

Biography: Writer and journalist Pauls Bankovskis (1973) was born in Līgatne, Latvia. He studied glass art at the Riga School for Applied Arts and philosophy at the University of Latvia (1992–1996). His prose was first published in 1993, and a prolific author, he has now published novels, several collections of short stories, books and works of non-fiction and film scripts. His focus tends to shift from Latvian history, its myths, and legends to the realities of the recent Soviet past and the possibilities of the future.

Synopsis: The novel *The History of the World* is an excursion into the very distant future. All the languages of the world have become mixed into one, the sap of the Earth has dried up, people and other creatures are threatened by the plague of black blood, three moons are shining in the sky, meanwhile every nation has set out its living space according to its own ideals and notions of correctness. Traffic between the various worlds is provided by sluglike monorails, but the present day for these people seems like a distant past, difficult to make any sense of. That is the kind of world that Marta and father must set off to explore, but Little Jacob and his mother have to stay home to take care of the livestock and keep an eye on the farm. Who knows how it would have all ended if the parson Bišķis hadn't become a frequent visitor to the household. How will the journey of Marta and her father end? And what kind of fate awaits Little Jacob?

Excerpt

The Beginning of Winter. Little Jacob

It started on the day of the pig funeral, although the grown-ups had most probably perceived or suspected something quite some time beforehand. Of course, there's no point in talking with children about adult matters. But the whole of the previous evening had been still full of warmth and the peacefulness of winter. Their small world had been cloaked by the deep black darkness of this time of the year, and the ice flowers blossoming in such

great numbers on the windowpanes reflected the light of the taper and the pale and tremulous flame of the candle that had been specially lit that evening. The fierce howls of the wind could be heard from outside, and every so often it seemed as though it might at any moment push out one of the small window panes with a kind of invisible hoarfrost coated shoulder. On other occasions they would not have been so wasteful, however, a big Bible was sitting open right next to the candle and, with his nose pressed right up against a page of the Bible, little Jacob sat perched on a chair. The letters and words which narrated tales from bygone days leapt about and undulated in front of his eyes, but their meaning refused to yield itself up to him, and his gaze, of its own accord, kept on returning again and again to the strangely lively and animated pictures of the ice flowers. In them Little Jacob could see forests and hills, lakes and seas, grand castles and cities that stretched out as far as the horizon of the sky – everything that he may have ever heard about from the grown-ups but was not destined to see with his own eyes. The candlelight, look, was reflected there like a little sun. The fire in the oven was still ablaze. The silly cat Kencis was stealthily creeping nearer and nearer to the mouth of the oven and turning his purring mill. Once the flames and the searing heat dies down, it will be time to turn in.

The burnt-out ember of the taper falls, Marta deftly catches it and tosses it into a bucket. On the doorstep, sunken into his own dreams, the dog Maksis slaps the floor with its tail now and then, but the lullaby of the wind is quietly accompanied by the whirr of mother's spinning wheel. The usual Wednesday evening. Work maketh the maker. Each has their own place and free time – as determined by fate, of course.

"You there, read, stop bobbing up and down!" That was mother's voice. "Take heed,

before bedtime I'm going to test you."

Once again the little one buried his nose in the large book stinking of mould and mildew.

"Winter is almost halfway through, aren't they going to kill the pig this year?" That was Grampa speaking from the top of the oven. Last winter he had taken a lusty part in the killing, although more as a dispenser of advice, a steadying hand and omniscient observer. His legs no longer holding as firm as they once had done, in distant glory days when they enabled him, mesmerised by the bright lights, to stay on the dance floor from sunset until first light, and then from dawn until dusk again. His hands, too, no longer had the strength and dexterity of former years – his fingers gnarled and crooked as hooks, there was no way that he could hold a knife in those, let alone make a decent stab into the pig. Over the last year, Grampa had become weaker and weaker, until one day – it was the towards the end of summer – he crawled on top of the oven with no intention of climbing back down again.

"They did say, didn't they, that it was going to be killed tomorrow." That was mother again, without looking up from her spinning.

