

**Biography:** Lauris Gundars (1958) is a Latvian playwright, scriptwriter, and director. Gundars has studied Law at the University of Latvia, Theatre Directing in Saint-Petersburg and Scriptwriting in Moscow. He is the author of *Dramatica or Rational Poetics*, a book on mastering tools for drama, which showcases his deep knowledge of dramatic history and theory and his wide-ranging experience in the field. He is also head of the Lauris Gundars' Writing Workshop, tutor at numerous European international writing workshops. Lauris Gundars teaches drama and communication at Latvian Academy of Arts, RISEBA University, and Riga Stradiņš University. He is the creator of MA playwriting program at the Liepāja University, and host at the "THEATRE ATTIC" radio show. He is a member of Latvia's Theatre Labour Association (since 2001) and the Latvian Writers' Union (since 1995).

### **Synopsis:**

The storyline of the novel begins on May 9, the day when contemporary Latvians openly split into two opposing camps; one section of society believing that the end of the Second World War resulted in the liberation of both Europe and the wider world from Nazism, mainly thanks to the heroic efforts of the USSR, while the other insists that this event ushered in a decades-long occupation of Latvia.

This time, the unexpected happens – Ints Bērziņš, a member of the *Saeima* and one of the brightest young supporters of nationalist ideals, is killed not far from the square where victory celebrations on May 9 are taking place. The obvious suspect is taxi driver Aleksey Volochko, the son of a demobilized Soviet army colonel and staunch supporter of USSR victory ideology, who is caught red-handed, still holding the murder weapon. Naturally, both ideological camps jump, unquestioningly, to their own conclusions: this murder is politically motivated. Both factions blame the other wholeheartedly for the crime.

The murder investigation is assigned to detective Sveta Liepa, a choice that is potentially suspicious in itself, given that her mother is Russian, she has arrived from the USSR.

Besides, Sveta has never made much of a name for herself professionally. Her physical

appearance serves only to cast more doubt on her assignment; she is referred to out of hearing as a "typical blond" and favours high heels and frivolous ruffles.

Fellow detectives do not envy her assignment to the case, although Sveta is delighted – at the outset it appears very straightforward with clear-cut motives. The case should have been solved in record time had it not been for a secret video recorder installed in Aleksey's taxi revealing a completely different series of events. The recording shows Ints Bērziņš' murder next to Aleksey's taxi at the hands of two masked men who then purposefully place the knife in Aleksey's hands. Inexplicably, this evidence disappears the very day that it is discovered and no trace of it can be found. In a state of shock, Aleksey blames Sveta for this, although for her it also comes as an unwelcome surprise ...

Sveta is instructed by her boss, Valdis Balodis, to conclude the case quickly and quietly, yet she goes against his orders and delves deeper into the case, going public with certain details in an attempt to ensure that the quest for truth should not be so easily waylaid in future. Sveta alone knows the true reason for her mission as she resolves to get the suspect absolved from a crime he did not commit. Lonely in her private life, she finds Aleksey's actions to correspond with her ideal of a perfect man, one worth saving since, even under such dire circumstances, he never loses faith with the idea that truth will eventually reign supreme.

Nonetheless, the fact that Sveta has fallen in love with her prime suspect is not revealed until later in the plot. Until then, her dynamic investigation is constantly in the headlines for the unprecedented number of high-profile people brought in for questioning. Along with people from all walks of life from the city and deep in the countryside, where Ints Bērziņš originally came from, party members and high-ranking government officials are also forced to testify.

Sveta is particularly interested in the activities of Ints' party members at the moment of his murder, some of which give great cause for concern. Her superior Valdis Balodis, on the

other hand, theorises that complications in the victim's personal life may have played a part in his murder when he is informed by a reliable source that the MP's sexual orientation may have caused discomfort in certain quarters. Meanwhile Aleksey himself tries to uncover who has been muddying both his and his father's name within his father's circle, discovering that his father, Vladimir, has fallen foul of party members with his condemnation of Russian's invasion of Ukraine. Aleksey's wife is also very busy, having decided to try and make money out of her husband's imprisonment while Aldis, the victim's brother, attempts to unearth the murderer from within their own family in which, as in many families, grievances have accumulated going back years. The investigation is constantly in the media, owing in part to the fact that Verners Ozoliņš, a successful entrepreneur and supporter of nationalist ideals, has put fifty thousand euros up for grabs for anyone providing watertight proof regarding the identity of the MP's murderer.

