

Biography: Vilis Lācis (1904–1966) was born in Mangaļi parish in the fishing village of Rīnūži (present-day Vecmīlgrāvis near Rīga). During the First World War, his family was evacuated to the Altai region in Russia, where Lācis finished his studies as a teacher and began work as the secretary of the village council. On returning to the newly-independent Latvia, Lācis tried his hand at several different jobs. At the same time, he was focused on his writing and making contacts among Communists. During the 1930s, his writing career was helped by the publisher Emīlija Benjamiņa, who published a serialised version of Lācis's novel *Zvejnieka dēls* [The Fisherman's Son] in the newspaper "Jaunākās Ziņas". As a result, Lācis became one of the most popular Latvian writers. In 1940–1941, Lācis was amongst those who helped to establish the new Soviet government in Latvia. During the Second World War, he fled to Moscow along with other Soviet activists; on the return of the Soviet occupation he once again came to power, serving as the chairman of the Soviet of Nationalities of the USSR Supreme Soviet (1950–1958) and the chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Latvian SSR (1946–1959).

Synopsis: As with many of the other novels by Vilis Lācis, *Rocky Road* was written as a work of literary realism and contains autobiographical elements: the self-made man, and fishing and labour motifs from the first half of the 20th century. The novel's plot focuses on the lives of young people in 1930s Rīga. Roberts Līviņš, the ambitious and driven son of a labourer, gets his education and goes on to become an architect working at a wealthy construction company. Soon after his attainment of higher education, respectable employment and a "better" social echelon, he falls in love with the director's daughter Līvija and is forced to forsake his earlier life, his roots, and his family. Roberts's wealthy bride does not wish to become the wife of someone from a lower class and demands that her husband break off contact with his family; however, in the end Roberts understands that high society will never understand his origins or his best friend Ēriks, a gifted boxer who is travelling along his own "rocky road" with Roberts. Ēriks is another one of the physically strong characters created by Lācis.

Excerpt

Chapter One

1

The thermometer read 22 below zero. The Daugava was full of sludge. At Andrejsala, not far from the Herring Sorter, a grimy cargo steamer had docked. Midnight was not far off, but the loading was still taking place because it was the Saturday before Christmas and the ship had to be at sea before the holiday.

A sharp easterly wind was drawing along the fence of the coal yard, lifting the loose, dirty snow and burning the workers' faces. From the cold and the dust they had taken on a bluish gray tinge. The workers would slap their sides with their hands, skip on one foot and then the other, and wipe their noses with rough woolen mittens. Their nostrils and eyebrows were frosted, and icicles had formed on the moustaches of the older men. During breaks they would pick pieces of ice out of one another's beards.

- If this cold keeps up, the Daugava will be frozen soon... - they were saying.

- The Daugava! The sea too will have lidded over.

- The ships won't be able to enter.

- We'll have to start eating dogs.

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- I guess I'll have to register with the unemployment office.

- I put up half a barrel of pilchard.

- I have potatoes at home. My wife picked some mushrooms and my boy brought back a sack of barley from his days as a shepherd. I'll survive somehow.

Yes, somehow...

The work proceeded apace. When the carts arrived with flax, the men would throw the sheaves on their backs and take them up the plankway. The plankway was icy and slippery from the sliding cargoes.

- Watch out! – the carrier yelled, throwing the sheaves into the hatch. Inside someone grabbed them, pulled them somewhere into the darkness to put in some hole. When the sides of the holds were full they stuffed the hatch. High on the mast, a lamp with five bulbs was hanging, the sixth had burned out.

- Come on, hurry up! – from time to time, the foreman's voice was heard from the middle of the ship. – That way you'll be able to get to your Christmas pīrāgi sooner.

So the men hurried up the plank and down to the carts quicker until their legs were about to give out and their faces were steaming. Some of them were already over sixty and had rheumatism in their bones and stiff fingers. When the carts went away, the workers had

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nothing to do for a while. All sweaty from work, they now had to stand in the cold, shivering and beating their hands against their sides. Some put their fingers to their mouths, trying to warm them with their breath.

- It must be minus fifty on the Iron Bridge... -- someone ventured.