"That's what they've been saying every day: tomorrow, tomorrow!" Grampa grumbled. "For months now – tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow."

"Does it make any great difference to you up there, baking on top of the oven - whether it's morning or night, today or tomorrow," father spoke up from his corner. In the half-light, the tip of his cigarette blazed brightly and moved. He no longer had to read the

book, nor, thank God, did he have to spin wool into a fine yarn, and as for plaiting rope, the hands are enough, as he tended to say, but the eyes and the head can take a break.

"What's going on there? What was that?" The voice of clever sister Marta. She was sitting next to mother and working diligently at her sewing – the wrinkled cheek of an angry Dievs, the symbol for God, could already be seen on the white linen cloth, it was worked in blue thread.

"It's only the frost sprite my dear, only the frost sprite." The reassuring voice coming from mother's bosom.

Little Marta is going to be eighteen his spring, she should be hastening to find a husband, however, not only men but halfway young, healthy and decent people are few and far between in the world these days – who knows, she may well have to remain a spinster.

"But you there, keep on reading, stop gawking around and eavesdropping." That again was a reminder for Little Jacob at the big book. "The reverend will be coming for a visit either tomorrow or the day after – you'll have to show him what you can do."

It seemed that, on hearing about the parson, Little Jacob shrinks even smaller as he thrusts his nose even closer to the printed, worm-eaten page - as if he would like to hide inside the book, away from adult eyes.

"The reverend?" Grampa raised his voice from the top of the oven. "The reverend, you said? Is that old blabbermouth Bišķis still alive? Hasn't he kicked the bucket and gone to every devil that there ever was?"

"Hush, hush papa, the children are listening as well, aren't they!" Mother reprimanded him.

"Let them listen! Aren't they big enough and won't they know for themselves that there comes a time when every blabbermouth at the end of the day has to kick the bucket?"

"He is, after all, a reverend, nonetheless!"

"Reverend! Reverend!" It sounded as though Grampa with his toothless mouth was aping her. "A drunkard, glutton and fucker if there ever was, your Bišķis! I know him as well as any mad dog!"

"There isn't a saying like that," mother remarked.

"How d'you mean there isn't? If I said it, then there is such a saying! And Bišķis is one mad dog. What's he looking for here?"

"The same as always, the same as always. And to check up on Little Jacob as well – whether he's caught on to reading the book quickly enough."

"The same as always, the same as always..." Again it sounded as if Grampa was mimicking her. "I know these 'alwayses' of Bišķis. He's always there at someone's home when they've slaughtered a pig or some other creature. Always stuffing his face full, but even then needs no encouragement to ask for a sackful of blood sausage, liverwurst and a piece of raw meat on top of that. For God's blessing, so he says. Don't know what kind of a God he has to whom you need to be handing over meat dishes and roasts. Probably that

same one for whom Cain killed Abel, as if Jesus hadn't come into the world. Maybe this year we could do something other than the same as always, and wait a little longer for the killing of the pig? So that Bišķis arrives and sees that it's not the same as always and hurries off pronto, starving, and we kill the pig afterwards?"

"No, no, tomorrow." The glow on the tip of father's cigarette flares up. "As decided, that's what's going to happen and will be done."

"But you can't rush things, either." Grampa was trying to talk sensibly. "Everything needs to be carefully weighed up, you have to supply the necessary. Has the knife been sharpened to a fine edge?"

"It is, it is, I saw to it yesterday morning."

"Are the bowls and other dishes in the kitchen clean?"

"It's not the first time that we've had to kill a pig." Mother is starting to get fed up with this kind of talk.

"I don't know, I don't know how you'll manage without me," now it seems like Grampa is talking more about himself. "If the swine is a hefty one, you still need to have good sense and sound judgment, not just brute strength."

"And so what have you decided?" father asked from his corner. "Once Bišķis is gone you'll be climbing down from the top of the oven and doing the killing yourself? Just a moment ago you were grousing that we've been thinking about it far too long this year as it

is and that we should do the deed without delay."