What seems at the outset to be quite a straightforward case takes on the semblance of a conspiracy when it emerges that factions of opposing parties may be involved, leading the investigation up more than one dead end. Aware of this, Sveta allows Aleksey to escape before having to pursue him in order to save his life. When it is revealed that she has been playing on both sides, Sveta is forced to go beneath the radar herself for a while. However, she continues her investigation unofficially, encountering grave danger at every step and in so doing, discovers certain public players whose existence most law-abiding citizens would never have guessed at in their wildest dreams.

The case is solved – the murder was committed to order yet its motives are rooted in an eternal human weakness – the reaping of financial gain through the exploitation of people's perception of historical facts and their significance, all dressed up with hifalutin words. The murderer is actually someone assumed to be above suspicion, someone present throughout the investigation yet hiding in plain sight. Unfortunately, Sveta is unable to prove it.

"Buried at State Expense" is a political thriller set in contemporary times. It offers a frank exploration of the roots of modern East European society and those processes that both define its present and condition its future.

## Excerpt

### Day 1

Blood, screams, heaving breath. Skulls crack like nutshells as he crushes them together like cockroaches. Flag poles split. Someone tries to break free but he prevents it – pushing them back, back under that terrifying press. He is up to his elbows in blood, bearing down with all his might. The great Mother falls along with the Black Men, not quick enough to shoot their machine guns. Then someone screams in a high-pitched voice, drowning out the other screams ... it's actually him screaming – he is scathed by the bright, five-pointed stars. It is his voice, he is screaming.

This is not generally the case at all - Aleksey never usually has nightmares on the night of May 9, victory day. What normally happens is that he wakes from a paradisaal dreamscape to find himself, as soon as he opens his eyes, back in the hell that is real life. This year, it is the other way round – moving upon waking from a sea of blood to a sunny corner in the park where his car is parked up. His dream seemed so real that Aleksey glances down at his hands, but there's not a trace of blood.

This May 9 is different. It's going to be different. His plane is due to take off in four hours, thirty-two minutes. He will be on it, sailing far above May 9. May 9 here, that is.

For the past two years, Aleksey has been trying to cut May 9 out of his life. Despite trying to skip it entirely, he always falls into its trap. He has tried not acknowledging it at all. One year, he started drinking early morning, later beating up his previously unknown drinking companion when he wished him a happy May 9.

'All the best for May 9!' he had said to Aleksey in Russian, inopportunoely.

Another time he had purposefully picked an argument with a policeman yet, rather than being locked up, as would usually be the case, he was left to go - in honour of May 9. This was done on the quiet, of course, as officially there's no May 9 in this country. It was a conspiracy between compatriots - bound by a tongue which had ceased being the country's official language close to thirty years ago. To top it off, he was released from the police van right there in Victory Square where the celebrations were in full swing – a location he was at pains to avoid even during his normal working day as a taxi driver.

Today will be different. He will avoid it.

Today he will be in Copenhagen. Looking at his phone, he sees it is already 22 degrees in that city. Here, it's barely 12. Here, the leaves on the trees are still in bud, there they will surely be open. The city will certainly already be in bloom.

Getting out of his car, Aleksey stretches before jogging round the park twice. Only then does he head off to wash in the hut by the children's playground which houses two dilapidated toilet cubicles and a narrow sink with cold running water. Aleksey has somehow grown accustomed to it – a full shower seems unnecessarily indulgent these days. He also finds the icy water invigorating for his shave. His white shirt has been ready and waiting for him for close on a month. Glancing in the mirror, he looks most appropriate as a passenger on the Copenhagen flight. Aleksey is surprised to realise that he likes what he sees. He straightens up to his full height of six foot two, today owning every inch.