- Now you're embroidering! – another worker replied.

- But of course – minus twenty-five at either end, so minus fifty altogether.

But that was an old joke that was no longer funny. They shivered, shook their bodies like horses and tried to find some shelter, yet there was no place where the cold would not find them. All that remained was to cuss out the forwarder and the drivers. Somewhere behind the piles of coal, the church bells started ringing. The city lights blazed against the black midnight sky, and the river, stiffly flowing toward the sea, was also black. On the other bank, the windows of a five-story building were aglow – bigger and brighter on the lower floors, dimmer on the upper ones.

- Hm... - the men said, looking at one another.

- Hm... - others echoed, walking pensively along the embankment. They turned their backs to one another and walked a little distance away from the plankway.

- What do you think, shouldn't we get one?

- Yeah, that'd be good.

Then they started rummaging through their pockets, producing dirty handkerchiefs with knotted corners or worn-out wallets. They would handle the coins with stiff fingers, counting, doing the arithmetic and, when two of them couldn't come up with the necessary amount, a third one would walk up and they would set up a co-op.

- There'll be no trams running when we're done... - a worker said, adding his tram money to the common till.

Then they scattered. Some did not return to the ship but, taking a detour, walked away from the port. When new carts with flax arrived, several carriers were missing. No one had anything to say about that, sheaves on their backs, they would just rush up the plankway and back down to the cart faster, periodically glancing over to the road: are they not back yet? Half an hour later, they once again paced on the embankment, at times disappearing behind the piles of ties and around fence corners. The fiery drink gurgled and the bottle was soon empty. There were no snacks on hand, so the men would just wipe their moustaches and go back to work. The cold was as bitter as before, the easterly wind as biting, but they were no longer cold. Some of the men were all smiles, others would talk nonsense, still others would stumble hurrying up the plankway. They would fall and skin their knees. But no matter. The knots holding the sheaves no longer chafed their backs, their fingertips had stopped smarting, the time was passing more quickly, and the work seemed to have got much lighter.

The church bell had stopped ringing. Across the river, only a few windows were still lit up in the five-story building, and the blaze of city lights had dimmed. Midnight had passed. The workers stuffed the last sheaves of flax into the ship's hatches, and boatswain and the sailors secured the tarpaulin. The winches would clatter for another hour, and the green round timber would slide up the plankway. The timber was frozen stone hard, and the pieces that fell in the water would not come up.

Finally, the whole cargo was loaded. Now just the plankway had to be removed and the ship could go to sea.

- Hurry up, hurry up! – the foreman yelled. – Don't just stand there, soon you'll get your pīrāgi.

But the workers did not really need any spurring on, they worked in great haste. Old men were scurrying about the plankway, tearing off boards, whereas the young ones were boldly balancing on the round, slippery supports. No one had any fear. Empty vodka bottles lay about.

A man carrying a board slipped on the plankway. He tried to grab onto a support but missed and fell. There were rocks and various kinds of scrap down there, and he remained lying there.

- What now? – the foreman yelled. – What are you waiting for?

- Līviņš fell off the plankway! – someone replied.

The work came to a standstill. Workers gathered around their fallen mate. – Līviņš, are you all right? Did you hurt yourself badly?

Līviņš did not reply. The men looked him over, feeling his pulse and listening to his breathing.

- He's still alive.

The foreman went to the phone booth. The wounded man was taken ashore and laid down out of the wind, covering him with some jackets.

- See what can happen... One misstep and...

A quarter of an hour later the ambulance arrived and medics picked Līviņš up.

- One person has to accompany him to the hospital, - the foreman announced. – Who will go?

Silence.

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- Mednis, you were his closest friend, - the foreman turned to a middle-aged man. – Go with him and later let his family know what happened.

- Who wants to mess with this on Christmas Eve, - Mednis grumbled. – How about one of the younger ones...

But the younger ones had already managed to slip away, so Mednis finally stopped resisting.

The ambulance pulled away. The ship was untied, the tugboat took it to open water. The workers scattered in the sleeping city.

- What happened? – the night watchman asked the passing workers.