"I'm not climbing anywhere, nor anything else – you know that well enough yourselves. And so now you imagine that since I won't be under your feet you can do whatever you take into your heads? As if I need anything any longer! As if I'd ever lacked for anything in my life! No, my dears, I have all that I need! You'll have to manage it all on your own now!"

Many a long and dark winter's night had passed in conversations such as this, sometimes even weeks or months. Nobody took much notice of what Grampa said any more, however, some good came out of this exercising the tongue for everyone. For the grown-ups it made the chores get done all the quicker, for Grampa it relieved the boredom of being cooped up on top of the oven, but Little Jacob could only pretend that he was reading about the wicked doings or intentions of the Egyptian pharaohs and the Pharisees, though in fact he was listening avidly and trying to glean from this talk some sort of understanding about the big and frightening world.

The killing of the pig planned for tomorrow had also become a significant part of this world, an event in which, for the first time, he too would have to take part as a fully-fledged helper. The candle had been blown out long ago, the taper had burnt out, the coal and ash had been raked to the depths of the oven but Little Jacob, thinking about tomorrow, was still tossing and turning in his hard and narrow bed, sleep eluding him. Grampa was snoring on the oven top, his snores sounding like the creaking hinges of a door, meanwhile from behind the patterned curtain he could hear the richly sonorous and as if plump, rounded

snores of papa, while outside the Northerly continued to gust and moan, and Jack Frost was knocking at the eaves, but Little Jacob could not stop thinking about the story he had read in the big book the other day, the one in which Jesus drives the devils in among pigs but then makes the pigs dive into the sea to drown. Papa had once told him that in the olden days even wild animals living in the forest had been able to get rid of fleas and other pests that were quite widespread at the time in a similar way. One of these animals which they called fox did this: it took between its teeth either some moss or a clump of wool from some other animal and walked into a river or lake so that only the tip of its snout remained above the water. Little Jacob did have to ponder on it for a while – where would a fox have been able to find the wool of another animal? But perhaps that was not so important. Papa and also Grampa have told lots of stories, however, funnily enough these are the stories that have become lodged in Little Jacob's memory the most firmly, these are the ones he has to think about the most often, and the things mentioned in them have always conjured up in front of his eyes the most vivid images of once existing, now long, irrevocably lost and similar to a distant dream scenes of the Big Wide World. He did not even have to call up in his mind the devils driven into the pigs, it was enough to close his eyes and imagine the insect-ridden clump of wool or moss floating away with the current. If it was a current or, as they used to say, a river, then it surely must have flowed out from somewhere. Why at the time nobody gave it a second thought, Little Jacob for the life of him could not understand, because for him this kind of eternal flowing from one place to another seemed highly unusual. Of course, it may have only been regarded as endless by the people who lived at the time, because, as was now known, these kinds of currents also could come to a sudden end in an

instant and this end did come. In those days a river like that also had some kind of destination, it carried the clump of wool or moss forwards and wanted to carry it somewhere. The ancient river was wide as wide can be and did not flow around and around like present day streams and rivulets. Many rivers, as Papa told him, had been so long that a person on foot wouldn't have the faintest chance of being able to walk the length of them, even over several days, from where they started flowing to the end. So that a river like that would run where it should and would not simply overflow and flood everywhere like a sea or a lake, on both sides it had banks, and the banks were so high and overgrown with trees, and the rivers so meandering, that a person standing by the water or even right in the middle of the river would not have been able to see a great deal upstream or downstream. A little clump of wool or moss like that could simply float past you and quickly disappear behind the bend of the river, and then you wouldn't know what was going to happen to it next: maybe the water would wash it out to shore somewhere, maybe it would get caught up in a tree branch, maybe an animal would catch sight of it, or a human being, but maybe the river would carry it right down to the sea because Little Jacob knows that the water from every river, even those that flow into other rivers, at the end of it all flows into seas and oceans, and there, for some unknown reason, it suddenly becomes salty.

