the Jewish ghetto, and she visits the countryside to exchange what things they do have for food. Each episode represents a moment stuck in her mind forever.

## Excerpt

### The Family Album

She's not allowed to take the album. In case she rips the sheets of tissue paper between each page, or tears off the rounded paper corners holding the photographs in place, or gets it dirty with greasy fingers.

Does Bille tear things and get them dirty? Never – at least, not on purpose. She hadn't eaten anything greasy at breakfast. Still, just to be safe, she wipes her fingers off on her dress. No one's home.

She's not allowed to take the album – and Bille won't take it. She'll just kneel on the chair and look through it slowly, not taking it.

The puffy brown cover with gold buttons in the corners looks heavy, but it's easy to lift. Underneath it, an empty black page. Under that, the tissue paper that so easily tears. The tissue paper's stuck, she can't get a grip on it. If she were to lick her finger, then she could. But Bille doesn't dare lick her finger – it'll leave a mark.

A funny thing, those marks. How do the grown-ups see them? The puffy cover was so nice to poke because it seemed alive, half resisting, half giving in to her fingers. But once, after Bille had poked to her heart's content and was off playing with her toys, Mama came home. She saw right away that the cover had been poked, and Bille got a scolding.

Just like last summer in the countryside. Bunches of herbs hung from nails hammered into ceiling beams of the living room. They hung above the smooth, black table too. Bille and Anita climbed onto the table, jumped around and swatted the bunches with long, bendy twigs. The bundles swung topsy-turvy, dust and flecks of lime whirled from the whitewashed ceiling. Dust sparkled like tiny stars in the square rays of sunlight from the window... What joy, what fun! It was really a miracle that they heard the barn door creaking in time, and were innocently drinking sour porridge in the kitchen when Auntie-dear came in. But didn't she know what the youngsters had done anyway? Didn't they both get their bottoms smacked? It was Bille's fault, the city rascal; she just taught Anita mischief. Anita never clowned around like that by herself. In fact, it was Anita who was the first to get up on the table – but it left no mark, and Bille didn't tell.

No leaving marks! Under the tissue paper is another black page. Bille lifts it a little. The sheet of tissue paper slides down a bit; a small bump forms in the middle. She can stick her finger under it, then her palm, to lift the sheet and smooth it back down. Good - it's not torn or creased.

Here they all are. Mama by herself in a coat with a high collar, looking out sullenly from under a pot-shaped hat clapped down over her forehead. They wore such strange hats back then. Papa by himself in a black suit, with a sprig of myrtle in his breast pocket; he has very smooth, short hair and big ears. This must be his confirmation photo. In the third photo, they're together. Mama's wearing a pale sleeveless dress, with a string of pearls so long that it's knotted somewhere past her waist. Bille hates that dumb necklace. Papa's suit is pale too. He's smiling broadly, and his ears aren't so ridiculously big anymore. Their wedding photo. Is that what this was? Bille's seen wedding photos in other albums. There, the brides are always in white veils, the grooms in black suits. Mama says that's how people dress when they get married in church; she and Papa went to the civil registry office. The registers are on paper, but people aren't. Maybe Mama and Papa stepped onto a big piece of paper and stepped off again? And then they were considered married? Bille tried asking once, but they laughed at her; she'll never try asking about *that* again.

In the fourth photo here's Bille, too - a lump in Papa's arms, sulky, with round eyes. The knot in Papa's tie isn't a knot, but Bille's tiny fist.

Bille lifts the next black page, sticks her finger and then her palm under the tissue-paper bump. She doesn't like looking at herself.

Now here are her grandparents from Zūras. They're sitting next to each other on chairs. Grandmother's so bulky you can't even see the chair; it looks like she's sitting in

midair. There's a fringed shawl around her head and, in her hands, a hymnbook with a cross on it.

Grandfather's head is bare. His longish hair is wavy, and his beard reaches halfway down his chest. If Bille likes looking at anyone, it's Grandfather. And if the family discusses anybody, then it's Grandfather, the Zūras ferryman.

"Tell me about Grandfather and the baron!" Bille begged Papa, when he was at home and in a good mood. For there was still a baron living in Zūras. His estate had less land than an honest farmer, but a baron's still a baron, and that's how the people of the district treated him. Everyone except Grandfather.

The baron drives his carriage up onto the ferry: "Take me across!"

And Grandfather says: "I'm not steering the ferry across the Venta for just one load. Hang on, for someone else to drive up too."

It's hay season. Who has the time to drive around? The baron waits half an hour, an hour. He waits an hour and a half. The sun is scorching. The gadflies are a real nuisance. They're eating the baron's horse alive, and the poor horse's mane and tail are trimmed short – it can't drive the biting insects away. So it paws at the ground and shifts restlessly.

Grandfather says: "Careful there you don't break my ferry to bits! You do, there'll be Hell to pay!"