- What happened... A man got hurt. He may not walk again.

In the report where the event was described it said: "Because of his own negligence... under the influence of alcohol... -

For it was Līviņš – just Līviņš, one of the many.

2

It was already known that father would have to work overtime, so he was not expected for lunch. At five o'clock, mother began to heat water and Anna and Alise waved each other's hair with curling irons. Anna was nineteen. She worked at a textile factory and earned

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enough for her upkeep and clothes. Alise was two years younger. She wanted to become a hairdresser, but there was still time – father never had enough spare money for apprenticeship and implements. The previous autumn Alise could have gotten a job at a sawmill, but they did not pay anything there. So father said that she should stay at home until something better came along. Robčiks turned fifteen that autumn. He had yet to complete the last year of elementary school and then he was hoping to study at a technical college.

There were no more children in the Līviņš family.

At seven, the girls had already put on their festive clothes and kept looking at the clock.

- It'll be just like last year, - Alise said. – Father won't make it to the Christmas Eve celebration. Why should we wait if it's perfectly clear that...?

She got up and started pacing the room. She had braided her dark hair, a silver brooch adorned with tiny pieces of glass gleamed on her checkered blouse; the yellow lace-up ankle boots were not exactly new, but carefully polished, and the black stockings that her sister had gifted to her shortly before the holiday were so thin that the white of her shins was visible. From time to time she stopped to look at her legs.

- My legs are more slender than yours, - she said to Anna. – You will get fat soon. You already can't do the vengerka the way it should be danced.

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- Is that right? – Anna smiled. – So why are you monkeying after me? If you are so afraid of getting fat why did you upholster your breasts?

- I'm only seventeen, - Alise replied, examining herself in the mirror. – In two years I will no longer need to upholster but you'll be wearing a corset.

- I will be married by then, - Anna said. – Whereas you still have to do your confirmation lessons.

- I won't do that! Let them spend that money for a ball gown and lacquer shoes.

Those who didn't know that the two were sisters would never be able to tell. Even though Alise was younger and more fragile than Anna, she looked more grown up than her blond-haired and plump sister. She was bolder and more self-confident, she never blushed, and her brown eyes never shied away from men's scrutinizing, evaluating gazes. At dances, Alise drew the attention of both young men and older gentlemen, whereas only very young boys seemed to be attracted to Anna.

The Līviņš family lived on the basement floor. In the courtyard building they had two small rooms and a kitchen. In summer they could not leave their windows open, because stray cats would get into the apartment.

When the clock chimed eight times, Robčiks could stand it no longer and announced to his mother that he was hungry. Mother poured the last pot of hot water into a tub, covering it

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with an old blanket – when father finally came home from work, the water would still be warm.

The four of them had supper. The pīrāgi were cold and the home-brewed beer was cloudy and bitter, but nothing could be done about it – father preferred it like that. A small Christmas tree stood on a table in the corner. So that it would look a little like a celebration, Anna lit some candles on the tree and turned off the electricity. The room darkened, some needles would catch fire now and then, and wafts of turpentine would reach them.

- How about singing a choral? – Mother suggested after they had finished the meal.

No singing was yet heard from the other apartments.

- No, let's not bother, - Alise objected. – That's old-fashioned.

Robčiks started calculating how much father would have made for overtime. From noon to three would be the regular overtime, for one lats and thirty santims and hour. So three lats ninety. After three, it was the double rate. Five hours would make thirteen lats. Plus piece work – it sounded like a good ship.

- What grade do you have in arithmetic? – Alise asked. – Five plus, right?

- You had a three, - Robčiks snapped back and got up from the table.

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Anna ate longer than everyone else, she did not look around or participate in conversations.

Only after she was done, she lifted her eyes and met her sister's anxious gaze.

After supper, they put out the candles and turned on the light. Robčiks went out to the kitchen where he slept and started reading the newspaper.

- No one will visit us tonight, - Anna said. – Shall we go to sleep?

- Yeah, you were too stingy to pay for the movies... - Alise said.