'You'll be raking the money in today, won't you? The city will be heaving,' Karlis disappears into the cubicle in his brightly coloured, expensive running gear, he runs every morning trying to escape a possible stroke. Going into the toilets is part of Karlis' ritual, and he likes being chummy with simple folk, too.

'I've got a day off today,' says Aleksey, smiling at himself again in the mirror. He drags his words out, almost imperceptibly – not an accent as such, more a peculiarity of his speech.

He is running away, as far as he can. He doesn't even want to see Madara from the café in the park this morning. He wants to go unnoticed; all talk is superfluous today – just one word could chase away his long-forgotten trembling. Aleksey is indifferent to flying. Copenhagen is just a word with a complicated sound, nothing more – he trembles inwardly from his own daring. Daring to break free from May 9. From everything redundant and unnecessary. To be someone else.

Aleksey stops his taxi at an unfamiliar café – the double espresso turns out to be exceptionally good and no one knows him there. Maybe he has a certain air about him today – that's the second girl this morning to smile at him. He has forgotten his nightmare; the blood, cracking skulls, falling bronze figures and shiny stars cutting into his flesh. Aleksey realises the most poignant parts of the nightmare are mirrored on his body – in the dream, the pointed stars hit the palm of his left hand and his right side – exactly the places he hurt so badly a couple of days ago, falling into a large philadelphus bush in the park. He had been drinking, heavily. Alone.

But today it was sunny, a lovely sunny morning – the sort of day to shoot the lead actor in a film, heading for the airport and his flight to a glamorous destination. Copenhagen came in second place amongst his taxi passengers, after Tenerife. He'll leave his car in the car park at the airport over the next three days.

Going past the National Theatre, Aleksey's cab is hailed by an office worker in a hurry – a well-to-do fare but Aleksey just waves him away – it's his day off. He flashes his headlights, confusing the rejected fare. Aleksey smiles to himself. He drives over the suspension bridge. Nine kilometres to the airport.

At the traffic lights by the Zunda Yacht Club, Aleksey gets into the outside lane and suddenly realises he has taken the wrong turning – he's going towards Ķīpsala rather than the airport. He chuckles to himself, all taxi drivers have routes they drive along on automatic pilot – this is Aleksey's Mārupe route. He needs to change lane and get back over the bridge but it's too late – there is quite a build-up on the other side.

In fact, Aleksey knows why he turned off where he did without thinking. Apart from being in the left lane going away from the airport, Aleksey is also just a stone's throw from *Uzvaras laukums* – Victory Square. Damned place. Where skulls were cracking last night. Right over there on his left.

He turns left. Today Aleksey is immune, he will be immune. Today he is wearing a white shirt. He has a ticket for another world. But he has plenty of time just to drive past the place where the May 9 celebrations are held – time to do it five times over. He won't stay. Oh no, not today. He will prove to himself that he can be different, that he is different.

A top-of-the-range, eye-wateringly expensive BMW series 6 SUV, brand new, is driving in front of his taxi, a gold and black striped flag sticking out of its sunroof. In the past, it would have been a red flag bearing the sickle and hammer, but they are now banned in Latvia and BMW must make do with the colours of St. George's ribbon from the Tsarist Russian Empire.

Aleksey is further annoyed to note the car has a sticker, 'To Berlin!' in Cyrillic script. It's ironic how these people are often huge fans of German cars. He spots another Mercedes heading for Berlin, apparently with the entire carcass of a second world war T-34 tank tower on its roof. Aleksey looks away.

As he turns right onto Victory Boulevard, the Mother statue, toppled overnight, stares at him with her still, bronze eyes. The three terrifying soldiers in black with their Kalashnikovs are still in place – the liberators, liberators of the Mother. In the centre of the square stands the white cement finger with its five-pointed stars, five in number, pointing skywards, serving to emphasise the historical appropriateness of the menacing trio.