"Perhaps that's why Jesus drove the pigs into the sea, because people usually eat meat with salt?" the thought came into Little Jacob's head, but from the imaginary and unfathomable Big Wide World the little boy was overcome by a warm, heavy blanket of weariness, and he was swept away by the nocturnal current of sleep and dreams like a

weightless little clump of moss or wool.

When Little Jacob opened his eyes again, it was already light outside – as light as it could ever be in the winter time, when so little light was left. He had been woken by a blast of stinging cold air because the outside door had been wrenched open wide and Papa was trying to force out through the doorway the small crooked bench complete with several bowls teetering and rattling on it.

"Really, can't someone close that door! As if they didn't have arms!" the wide-awake voice of Grampa rang out from the top of the oven. "They'll freeze the house out. And I'll die of consumption."

Grampa would mention consumption from time to time, and Little Jacob in his mind had decided that this should be something similar to an elephant – one of the largest animals that had lived in the Big Wide World in ancient times. He had noticed that grown-ups, and especially the oldest grown-ups like Grampa or papa, occasionally liked to talk about people and people's affairs as if in fact it was something to do with animals. If you leapt around, you might be called a rabbit, if you cuddled up to Mamma, you could be a little cat, if you got untidy or made a mess, they mentioned a pig, but, if you were hungry, then you were a wolf. No surprise, then, that consumption, too, could turn out to be an extinct, cold-loving animal that once had been a widespread cause of people dying.

"Stop dreaming, off you go, wash your mouth, get dressed and get ready!" Mother at the stove was clattering pots and pans. It was as though she could see Little Jacob's

intention to linger a little while longer under the blanket instead of crawling out from bed into the freezing cold of outside, or even she just guessed it with the nape of her neck or her back. Papa did not seem to feel the cold at all because once he had managed to deal with the bench and the bowls, he stomped in and out of the house without a fur coat, instead he had wrapped himself in his scarf with a motheaten vest thrown over his shoulders and a rabbit fur cap on his head.

"The door! The door! Is there really nobody who can shut that door?" Grampa would not pipe down, and the door did fall shut for a moment, but then Marta was coming from the shed with a huge pile of kindling, the door burst open and nobody could be bothered to close it again because Marta immediately had to go outside again to bring in the laundry that had been washed in the warmth of the room but hung out to dry overnight in the icy chill. The pieces of washing were frozen stiff and rattled like dried out birch tree bark, but together with them Marta carried in from outside something that reminded Little Jacob a little of early spring.

"Here!" Marta did not even look at him, she merely threw him the pillow case with pegs. Now Little Jacob had been granted a very short little stretch of extra time under the warm blanket – had had to put his hands out and carefully thread the clothes pegs onto the washing line tied in a loop so that they could be hung up on the plug driven into the wall until the next time the laundry needed doing.

Once the minor chore had been completed Little Jacob, shivering all the while, quickly got dressed. He poured some warm water from the kettle on the stove into a little

bowl, dipped his fingers in it, rubbed his eyes – and that was the washing done. Nobody was making any breakfast on this busy morning. Little Jacob had to cut a hunk of bread for himself and ate it on his own. But he wasn't really feeling that hungry yet, so he secretly threw most of the crust to Maksis the dog who, happy and excited, was constantly bounding in and out through the open door.

And then he had to run outside to see whether he should be helping papa with anything. It was lighter than early evening or night, however, the light emanating from the low lid of the sky was still the same old leaden grey. It was made even heavier by the slow snowflakes, as if dancing around everything and spinning round and round, and which, so it seemed, had absolutely no intention of clinging to anything but would keep on flying around in the air even until spring.

Little Jacob had to go and help Marta carry the hay down from the hayloft. He always liked being in the barn in wintertime – the air there, warmed by the breath of the animals, was redolent with the scent of hay, bedding straw and livestock manure, and it seemed as though it was only in the presence of people that the cows, sheep, pigs and hens looked around wide-eyed without appearing to think very much and not speaking among themselves, however, as soon as the people were outside, the beasts would start to discuss matters or chatter away quite like the people of the household in the living room on dark evenings.