- We can go tomorrow, during the day, - Anna replied and started undressing. While mother cleared the table, Alise went out into the hallway and walked past the doors of the other apartments. Then she went to the gate and watched the street for a while. Only strangers passed by and no one said a word to her. Alise was getting cold. Back in the courtyard she once again stopped and looked at the brightly lit windows of the upper floors. Some lamps had colorful shades, making the walls take on a reddish or greenish tinge. When she looked into windows where the light looked like their own, her face showed indifference or even irritation. At times, however, her eyes lit up and she pursed her painted lips as if deep in thought.

Alise returned to the apartment, picked up a novel, leafed through it, then replaced it with an illustrated magazine, examining the portraits of ladies that were complete strangers to her. After a while she got up again and went out into the courtyard. Alise was not expecting

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anyone, she knew that no one would come or was waiting for her there, but she needed to move and somehow fill the sad emptiness of this evening.

- No sign of father? – Robčiks asked when Alise came into the kitchen for a second time.

- no...

Anna was asleep and mother too was napping in the other room, having lain down without taking off her clothes. Alise sat down by the window and started to undo the buttons of her blouse. It was eleven o'clock.

At midnight, mother went into the kitchen to see if the water for washing was not too cold. Robčiks quickly hid a book under his pillow.

- You're not sleeping? – Mother observed. – Father should be here soon. If I don't hear the bell, let him in.

- I'll listen for it, - the boy answered. – You go to sleep, mom.

As she left, mother turned out the light, and Robčiks remained in darkness. Crossing his arms under his head, he thought: "If this building should suddenly collapse, we would be at the very bottom, under the ruins, and would never get out. If I ever have an apartment of my own, I will never live in a basement. Up there, under the roof, must be much more pleasant. But a one-story house would be the best."

Tick-tock...tick-tock...tick-tock...tick-tock, ticked the clock. Muffled noises came from other apartments and the street. It was freezing outside but warm inside. Father will be all frozen and so tired that he won't want to wash, and mother will have to force him into the tub. He may also have had a drink or two and then it won't be so easy to get him to bed. At such times father was merry and chatty, he would tease Alise and Anna about boyfriends and praised Robčiks: "If God keeps me in good health, I will help you become an engineer. You have a good head, my boy..."

Hours passed. Robčiks could not get to sleep. At two in the morning, he got up, quietly got dressed and went to talk to his mother.

- Father is still not home. Should I go to see Mednis? They work on the same ship...

- Go ahead. But put on a scarf and father's warm hat.

Mother saw Robčiks out and locked the door. Then she went back to bed. And even though it was not the first time her husband worked till dawn, she could not really go back to sleep.

"Now it's the first day of Christmas," Alise thought, staring at the dark ceiling. "Will I have a boyfriend around this time next year?"

3

In the gateway Robčiks ran into Mednis.

- Oh, a good thing you came out, - Mednis said. – Now I won't have to go in.

- I just wanted to go and see you, - Robčiks said. – Is my father still working?

- We finished the ship. Breaking the plankway, there was a little accident. Maybe it won't be so bad after all...

For a moment, Robčiks waited for Mednis to continue but he was silent. Then he asked in a quiet, shaky voice: - Father?...

- Yeah, so it happened, - Mednis blew his nose loudly. – He fell off the plankway and got hurt. I had to go with him to the hospital. If you go there, ask where the surgery barrack is.

- Is he in a bad way? – Robčiks asked, even quieter than before, playing with the end of his scarf.

- Hard to say, before the doctors have examined him. Maybe he will have come to by now and will be able to talk. Well, I have to go home now. I think that if you say you are visiting your father, they'll let you see him.

Mednis left. Robčiks stood still for a moment, wondering if he should go inside and tell the news to his mother or go straight to the hospital.

"Nothing is clear yet. Mother will just worry and cry. Maybe it's not so bad."

He went out to the street and turned left. The street was dark and empty. Freezing night watchmen were having quiet conversations in pairs, sucking on their pipes. From time to time, their bunches of keys would jangle. A frightened cat tried to crawl under the gate to get into the courtyard but it proved impossible, so it ran away across the street.

- Maybe it won't be so bad, - Robčiks repeated to himself. – A worker fell into an empty hold on the ship last summer and a week later he was fine. It's a much shorter way down from the plankway.