He is forced to slow down – the first groups of partygoers, bunches of red carnations in hand, are heading towards the monument: white haired people propped up by their grandchildren. Victory Day is an occasion when even those who are normally lonely aren't on their own. It's a celebration, a shared event. May 9 – the day of Soviet Army victory, although Stalin chose to celebrate the day subsequent to Hitler's official retreat. The day on this side of the world which, for the following half century, was defined as liberation day. As the Soviet empire fell apart, this myth successfully took root, cared for well and watered regularly. Nowadays, it's a sort of landmark. It's a way to check in with one's sense of

belonging and reinforce it. A day of victory over the whole world. The proof of supremacy where past, present and future are one and the same.

No one here is old enough to have taken part in that long-ago war. Grandchildren dress up in newly made uniforms of the deceased, asserting their right to wear the medals of their forefathers. A world that springs into existence in all its glory for everyone to witness just once a year; today. Nonetheless, Aleksey is aware that it isn't in complete hibernation the rest of the time. It nourishes itself, it is fed and encouraged.

Aleksey forbids himself from dwelling any further on this - he has mulled it all over a hundred times before. Besides, he once heard a white-haired man on TV saying that only what you are afraid of exists.

Overnight, tents have been put up in the large space surrounding the monument and they'll have copious amounts of food and vodka to see them through until tomorrow night. Although the stage is still empty, popular Soviet tunes from the Forties are blaring from loudspeakers for the enjoyment of all. Carnations, carnations and more carnations are laid on the cement border of the monument.

Aleksey tries to focus his thoughts on Copenhagen but instead finds himself unthinkingly humming along with the catchy Soviet melodies. He is Russian, these tunes are written in his chromosomes. This celebration speaks Russian, exclusively Russian. Aleksey, too, is the son of a Russian occupier. A Russian, thirty-seven years of age.

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The slanting sunrays do nothing to make the room cosier. Quite the opposite – they singe anything that hasn't yet faded. Not that there's much there. Just their clothes, shed moments earlier.

Sveta only started noticing the damp wallpaper and tatty furniture after about three months. Prior to that, she had only seen him; his eyes, his body, his ardour. It may equally have been her own ardour shielding her view of anything else; she hadn't been touched by a man for the past eight years. It had just sort of happened. A blonde head-turner and working in a male-dominated environment, she had had to be cautious at first, hard even. She had later gained a reputation as being inaccessible, so to say, something to be ticked off during stocktaking.

Valdis is her boss. Fifty-one, married. Let off the lead. At the beginning, Sveta had to comfort him for his instant ejaculation, though she found she could hold him back by counting his rhythmic thrusts. She didn't think it would help but it did. They started off getting as far as five but now Valdis can easily make it to forty. Sveta is not overexcited by the affair any longer, it has become a routine. Just as it is part of the routine to grasp tightly onto the shabby bedside table where a previous police dorm resident has engraved, "Fuck Russia".

'...42-43-44-45...' Valdis is now counting on his own. He is certainly very tender.

The two of them come here every day, sometimes more than once – their shared office is located in the opposite building. Valdis is certain no one has the slightest idea about them. Sveta is not so sure. She notices looks, meaningful glances. It has already been going on for more than six months, Valdis really needs to make his mind up as to what happens

next. He has touched on it himself, saying things, making promises. Sveta has lied to him, saying it wasn't important.

She is thirty-eight, childless, never been married. She has long blonde hair. Sveta notices that with every passing year she chooses higher heels and shorter skirts – she hates herself for this. Just as she hates herself for not knowing any other way to get herself noticed. She fell into the job as an investigator and would leave it quite happily when Valdis gets to fifty thrusts. Having said that, she would only trade it in for a baby. But she would go only for the full package, child and father. For the child's sake, not hers. Sveta is well-aware that one doting mother does not constitute a family. That endless longing for the unknown, that something one never experiences. Having an unsuccessful family is not on Sveta's to-do list and she wastes no time wishing for an only child and an imaginary family. She knows what that entails.

"...56...57!..."

Valdis collapses above her. He is heavy but Sveta likes it. If you have been alone for so long, you do.

