

Biography: Inga Žolude (born 1984) is a Latvian prose writer. She studied English literature at the University of Latvia, and upon receiving the Fulbright scholarship attended Southern Illinois University in the USA (2008 - 2009). In 2015, she obtained her PhD. Žolude is a member of the Latvian Writers' Union since 2010. Her works have been translated into numerous languages.

Synopsis: The history of the orphanage of the red children starts in 1534 when Margot, the queen of Navarre, establishes *Hôpital des Enfants-Dieu*, later known as *Hôpital des Enfants-Rouges*, because of children's uniforms in red – the colour of compassion. In 1615, the title of the orphanage was given also to a market, founded by Louis XIII. The scenes from the 16th century orphanage in Paris, featuring French characters open the novel and are continued between the four big parts of the novel, each focusing on one of the three main characters carrying "a gene" of the red children that is reborn in Latvia in the 21st century, and a separate myth of the way children come into this world, for example, children are brought by a stork, or found. The last part of the novel intertwines all the three previously separate stories. The three main characters of the novel are Nadja, Mārīte, and Liesma. Nadja is a patient at a drug-addict institution, Mārīte is a nurse at the same institution, but Liesma is Mārīte's neighbour. Mārīte supports Liesma since she raises her son alone and encounters many difficulties. Liesma helps Mārīte to rescue Nadja. In the end they all reconcile with the core line of the life and fate, overcoming the notion of being an *orphan* in this life.

Excerpt

Les enfants rouges

'Two red children

Against the backdrop of a poor landscape '

M. Čaklais

It's the damp; the damp of the basement that enfolds everything. The door is smothered with tiny, splattered spots of mildew. But now it's fine, just a bit of mildew. A week ago, the entire outer wall was covered with a thin layer of ice. We had to move the beds away from the wall. Then, every so often during the night, there was a thud as one child or another fell out of bed. When the weather turned from frost to snowy, wet weather – so unusual for the time of year - the temperature rose to zero and then even went above it, all the ice on the wall melted and ran down to the floor. In the morning, yet-to-dry puddles of water had accumulated under the beds and, after the morning round, every other child was punished for bedwetting. The teachers and headmistress took it as a collective act of protest. December 31st, 1599. The last day of the old year. With each passing day, every child living here grew older and his or her chances correspondingly withered. As soon as they were old enough, the girls went to work as maids or were sent away to brothels. The boys, more often than not, became criminals, manual labourers or servants.

It seemed that they only had to get through these final hours and then the year would be over, everything would be all right or whatever God's will happened to be. God's will was well known here although it was not always defined as such, for instance when one of us died. There was no big burial procession, nothing, it was just used to frighten the rest of us – if you carry on like that, you will die just as Marcel or Renard or whoever else who had just left us did this morning. The bed of the deceased would be changed and a clean set of linen put on it. There was no great conviction, however, that it was clean as it looked just as it had done before. Everything here was made of the same red material. The uniform of

the deceased would be washed and await its turn to serve someone else. And we would wait to see who it would go to. Uniforms were in great demand. Too small, too big, torn, dirty. Any one of these could be used as an excuse, of course, it didn't prevent getting a clip round the ear, but that was nothing compared to the punishment when trousers were wet. Most of us were old enough to be able to do our business on our own, but anything was possible, especially if the older children lent a helping hand, those boys had other methods. The wet nappy was pulled over your face and you were made to stand by the pole for three hours with a bare bottom. The other children would run around, aiming at the bare bits with their catapults, shooting small pebbles or chewed chokeberries which stained all the lower part of the body or, in winter, throwing icy snow balls. The rest of the time, they were quite friendly. The girls were not threatened by this. They had their own things that were different, unknown to us.

We didn't nourish any great hopes although we did know that our grand patroness would remember us over the important festivity. She always sent a few carts of food for holidays. It was a paradox really as on holidays there was just one cook in the kitchen and she certainly didn't have time to prepare all the food that was brought. It goes without saying that the food wasn't stored away for a rainy day or divided up between us. Instead, we would see the few teachers on duty set off for home with large baskets and parcels, some even assisted by other family members who helped carry the load.