At one point he passed a building with a red-lettered sign on the door, which was half glass, so that one could see inside: there was a wide staircase covered in a red rug. Outside there was a limo, and two waiters were trying to get a young man inside. He had a bare head and hands; when the waiters let go of him, he sat down on the curb and would not get up.

"How can he not be cold?" Robčiks thought. "Such fine clothing and he is wallowing on the pavement..."

The hospital's gate was closed and the guard did not want to let Robčiks in at first: - Visiting hours are from two to four in the afternoon, - he said.

When Robčiks told him why he was there, the man not only let him in but took him to the office. The doctor on duty was there. Robčiks had to take off his coat and put on a bluish-gray overall. Everything there smelled of medicine.

- How old are you, young man? – the doctor asked Robčiks. Then he asked about his mother and others, inquired as to the ages of his sisters and what they were doing. Then he called an orderly and asked him to take Robčiks to his father. As they walked away, the doctor looked after them, shaking his head: - Now you're in for some hard times, my boy...

4

Doctors had already examined Līviņš. He had been cleaned up and, his head and right elbow bandaged, was lying in bed at the end of the barrack. The nurse on duty took Robčiks to his father and whispered to him on the way that he should behave quietly and refrain from asking questions. – He has had quite a shock to his system. Surgery is out of the question. Sit on this chair.

Robčiks sat down and, feeling confused, looked at his father. The nurse left him and sat down at a table in the middle of the barrack: there were many small bottles with prescription tags and a glass with several thermometers. There the air smelled even more of medicines, with the stench of iodine prevalent. Robčiks felt slightly nauseous. Many of the

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sick men were moaning – some quietly, though clenched teeth, others loudly, with tearful, quivering voices. Everyone was bandaged; iodine and blood was soaking through the gauze, some had their arms in a cast, others had their legs on pillows, still others had heads wrapped so thoroughly that only their eyes and mouths could be seen. And all were in pain, all faces were pale, and their breath resembled sighing.

Robčiks had never before visited such a place. Hearing all these moans and raves, he felt scared. He wished father would say something. Robčiks saw how father's eyelids open for a split second, he saw his mouth move, but then he was back asleep again and seemed not to even notice his son's presence.

Robčiks leaned closer to his father and touched his left shoulder lightly. – Are you sleeping, dad?

Father did not reply but when Robčiks unthinkingly put his hand on father's hand, the latter slowly felt for Robčiks's fingers. Father's rough hand seemed to wish to caress the son's small one, his fingers moved up Robčiks's forearm, squeezed it and then let go. Robčiks saw that father's eyes had gotten wet. There were red droplets stuck to the corners of his mouth.

Father moved his lips again; it was so strange that this big, broad-shouldered man found it difficult to speak. His voice was not above a whisper, more of a smacking of lips than speech sounds.

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-- Robčiks... tell your mother... you should all go... to the country... -- After this father fought for his breath and seemed to hold back something in his mouth. His cheeks became very round. With his left hand, father felt for a strange, dark vessel on the nightstand and put it to his mouth. A thick red liquid, all clotty and chunky poured into the vessel.

Robčiks picked up a fuzzy, paper-like rag under his father's chin and wiped his lips.

A moment passed, and then father continued: -- I guess I won't be getting up... You can't make it here... Have mother go to a lawyer... He will help you collect... insurance... maybe even... pension... Finish school... Then you'll have to work... And no more... school...

Tears welled into father's eyes again but his tired face attempted to smile. It was a sad smile.

-- You have a good head... on your shoulders... I wished you could... study... but now...

His rough fingers once again slid over his boy's hand while his eyelids closed and teeth clenched as if in cramps.

- Dad, can you hear me? – Robčiks whispered in his father's ear. Father nodded slowly, he was still awake. Robčiks continued: - I don't want to go anywhere. I'll stay in Riga. I'll get a job and keep going to school, I'll manage. I'll help mother.