There's the murmur of distant voices from the courtyard below then the sound of a car starting up. Valdis pushes himself up onto his hands and peers out over the windowsill into the courtyard.

'Rudzītis ...' Valdis pushes his face back into Sveta's hair. 'I should dismiss him, shouldn't I? He's lazy ...'

Sveta is still thinking about something else.

When the telephone rings, neither reach out to answer it.

Valdis has already fallen asleep.

The telephone rings for quite some time. Sveta keeps thinking for quite some time, too.

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In a petrol station, Aleksey has bought two sets of red, white and red state flags for the car. Big ones. One of them is already fluttering from the taxi's roof while Aleksey mounts another on the other side. For now, he has stowed the chequered taxi light from the top of the car in the boot. He still had plenty of time – 2 hours 52 minutes. From this side of the river it is only 8.1 kilometres to the airport. Aleksey has time to do everything he is planning. He has time to feel free in Riga.

When another taxi like his comes to a halt alongside him, Aleksey wishes he had pulled out of the petrol station before fixing the flags onto the car. Dmitry, or Dima, doesn't get out. He never talks much either, a good thing. Aleksey likes Dima's calm Russian talk – he himself uses many verbal exclamation marks with plenty of four-letter words thrown in. Dima never does this.

'You'll miss your plane, won't you?' Dima wasn't expecting to see Aleksey today, either here or anywhere else.

'I've got heaps of time!' Aleksey avoids looking Dima in the eye, a dead giveaway.

'Still planning on putting on a bit of a show here?'

'Just driving through, calm as can be!'

'But there's already traffic jam.'

'We'll make it!'

Aleksey's phone rings.

'Listen, can you take one of my fares for me? A rich fat cat, he's already called me three times ...'

'Turn that thing off, will you!' Dima sees straight through Aleksey.

'On your orders, sir!' Aleksey's phone beeps and goes dark. 'Done! Excellent!' He gives a forced, cheesy grin.

'Leave your car here, I'll give you a lift.'

'Oh, I haven't got ten euros for the fare, sorry ...'

That is a bad joke, awkward, both of them are aware of it.

'Do you want me to come with you part of the way?'

'Dima, you are an occupier, too. Why would you do that?'

It's impossible to say "occupier" in Russian without the accompanying subtext. Aleksey hates it, but the words are already out.

'Thank you, my friend,' Dima answers in Latvian - he never translates his thoughts into words. 'Say hello to Copenhagen for me.'

'Wait!' he says in Russian.

Dima is leaving.

'I'm sorry!' again in Russian.

As Dmitry's taxi turns the corner, Aleksey grabs his phone, suddenly desperate to call him. The display is black, seeing as Aleksey has not long turned it off.

The two flags flutter from the roof of Aleksey's car. Big ones.

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He hasn't slept all night; he just can't drop off. The constant interchange of excitement and the cold sweat of fear. Ints is used to it - it's just the way he is – whatever he has to do does not simply bide its time within him, waiting to be done at the pre-arranged time and place, but rather burns inside him. The excitement is genuine, as is the fear. Never mind, it's six of one, half a dozen of the other. Ints has never been able to wait for anything. Even his father had failed to help him keep a cool head and nowadays, many people interpret Ints' enthusiasm as a cheap trick, no more than a show for his voters who see the twenty-five-year-old member of parliament as genuine and sincere, just the man to represent them in the Latvian parliament, the *Saeima*. Over the past year, Ints' ratings have rocketed and there's no denying he's delighted about it.

'Just don't go giving in to anyone,' a complete stranger had said to him last week on the trolleybus. The man had stared at him at length before recognising him and saying this.

'Me? A push-over? I don't give in to anyone!' Ints had snapped, laughing.

But the old man had just got off at the marketplace as if the exchange had never taken place, apparently having lost all interest in the conversation.

All the same, the elderly man's piercing stare had tormented him all night – it was more a question of what he hadn't said and his sudden indifference. Ints doesn't give in to his voters; he is simply who he is. Not to those voting for him nor to those not voting for him, although that was precisely what everyone would be saying today. Not even to those who vote for him. But he is ready to engage with the topic as he knows it's not his style and he won't be handing out favours to anyone. Ints is great at comforting himself.