"Will you cross or won't you?" the baron says in the local dialect - live in Ventņi, speak in Ventņi.

"Like I said, I'm not steering the ferry across for just one load!"

As if a baron's two-wheeled carriage were a load!

Roaring even more angrily than his gadfly-stung horse, the baron storms back to his estate. Grandfather just laughs.

Another time, when the baron is on his way to Ventspils, Grandfather, after having some drinks with the neighbours, sends his sons to squat in a ditch; when the baron dashes past, they yell from the bushes:

"Hey ogre, where're you going?"

Whatever the baron had, Grandfather had to have twice as much of it. The baron signs out five young, especially delicate apple-tree saplings from the nursery for his garden, Grandfather takes ten. The baron buys a horse, Grandfather buys two. The only thing Grandfather couldn't do was build a castle like the baron's, but did that beggar build that castle himself? No, he inherited it from his family. Grandfather has a white house with three rooms, but he drives past the estate with two horses. Only good-for-nothing barons or people from Vidzeme drive a single horse.

Oh yes, Bille had ridden around with those horses! Brown horses with yellow manes and tails, which Grandfather didn't cut – so they could fly in the wind like golden flags as the horses trotted. Grandfather's beard also flew in the air.

That's how Grandfather drove and lived – with his beard proudly flying. Just like here in the photograph. Things only went wrong for Grandfather once. Some layabout had scattered anti-government pamphlets right by the ferry. Grandfather was arrested and was beaten in the Ventspils police station for a whole week to get him to confess that he'd been the one who wrote and scattered the pamphlets. But they came to see Grandfather's oldest daughter Līze (Bille's Auntie-dear), and promised her a silk dress if she'd tell them how Grandfather wrote the pamphlets. Līze said that Grandfather had only gone to school for two years. Pamphlets? The only writing utensil in the house was a pencil. She showed them everything Grandfather had ever written: a notebook full of the ferry's earnings and accounts, a calendar with notes of when the cows and mares had been bred, a page from

the family Bible of births and deaths. They didn't believe her, and turned the house upside down for no reason. So Līze didn't get a silk dress, and Grandfather was let go - they couldn't beat a lie out of him even with all the policemen in Ventspils.

And did Grandfather hold his bearded head up afterwards? He held it even higher!

Bille never gets tired of looking at Grandfather and thinking about him. There's nothing worth seeing in her Grandmother from Zūras, unless you're amazed by how fat she is. And the family talks about her as little as they do about Bille's other grandfather. Now and again someone will say: "Rest in peace; may the earth rest lightly on him." Because Bille's other grandfather is now just a flower bed covered with round clusters of sempervivum in the Brasla cemetery, not even a cross or stone slab. On each side of where his head lies is a rusted tin can, from which they remove the dead bouquets, rinse out the slimy green leftovers of standing water, and put in new flowers – whatever's blooming in Mama's garden at the time. Then they pull the weeds that have sprouted among the sempervivum, rake the white sand along the edges of the bed into a herringbone pattern, stand there for a while, sigh and leave. Nothing else to do. While Mama's changing the flowers and doing the weeding, Bille sometimes manages to grab some of the white sand and weigh it in her hand. So light... Bille never met this grandfather. He died right after the family came to Rīga; Mama was still a teenager. There are no photographs of him either.

The photograph of Bille's grandmother from Rīga is small and blurry. Her hair's parted right down the middle and cut in a straight line below her ears. Her mouth is straight and pinched tight, her eyes angry. There's a white shawl around her shoulders. She's wearing a polka-dot blouse and a black ribbon around her neck. The shawl's made of silk, the ribbon is velvet. Why, then, does Grandmother always say: "If I hadn't had those *čarvāni*, I'd dress in silk and velvet"? She *does* dress like that.

"Čarvāni" are children. Grandmother calls Bille a *čarvāns* too, sometimes. Grandmother's many *čarvāni* either died when they were small, or wandered off into the wide world. Only two are in Rīga – Mama and Aunt Olga. Anyway, grownups aren't *čarvāni* anymore. There's a picture of each one who wandered off, too.

A young soldier in a round cap with a round symbol on the front. He joined the Latvian Riflemen and never came back. It wasn't clear whether he fell in combat or died of typhoid in Siberia. There's been no sign of life from him.

A neckless woman, her hair held in place with a round comb – to Bille, those combs seem like the ugliest thing ever invented –, next to a wide-bodied mustached man. They're at a fussy, curly little table. She's sitting in an equally fussy chair; he's leaning over her shoulder. She's the daughter who was married off to a Czech. She's sent them a photo and nothing more. Not a letter, not a card – not even at Christmas.

The daughter who was married off to a Hungarian, though, is a slender lady. She's standing on a bridge with her whole family: a gentleman in a wide-brimmed hat, a boy taller than his father and a lanky girl. Sándor and Eva: Bille's cousins. In the back, far across the river, there are some castles and crenellated houses – Budapest. A strange name.