"Come on, move, you clump!" His sister pressed into Little Jacob's arms a fair-sized sheaf of hay, nudged him towards the door and at the same time his thoughts moved in another

direction. Until now, whenever there had been a pig funeral Little Jacob had looked out through the window and he did not feel particularly sorry about the fate of the pig. He knew that a beast is to be cared for and held dear only while it is still alive. And likewise, it is held dear when it is to be killed: that, according to papa, had always been the order of things in the Big Wide World, and that's the way it was still. The problems arose only if the animal had been held dear while alive, but then when it came to the killing, it was no longer loved and was regarded as alien and an enemy. If that happens then that's the way it will remain after it's been killed, but who then will wish to put it on the table and partake of an alien and enemy, papa had explained, because that's how a person can make an enemy of himself and begin to hate not only himself but also others like him. Now the day had finally arrived when Little Jacob would be able to witness in person this great act of love that was of such importance to everybody.

See, papa is already wrestling the huge fattened pig out from the barn, but the creature does not seem to understand human intentions and is making every effort to resist – it pulls back, and to the side, it tries this and that. Angry squeals ring out in cold air, its feet try to gain purchase against the slippery ground, scattering the thin snow, but the white clouds of steam from its breath hurtle around in the air among the already chaotically circling snowflakes, this way and that.

Maksis comes running out from the house and, perhaps thinking that this is some kind of fun game, starts leaping around papa and the pig, barking all the while. This serves to make the pig even more agitated and now it is as if any moment papa will go flying through the

air.

"Really, can't someone sort out the dog?" Papa is sounding cross. "Like children, upon my word!"

Marta manages to grab hold of Maksis by the collar, she hauls him off to the istaba and slams the door. Now the barking is drifting over from the house.

At long last the pig has been heaved over to the centre of the yard and tied to the big cherry tree. In the struggle, papa has become quite hot; he flings off his thick woollen vest and his back is steaming. The dagger is right there, on the little bench, with the bowl alongside it. Papa casts a gaze over everything as if evaluating whether there is something that has been forgotten, then sits down at one end of the bench, pulls out from his pocket his smoking things, rolls a cigarette and lights up.

"Jacob, go and fetch me something to drink," he says, and Little Jacob sprints to the kitchen.

"Mamm, mamm, something to drink for papa!"

To the boy's great surprise, she pours into the mug not water, milk or fermented milk, but beer – the aroma of bitterness and hops wafts through the warm kitchen, but once he reaches the outside door Little Jacob, while mother isn't watching, snatches the chance to press his lips against white frothy edge – my word, it's like a major feast day.

Papa swiftly empties the mug, then rises to his feet and takes hold of the club propped up against the cherry tree. For a moment they stand there, man and pig, eye to eye, observing

each other, but then papa swings back and...

Little Jacob must have closed his eyes for an instant, because the pig is now on the ground and papa is shouting:

"What are you standing around for! Take the bowl and bring it over here, quickly!"

Little Jacob picks up the bowl, runs over, crouches on the ground, papa then keeps poking him:

"Hold it straight! Like that! Lower!"

Little Jacob must have closed his eyes again, because he hears a weird sound – like a soft whistle, though the whistler is not the pig but father, and the whistle is coming from his lips, but in his face astonishment is followed by fear, perhaps even terror.

Then Little Jacob takes courage and looks downwards: blood is gushing from the pig's cut throat into the bowl, and that's the way it should be, he knows that well enough. He's seen the bowl of blood in previous winters: large and steaming, that's how father would carry it into the kitchen and mother could get to work making blood pudding. But Little Jacob has never seen blood like this before, not from any living creature. And probably papa, too, is seeing something like that for the first time ever. Marta, standing a little way off, took a few steps closer to the killers, and mother also emerged from the house at the same moment.

"What's the matter?" Mother's voice sounded as if coming from a great distance.

A hot stream was gushing into the bowl, however, it was not a darker or lighter red like

blood usually is, but black as pitch.