Not long after breakfast the first cart driver came up to the gate of the orphanage and rang. We raced to meet him because, in the ensuing confusion, it was always possible to wangle or pinch something. It was chickens, a cart full of chickens. We all had wet feet -

outside the snow was thawing and our red socks had stained them. The coachman had put one chicken aside for himself in a basket which he had placed on the dickey. He asked us to unload the chickens from the cart. When he had left, we made our way back with all the chickens encaged in the baskets. It was wet and cold. We were met by the headmistress, standing flattened in the doorway. She asked indignantly if we thought we were bringing the feathered creatures inside. 'Go to the sheds. I will have Monsieur Gardain come down with an axe. Each of you is to kill your own chicken. But, Madam! . . . Watch your mouth! If you want to eat, you have to butcher!'

'So, this is the house where nobody gets off' the driver says. When the bus breaks at the stop, I get off holding my unconscious baby, pressing my ear close to his chest, checking whether his heart is still beating, whether he is still breathing. I'm afraid he might be dead. As dead as this house. The facade of the house is split in two by an enormous crack as if lightning had struck it from the bottom up. I go to the door, Nadja is standing there, as well as some guy who is alive and undamaged. Nadja is petite, no taller than a child, about thirty years old and she probably weights about forty kilos. She is wearing a dirty t-shirt and tracksuit bottoms rolled up to her knee, the length of both arms scattered with the wells of puncture marks – blue syringe entrances to her veins, her dirty hair tied up in a ponytail. They cannot open the door. I have the keys and the fact that I have to put my sleeping, sick baby down on the ground to unlock the door makes me furious. I lay him down in the dilapidated stone entrance way and he flops back, his head bouncing heavily against the stone, I press my ear to his chest – he is breathing, I'm a bad mother. How could I let it go

this far? A heavy heart beats in my chest. I unlock the door. This appalling stairwell where Nadja and her like slouch around the whole time. They don't touch us, they just steal. We haven't been burgled yet. If they burgled me, all the money I've saved. . . I don't know what I would do, those bloody druggies! Mārite lives upstairs, she is the only decent being in this shitty house that I want to get as far away from as I possibly can, but it's the only place I can afford. Brown oil-painted floor - I lay my son down on it. He is just as big as the cardigan he is wearing, the sleeves hiding his little arms, he breathes. I undress him and place him, like a doll, in his cot. He is so deep in the profound sleep of sickness that nothing would wake him up. And let him sleep, the illness can only be overcome by sleeping. Only please, don't stop breathing, I'm a bad mother.

Mārite is standing in the doorway, waiting for us to go and have a smoke. She says that idiot Nadja is fiddling about behind the door and we shouldn't leave anything in there as she would nick it without the slightest prick to her conscience. I have just one suitcase containing documents, papers and some clothes, all my money. We go to have a smoke, I lock the wobbly door from which the central part of the lock is totally worn away and just hangs on the wooden plate of the door. She is able to break in, steal from me, kill my child. But I'm dying to have a smoke, I need to forget it all even if just for a little while. Mārite's red, carefree cheekbones and smile; she is the only one to offer me any support here, even if it's only because she is neither a drug-addict nor an alcoholic. A nurse who, God knows why, lives in this cesspit where all the electric wires hang out of the walls in the corridors like blood vessels in a disemboweled body. Oh, God, please watch over us. We are smoking on the mezzanine floor where the shabby white window frame hangs from its hinge like the

wing of an angel of God and which, like a magic carpet, should please take me to the Land of Happiness! Mārite asks me how my little one is doing. I don't know. So bad, I believe I'm also so bad, I'm bad. . .He will get better, she interrupts me. She says he must surely have fallen sick because of the cold and damp in this place, no decent heating, cracks everywhere. When we come back, the door is ajar, watched over by Rainers and Ilva, two teenagers under Nadja's command. In my room, Nadja is kneeling over the suitcase, she hasn't found the money, just a pack of cigarettes. Without stopping to think that I don't want to dirty my hands, I grab her by the hair. I'm feeling such a weight, her silly outbursts were just what I lacked, I turn her face towards me – bitch, sprawled on the ground all soft and misty, I shove my foot in her face. You bitch, going to steal from me, were you? I'll teach you a lesson! Can't you see my child is sick! I need money for the doctor! Rainers and Ilva hesitate, unsure whether to come in and save Nadja. Out, I yell, don't you dare to put your stinking feet in my room! Nadja has already rolled all over my floor, I feel as if everything is soiled. Mārite takes the money, one hundred and fifty lats, folds the bank notes in half and tells me that she will store it in her room. Her door is much safer than mine.

I wake up. Thanks God, it was just a nightmare. None of it has happened yet.