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Father sighed and did not reply. Not sure that father could hear and understand him,

Robčiks continued to whisper about his plans: how he would grow up and conquer this city, which his father had come to conquer twenty years earlier. If he had been unlucky, it did not mean that Robčiks would meet the same fate. Born and raised here, he already knew more of the city than this middle-aged man who had strong hands and a peasant's modesty but lacked courage and agility in decisive moments. Robčiks would be more persistent, more courageous, and more stubborn, and certainly not as modest as his father. He would certainly manage. He was only fifteen, and people lived much longer than that.

With his imagination fired up, the boy kept talking until the nurse came over and told him that he had to leave.

- Maybe your mother would like to come and talk to him, - she said having accompanied Robčiks to the hallway. – She doesn't have to wait for visiting hours, she should just come whenever.

Five minutes later, the guard let the little conqueror of the big city out on the street. The city lay even darker and quieter than before. There were no lights in any windows. To Robčiks's right and left, there were high brick walls, which had hundreds of eyes, but all of them stared impassively at the late pedestrian. Below, between these hard walls, stretched the street – he could only walk forward. How noisy were his steps on the pavement, how loud the walls echoed them. And how small he was in his solitude against the cold vastness of the city!

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Night watchmen were dozing. Near an intersection, a policeman was slowly pacing on the pavement. From the building with the red letters, he could hear soft music and women's laughter. A couple was standing in the dark gateway and kissing. As Robčiks passed, the woman hid her face behind her companion's shoulder, but the man looked at him daringly. When they saw that it was just a boy, they no longer felt embarrassed and went on with their kissing.

The city was asleep. Only its dreams and passions released by the night were awake.

5

In the evening of the second day of Christmas, Līviņš died. For the last two days, mother had sat by his bedside but had gone home before the last agonizing moments. There was not much hope for recovery from the very beginning, so the news that Līviņš had died came as no surprise. All this time, mother had been walking around in tears, but now that the end had come, she no longer cried. Her features took on a strangely hard, spiteful expression, her lips barely moved when she talked, and her eyes were shaded by something dark and deep. Only her voice, hollow and as if strangled, betrayed the grief this ageing woman felt. Anna was most open with her pain – she was her father's daughter and now the family's only breadwinner. Alise walked around with a serious face, as if worried and confused, but she was embarrassed to cry. When father had to be washed and placed in the coffin, she did not go with mother and Anna to the hospital mortuary: - I'm afraid, I won't be able to look... - Robčiks would have gone, but they would not take him, because he was too young and sensitive.

With all the problems associated with the burial, they seemed to have forgotten about the future: how were they to live, how were they to manage? For the funeral money paid by the trade union they could purchase only a plain coffin and pay for the gravesite and hearse.

They had a small quarrel when they had to choose father's burial clothes: mother wanted to dress him in some of his older clothes and keep his black Sunday's suit for Robčiks – it had not been worn much. Robčiks argued with his mother for the first time.

-- By the time I grow up, it will be all moth-eaten. Dad has earned at least to be buried in his best suit.

- And by the time you can wear it, such suits will be out of fashion, -- Alise added.

Mother gave in, and the old working man was dressed in his Sunday best. The trade union placed a notice in the newspaper, so many workers came to the funeral. There was also a wreath from the union, and it had paid a band to play at the gravesite. Simply, with quiet dignity, the workers carried their colleague to the grave. When the funeral ceremony was over, one of the executives told missus Līviņš that they would collect donations at the port for the family.

And then they were alone. They went home and sat in darkness. No one wanted to be the first to turn on the light. Mother was calm, Anna too had stopped crying. Robčiks was thinking about what father had said in the hospital. He had not mentioned it to his mother.

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- We will have to look for a smaller apartment, - mother said. – One room would now be enough.

- Somewhere in the outskirts it's possible to get a room and a kitchen for ten lats a month, - Anna said.

- But we are used to this place, and everything is nearby, - Alise reminded them. – If I got a job, then we wouldn't have to move.

They calculated their finances and needs, for now it was all up to them. Father's wages for the last ship would be about forty lats, the other workers had speculated. This would be matched or even slightly exceeded by the donations. Two hundred lats would come from the co-op where father had been a member for many years. Maybe it would be enough for them to last until spring.