

**Biography:** Māris Bērziņš (1962) is a writer and playwright. Māris Bērziņš has worked in the Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Economics of the Republic of Latvia, he established and for a while managed the State Culture Capital Foundation. After this colourful career Māris Bērziņš decided to turn to literature and currently works as a full time writer. Māris Bērziņš is an active member of the Latvian Writers' Union.

**Synopsis:** Winner of several literature awards, *The Taste of Lead* is a narrative account focusing on a young Latvian man, Matīss, who seeks and eventually fails to avoid siding with either power at war in Europe in 1940. Facing the challenges and conflicts experienced by every young man – the discovery of the existence of love, betrayal, good and evil, and, on a personal level, the taste of lead in his mouth. A vehicle for dealing with weighty issues, this novel is characterized nonetheless by the signature irony, wit, and a taste for paradox noted in Bērziņš' other works. This book explores lines of division; those simple, qualifying lines that set a regular man apart from a hero, the tragically thin line separating peace from war, the demarcating line seen between words and actions, and the contrasting line between giving in and taking action.

## Excerpt

### What a Tibetan Monk Saw in Europe

A Tibetan monk – who was an intelligent and notable figure in his country– once traveled to Europe. Having spent his life in his mountainous homeland, he had never experienced European civilization, and as such everything to him seemed new and foreign. He wrote broadly on his impressions for his friends back home. [ . . . ]

The people in Europe struck him as a bit insane. It seemed that they would jump at each other's throats in the blink of an eye.

*The Kurzeme Word*, No. 148, 20.06.1940.

## **Torņakalns Then and Now**

Ansis Štoks

I'd like to say Torņakalns is the most humane neighborhood in Riga. Every unfortunate soul is taken care of here. The Children's Hospital. . . . helps ensure our youngest citizens grow to be healthy and strong. Those whose minds have failed them can find a home in the Šenfelds Neuro Clinic [on Vienības Avenue]. Those with disabilities are welcomed with open arms into the home on Ģimnastikas Street; the rest of the late-night wanderers can turn to the Telts Street home.

I've met people here who have lived in Torņakalns since they were born, and who are grateful that their right to live was not revoked, even in moments of weakness. They told me much about the once-happy life of the Torņakalns residents. They listed five of the most popular inns that, due to changes over the years and in the surroundings, don't exist anymore. Some of them had rather lofty names, such as "The Golden Steed." [ . . . ]

More Latvians live in Torņakalns than in any other suburb of Riga. Most of them own small properties or are blue-collar workers. Life here is quiet, the air is fresher than in downtown Riga, which is why many families stay in Torņakalns for decades.

***Working Life***, No. 28, 08.07.1939

## **Lithuanians Prohibited from Traveling Abroad**

Aug. 26, Kauna, Lithuania. The Lithuanian Cabinet of Ministers held an emergency session yesterday, led by State President Smetonas. The session discussed the current international

Māris Bērziņš "Svina garša" [The Taste of Lead]

Excerpt

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

situation. The government ruled to cease until further notice the issue of non-crucial travel visas to Lithuanian nationals. Travel outside Lithuanian borders is also prohibited to those Lithuanian citizens who have previously received foreign travel visas or passports.

*The Kurzeme Word*, No. 193, 27.08.1939

### Postings

Need **painters** at Jūrmalas Ave. 44, apt. 3, pl. 8 t. Fogels.

**Painters and builders** appl. to V. Vīgants workshp.

Kr. Barona St. 17, 5—7

**Painter**, need for marking, appl. to Kozlovskis at Gaiziņa St. 3. Good pay.

*Latest News*, No. 194, 29.08.1939

So, Mr. Birkenš, up to the heavens you go—each time we start a new project, Koļa always has some saying or other to get me going. We kick off a makeover for yet another apartment, and I've been working on the ceiling since morning. Our job always starts from the top down.

Master Painter Nikolajs Brīskorns also goes by Nīks, but he prefers Koļa. It sounds juicier and meatier. It's not very Latvian in my opinion, but if the man wants that as his name, what can you do. Koļa is a clever guy, and no bullshitter. My mother's stepcousin, my uncle, and my boss, all in one. Uncle Koļa, as I called him when I was a kid, is forty. Wait, no, he turned forty-one in April. I'll be twenty-four in December. Even though the physical years between our ages is a constant, as time goes by, the differences in our ages and mentalities somehow manage to dwindle. That's what it feels like, at least. I started working for him right after high school, even before military service. I liked it. Thinking about it, this is my third year painting. He once told me: "You work with me, not for me. It's a huge difference. Got it?" I get it. And appreciate it.

Koļa taught me the trade with nothing but patience—no teasing of my beginners' mistakes and screwups. It doesn't always look as good as his work, but I know what it's supposed to look like. And that's half the process. I've gone from being a clueless apprentice into an associate. For that, Koļa has all my respect and utmost thanks, and my reverence toward him has never faded. It's not like I fawn over him all the time like some kind of holy angel, sometimes I have choice words for him, but for the most part we get along well, and see eye-to-eye, as it were, on all the lines and angles. Of course Koļa's mood swings are like a carousel – he shows up gloomy in the morning, like a muddy autumn, muttering to himself, but not even an hour later he's laughing or swearing about something, like old

wallpaper that refuses to be scraped from the walls. He works lightning-fast, and you can't figure out how he can do it all so quickly, precisely, and perfectly.

Koļa has one weakness, though. Often—too often, in my opinion—he'll run out to Miss Alvīne's place in Ziepniekalns. He helps her out, especially in summer, when the grass needs mowing, and in the winter when the yard, barn entryway, and paths need to be shoveled—all so the lonely, but still very hardy woman of the house can get in her wagon and bring milk to the Koka Street store. And then the long list of other heavy work that she's not able to do herself. Even though I don't know her, just seen her from a distance, she gets on my nerves—I don't see why that old cow-lady doesn't hire a helper, instead of shamelessly working Koļa to the bone. I don't understand their strange relationship. All Koļa has told me is that Alvīne's son was a classmate of his who died in the Latvian War of Independence, and that she doesn't have any other family. He has to help her. Yeah, yeah . . . almost all his free time is spent catering to the whims of that old and, far as I can tell, very bossy woman. As a painter, you come across the type. I wonder what will happen if she completely loses her faculties, what'll Koļa do then? I already know what: he'll go round her place even more often. Nokolajs' conscience won't let him settle the old lady in a old folks' home, because what it's actually called is a poorhouse, for shame. I'll admit, I haven't been in it, and god only knows what's really inside, but when the time comes, I'll tell him, I'll suck it up and tell him that the nursing homes are state-run and all things considered life there can't be that bad. Though to be honest I better keep my mouth shut, since Miss Alvīne is perfectly healthy. Maybe Koļa is hoping for an inheritance?! If that's the case, then it all makes more sense . . . strange that I didn't think of that before.

And still I pity Nikolajs, because it's Miss Alvīne's fault that his luck with younger women is . . . I don't even know it exists. I've never seen him with anyone, so I'm not sure. Why isn't he itching to take on the role of husband? But . . . maybe he just can't anymore? He is pretty old. Mm, but what isn't. At times I want to ask, but it makes me uncomfortable, and he'd probably just laugh and say I ask too many questions. Better not to ask. In the end, it's his life, and it's none of my business; I've got my own things to deal with. Even I've hit a dry spell with women, but not like Nikolajs, my issues are more self-anatomy related. But that's another story, and not one I like to talk about.