The daughter who married the Hungarian wrote letters at first, but later on she forgot Latvian. Sándor and Eva can't speak Latvian at all. Now that, Bille doesn't understand. *Foreign* languages you can not know how to speak, that's clear as day, but *Latvian*?

Once more she has to lift a black page, stick her finger and then her palm under the tissue-paper bump.

There's a large, yellowed but very clear photograph covering the whole page – Auntie-dear and Uncle when they were younger. Bille has never seen Auntie-dear looking like that. In person, Auntie-dear wears a shawl in a peak across her forehead; under the

shawl you can only see her eyes, and a deep crease between her eyebrows. The sleeves of her blouse are always long, buttoned around her wrists. Here, her forehead is high and pale, without any creases. Her eyes are misty, her hair let down over her shoulders; her blouse has a deep neckline and short sleeves. Her slender hands hold a book in her lap, but there's no cross on it.

Uncle's ragged moustache is the same as now, though. He's still just like he was. He's standing next to Auntie-dear's chair so that it's not obvious he's shorter than his wife. The neighbours call him her "half-pint husband." But because of him Bille can think about Grandfather again.

"You won't marry that Ernest!" Grandfather shouted at Līze, so loudly that the windowpanes rattled and the lamp swayed.

"Why shouldn't I marry him? Isn't he a man, am I not a woman?"

And she married Ernest.

Then Grandfather flew into such a temper that he never wanted to see Līze again. He gave her her inheritance, so that she could rent a farm in a far-off district and not show her face here with her "half-pint husband." In the name of fairness, Papa got his share too. Ansis didn't need his anymore; he already lay in his grave. Voldis had no right to his until he broke it off with Lonija. Krišs would get the ferry and house when Grandfather died – and the beautiful golden-maned horses too. How Bille would love to have those horses! But Grandfather won't leave them to *her*.

Bille lifts the next black page to look at lucky Krišs in his militia uniform. The tissue paper rumples when the kitchen door bangs. Bille slams the album shut and notices right away that the tissue paper's creasing. But she can't save anything any more, only get off the chair and over to her toybox in one leap.



Grandmother's footsteps. Bille wasn't expecting those. She's been pricking up her ears for the clack of Mama's high heels.

"Is anybody home?" Grandmother asks from the kitchen.

"Me."

Grandmother comes into the room with a basket and suitcase. She's always like the moon in a cloudy sky – appearing and disappearing. Now she's popped up – at exactly the wrong time. Who knows when Bille will be able to smooth out the tissue paper, and whether that won't leave a mark.

Grandmother puts down her basket and suitcase, goes back into the kitchen, opens a cabinet and checks what's inside.

"That's what I thought," she says, pulling her coin purse out of her pocket and a shiny one-lat coin out of the purse. She hands it to Bille. "Run to Bānītis' shop and get half a pound of butter."

Any other time, Bille would be happy and proud to be able to go into the shop with money in hand, not with the little blue notebook where they keep track of debts. Bānītis does sell on credit – who here on Vārnu Street would buy from him otherwise? -, but expresses grumpiness and displeasure in every way; the younger the buyer, the greater his display. Bānītis only becomes happy and friendly when he sees money. Then he fills the whole store - with its drawers of groats and all sorts of noodles, jars of candy, the can of cream, the small tub of herring and many other unexplored things – with a glow like the sun.

When she goes there with the notebook – and she almost always went only with the notebook -, Bille can't look around. Then she has to hurry. She could look at things up close today; today she has a lat, cash. Bānītis would smile and smile. But what good is cash if her

conscience isn't clear? Bille's scared that Grandmother will open the album, see the creased tissue paper, berate Bille for it and tell on her to Mama. Then Mama will berate her and there will be noisy fighting all evening long.

So Bille runs full tilt into the yard, through the gate and those few steps in the direction of Grīziņkalns to the shop.

At the door, Bille looks at the shiny lat again, then enters. Bānītis stares glumly at her hand. He sees that she doesn't have the notebook, but that her fist is clenched around money. He beams and, after weighing the butter, asks with a smile whether she wants to buy some candy with her change.

"Candy rots your teeth," Bille answers sharply, taking the change and the packet of butter. Now she can be proud. But those pretty, delicious candies are peeking at Bille from a jar, the ones that look like sticks cut into pieces, a flower or bird appearing where they've been cut...

Grandmother didn't give Bille permission to buy candy, but she's not about to let Bānītis know that. She just doesn't want any.

Opening the door, Bille quietly hopes that Grandmother will be in the kitchen. No, she's thumping around in the room where the album is.

"I brought the butter," Bille calls nervously.

"Leave it on the table," Grandmother calls back. Her voice isn't angry. Bille's relieved. There's no danger yet. And later – well, we'll see.