Towards morning, the youngest member of the *Saeima* realises that, quite rationally, he can work out exactly why someone likes him or not. He doesn't like the fact that he can work it out. Up to now, he has simply experienced it by living it. After high school he had been accepted with exceptional grades at the highly-esteemed Faculty of Film Directing. Six months later he had switched to Political Science – far closer to real life. Then he joined the youth section of the National Party, following the trail of the prettiest girl in his group. She married the then Minister of Welfare but the party never let Ints go. Someone had had a hunch about him that turned out to be true. The newly graduated go-getter stormed into the *Saeima* with the highest number of votes in his party, at least seven other hopeless candidates in his wake.

It was they who had given in to him, not the other way round. That was another thing he had worked out last night. His head was spinning slightly from lack of sleep. But it made the world a rather more playful place, something that today wouldn't go amiss. A serious take on serious matters was not his style.

'To victory, sir!' Ints is addressed in Russian by a grizzled-haired man holding up plastic glasses in both hands.

Ints knows full well that here in Victory Square on May 9, failure to clink glasses and drink a toast constitutes a serious offense. He had hoped no one would come up to him but the tiny, smiling man seems to have sprung out of nowhere.

'To victory!' Ints says, trying to mimic his pronunciation, but there's no getting rid of an accent overnight. Especially if you have never studied the language. Of course, back then, Ints had been delighted that his father refused to pay for Russian lessons at school. After the

collapse of the USSR they were no longer compulsory; Mrs Petrova, bless her soul, had retrained as a craft teacher. As it turned out, the language of the liberators had always been hated, throughout the years of occupation. Loathed and resented yet spoken. And then, enough was enough.

'It's not as if they tried to learn our dog language, as they would call it,' his father had hissed.

'To victory!' Again, the man attempts to clink the soundless plastic glasses together. The drink is transparent, strong – vodka. They drink. Unnoticed, Ints pours most of it to the ground.

Noise rumbles all around – the small stage is still going strong and now loudspeakers on the larger one are blasting music, too. Different Soviet army songs dating back from WW2 blare from each stage. Dotted round the square, groups are singing something else again or dancing, enjoying the Russian accordion – the *bayan*. The most enthusiastic dancers tend to be elderly women - indeed they are the only ones dancing in small groups.

'Are you from America?' The grey-haired fellow drinker is delighted to notice that Ints' jacket bears the same ribbons on the collar as his own – the gold and black stripes of the St George's Company of the Empire. This happens to be the first time Ints has ever worn that ribbon. He had reasoned it would render him invisible, help him blend into the crowd, even if only superficially. Instead, he has clearly been unmasked.

It's still a mystery to Ints, how he can gauge in a heartbeat whether the person in front of him is a compatriot or not. It isn't that he judges them on anything in particular as he works it out – it's more of an unconscious assessment of anyone he meets. They might

be wearing exactly the same suit and shoes as the next person but, without so much as exchanging a single word, he can tell instantly. And he knows that they know, too. He might get it wrong with one out of a thousand encounters. Like them, he's had decades of training.

Their neighbouring Estonians are the trickiest to detect while he recognises a Russian straight off. Back at university, he and his fellow Russian students had tried to pinpoint the defining characteristic, the specific feature that allowed them to pigeonhole a stranger, but they got no closer than vague descriptions, like a certain gleam in the eye or something in the smile. The fact that for years Russians had spoken perfect Latvian made it all the more difficult to pin down.

'Are you from America?' The man has already poured them out another shot.

'I'm one of you, one of you!' Ints laughs back in Russian. It's fine.

'Aren't you scared? You could get killed!'

Now both of them laugh.

The man hugs Ints, his grizzled head squeezing against Ints' chest.

'To victory!'

The man is certainly too young to have lived through the war himself and Ints is unsure whether he's referring to that historic victory or some undefined future one.

The celebrations in the square rumble on, audible to the best part of the city, exactly as intended.