It is burning. The air is burning, shooting in flames up into the clouds like last year's grass, grey blue smoke spreading in all directions. The first heat of summer is so sudden that the air seems to be burning. All the children have red hats, pigtails and strands of hair escaping from their headdresses and banging against their chests as they run to the sandpit. The air has congealed, becoming dense and heavy, the trees are fragrant and immobile in the absence of any breeze, just scattering small blotchy shadows down from their leaves. Yet go

and tell the children that they should stay in the shade, that the sun is too strong? The children are chasing each other's shadows. They jump on them and their legs, up to their ankles, turn pitch black. Just the trio of friends, as close as sisters, are sitting in the shade of a tree, playing with their dolls – Liesma, Mārite and Nadja. They are calm and slow, only their arms are moving. In their hands they hold dolls which they swap as if they were different personalities. The kindergarten teacher can never work out which one is Liesma, Mārite or Nadja. Their role-playing messes up her head. Three girls, each different from the other two, all of them wearing a red dress, as if so different. And they play such a puzzling game – exchanging their clothes, dolls, hair styles. Nadja's knee-length socks always fall down and encase her ankles in wrinkles, pompons dragging along the ground, grey and covered in debris like a mutt's tail. Mārite still wets her knickers and, during the afternoon nap, she almost always wets the bed. Liesma is as white as a sheet, splashed with yellow drops of tea, her red, boyishly-cut hair standing up in all direction like a burning thistle.

The red children! The teacher is calling them inside. They seem to have no intention of doing as they are told. They could carry on playing outside until they dropped dead of starvation, like little tin soldiers. The teacher is cajoling and chasing them back in to the kindergarten as if they were cows or stubborn lambs. Once is enough for the more obedient ones who are now standing on the threshold and waiting. There are usually about two of them who just can't stop and spin about like shuttles as if they were on a sugar high, then they can't get their breath back for quite a while and wheeze, breathless, like exhausted dogs. But the trio are never bothered. If they do go anywhere, they always go together, hand in hand, dolls under their arms, as slowly as someone on death row. Slowly. The three

sisters' walk is a true test of the teacher's nerves. She cajoles, chases, pushes them but there is no acceleration to their slowness. Different timing. When the trio reach the door, the most active spinners are back outside again, breathlessly measuring the perimeter. Running, they can't hear the teacher's calls. Meanwhile, even the calmest, most biddable children have started to fidget. At long last, the teacher gathers them all together and, under her wing, accompanies them inside.

When Mārīte wets her last pair of clean knickers, having already wet all her spares, Nadja and Liesma sort out who is to lend her theirs. They have all been so mixed up that they can no longer tell who's are who's.

The teacher propels them to the sink as if were in a concentration camp and makes them wash their hands. It's the next test of her nerves. Shouting, shoving, soap sliding to the floor, splashing and flooding. The trio never part with their dolls. The plastic bodies are the first ones to get their hands clean. After that, the three friends themselves, slowly, unnervingly slowly, pass the soap bar synchronically from one hand to the other while their teacher, her back to the doorframe, nervously beats out the rhythm. The stream of water slows until it begins to change form, freezing at the end of the tap into long icicles. Then, the teacher snatches a towel and rubs the soap from the palms of the three friends.

Soup. The main course with a meatball. A fruit compote. There is always someone who doesn't eat something. Someone chokes, someone spills his food, someone pinches someone else's meatball, spits in a nearby plate, chucks around the inedible bits of lunch. The three friends are feeding their dolls. The dolls usually have one third of their meals, which explains why the trio are so skinny and the dolls so fat. Then they themselves start

eating, they form a circle and feed each other. Liesma eats everything. Mārite and Nadja are always teasing her about that, so even if Liesma is still a bit hungry, she always leaves something on her plate.

Time for bed. That's the most fun part. All the children dressed alike. All in red pyjamas, running around the bedroom like harbingers of good fortune. It always ends in tears which then develops into quiet sobbing under the covers and later even in their sleep. The three friends take each other by the hand and fall asleep on their backs, their dolls wedged under their armpits. Mārite is the first to unhook her little hand. She dreams of running water and a tinkling sound. Again, she wets the bed. When she wakes, her doll gets a good scolding. The teacher changes Mārite's bed, the red children zip around the room – clothes have been lost, someone is putting a shirt on inside-out, someone else is putting sandals on the wrong feet, putting trousers on the wrong way back-to-front. At last, they have all happily managed to dress themselves in their red clothes. Male and female ladybirds.