Marta breathed out an odd noise and collapsed to the ground, right there where she'd been standing. She's always been a bit oversensitive whenever there was anything to do with blood, but this wasn't even proper blood.

Mother ran over to Marta, helped her sit up, sent her into the istaba and came over to take a look for herself.

For a moment Little Jacob thought that the grown-ups were angry and their anger was directed at some mistake that Little Jacob had made, one that had messed up everything. He crouched down in the snow, both hands clutching at the hot bowl, and avoided looking at the undulating gleaming blackness as well as his parents' faces.

"What is it?" Father's voice.

"We have to cut it open," mother stated firmly, "otherwise we won't find out anything."

"But what about this?" Father waved at the bowl of blood.

"Let's put it to one side and see whether the dog or some other beast approaches it. We need to, first of all, find out what's going on."

The rest of the day and the evening passed by in a sombre and quiet atmosphere. The bowls and the saucepans remained empty, the stove gradually cooled, and nobody felt like talking very much. It seemed as though a dark weight had settled over the yard. At other times, by evening the whole house would have smelt of meat stew, rich clouds of steam would have

been billowing above the stove, but mouths and cheeks would be shiny with fat. Now, each retired to their own corner and, if they really could not hold out any longer, gnawed on a dry piece of bread or sipped on some fermented milk. They weren't inclined to any other chores, either, and in their thoughts, so it seemed, each one of them returned to the yard with the fattened pig hanging head downwards and the black coloured snow beneath it. As soon as darkness fell, they all were ready for bed – with the birds, as they say. It was probably only then that someone, possibly father, suddenly thought of Grampa.

"See now, how after all this Grampa, too, has quietened down," he said, listened hard and threw a glance to the top of the oven in surprise.

Usually, the instant he was mentioned Grampa would have responded. He did not need much encouragement to respond, he always had an opinion about absolutely everything, and his own knowledge. Yet now there was silence on top of the oven – and everybody else immediately noticed it as well.

"Jacob, son, be so good and climb up to take a look to see how Grampa is getting on," the silence that had filled the living room like cold and thick water was broken by father's voice.

Little Jacob was good - he clambered up and looked, only he couldn't really see anything. On top of the oven, behind the rag rugs that had been hung up, it was stuffy and dark, moreover, it seemed as though there was nobody there.

"There's nobody here," Little Jacob reported. "It's empty."

Little Jacob couldn't even remember when he'd last seen Grampa face to face. Probably it

was that winter when Grampa had not yet moved to live on top of the oven. Since then Little Jacob had avoided him – it was hot on top of the oven with Grampa, it was dark and it usually smelt bad. But now little Jacob was a big boy, he knew how to read the book, he had even been allowed to take part in a pig funeral, despite the way it had all ended, and he shouldn't be frightened of Grampa any more, either.

"What do you mean – nobody there?" Mother did not understand. "He couldn't have gone anywhere, surely."

"Let Marta take a look," father ordered.

Marta climbed onto the chair, pushed her brother aside and peered over the edge of the oven.

"But he is there, see!" she called out and shot a fierce look at Little Jacob. "Grampa, Grampa, are you sleeping?"

But Grampa did not reply.

"He must be asleep, so fast asleep he can't hear a thing," Marta declared, but then the adults looked at each other, father quickly rose to his feet and climbed up to the top of the oven. A moment later he passed down something that at first reminded Little Jacob of a small twig doll, or a scarecrow. In height it was scarcely taller than him, on closer look, the boy recognised it as being Grampa, only he was tiny, dried out and completely shrunken.

"What's the matter with him?" Little Jacob asked, but mother and father sighed, and father

put Grampa down on the table like a piece of firewood.

"At least the parson won't have come in vain tomorrow," he said. "He won't get any sausages or ham, but at least he'll do something useful."

Grampa was hidden under his own blanket, it was stained and full of holes, and soon afterwards they put out the lights and went to bed. Nobody had any idea how early in the morning the parson would decide to show up, because he was always so eager for the killing of a pig that some years he would arrive at first light.