

**Biography:** Poet and playwright Māra Zālīte was born in 1952 in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia, where her family had been deported in 1941 by the Soviet regime. When Zālīte was four years old, her family returned to Latvia. In addition to her writing career, Zālīte has worked at the Latvian Writers' Union, served as editor-in-chief of the literary magazine *Karogs*, and headed the Latvian Copyright Agency. She has won numerous literary award, including the prestigious J. G. Herder Prize in 1993. She is an emeritus member of the Latvian Academy of Sciences. Her works have been translated into several languages, including German, Russian, English, Estonian, Lithuanian, and Swedish, among others.

**Synopsis:** *Five Fingers* was the winner of the 2013 Annual Latvian Literature Award. It is a fictionalized childhood memoir in which the author describes her family's return from Siberia to Latvia in the 1950s, and her life in Latvia in the late 1950s and early 1960s. "In her career, Zālīte has been best known as a poet and playwright... Poetry and drama are also present in *Five Fingers*; the best writing in the book has a combination of precise, poetic detail and dramatic purpose, carrying us to the end of the novel where the protagonist, Laura, promises to fulfil her grandfather's dying wish – to give his wedding ring to his son, Reinis, 'upon his return' from Siberia, where he disappeared without a trace after being deported. This means that Laura has taken on the task of remembering.

## Excerpt

### The Train

Laura has been riding the train her entire life. Perhaps even longer. A train is not something good. More likely it's something evil. Like a gigantic dragon blowing rage from its nostrils. Dreadful anger at the entire world, which the dragon every now and then vents in the form of a hissing mist.

"What was that?"

Papa thinks that the train lets off steam and that it wouldn't harm Laura to do the same. What? Let off some steam? Laura? Yes, then she'd fidget less. How can papa compare her to a train, how can he? Laura pulls a long face.

The dragon howls, whistles and chokes, and whips its tail. Laura with her mamma and papa are riding the train in its very tail. Hence the dragon flings them about like old fools. Laura has no faith in the train, not even a smidgeon of faith. Maybe the train is insane. Maybe the train has no mind whatsoever. How can a person know in what direction this nutty pile of iron is dragging them? A person may think that it's to Latvia, but who knows for sure? How can one be certain?

The train can't do anything on its own, mamma tries to comfort her. The train has to ride straight along the tracks, not to the right or to the left. The tracks control this steed like reins would. Laura can calm herself/simmer down, because the tracks lead directly to Latvia. One more seam and then the town of Ikšķile! Papa laughs. Laura doesn't want to explain all the words she's just spoken. Another time she would, but right now Laura doesn't want any part of such talks.

Laura can't bear it any longer, can't stand it any more! Can't and doesn't want to, and that's all! Can't bear any longer the constant jolting and shunt rattling, from which Laura feels ill and has to vomit. She doesn't want to smell the sharp and bitter odour of coal and metal. She doesn't want to stomach the sweat and smelly feet of other people when they take their boots off to lie down on the compartment's sleeping bunks. Many don't have socks but rather rags wrapped around their feet. She doesn't want the fumes of alcohol or Russian cigarettes in the train corridors, doesn't want the tea in metal containers, because soon after drinking it, she has to go and pee to the train's toilet. Laura always tries to hold on until the very last minute.

The toilet. Let's go to the toilet. Laura had trusted mamma. But what she's seen there... It makes Laura want to vomit, she doesn't dare even think about it. The most dreadful part of the train is the toilet. A small child can fall into the toilet bowl and fall out through the open hole! It's the most horrendous thing that Laura can imagine. The toilet hole moves and disappears, you can't aim into it, through it you can see flashing sleepers and threatening, vengeful earth among the tracks. In the middle of the tracks the soil is like a furrow, where people sow their shit. A small child can only close her eyes and yell. Laura doesn't want the smell, the jolting, or for her stomach to hurt. She's made up her mind! Laura will get off the train and never again ride on such a smelly dragon! She'll think of a different way to get to Latvia. She'll collect her things. Mamma is reading a book, her head bent. Let her read, she'll lift her head, but Laura will already be gone.

"Laura! Where are you off to?" Papa seems cheerful.

Just wait, wait until Laura gets off. You'll see then if papa is still cheerful.

"Laura won't go by train! Laura will go by boat! Laura is going to get off!"

"Climb up on the baggage rack and don't talk nonsense! You won't get off, it won't happen! Pull, just keep pulling at that door. The conductor will come and throw you out!"

Mamma has lifted her head from the book and is angry.

"Laura's going to go by boat!"

"Where are you going to get such a boat? No boats go to Latvia."

"Why don't they go?"

"Because boats don't have legs."

"Why don't they?"

"Figure it out yourself."

Laura doesn't want to figure out anything! Laura doesn't want to have any reasons for going by train. Besides that with such a conductor who can throw children out of a moving train!

Their trip had started with a ship. With a big, white ship. With a big ship and with great jubilation. It was no shabby slipper! Why did papa have to talk like that? It was a big, white ship. On a ship you could go out to get fresh air, look at the blue sky, let the sun warm up hurting knees and elbows, and you could breathe in the big river. A river could be trusted. A river is alive. A river is wise. Not like the tracks that don't have either a heart or a mind. A river smells of fresh fish. Breathing in ever so deeply, you can breathe in some sweet fish. Some totally tiny fish, not the big ones, of course.

Laura draws breaths full of very tiny, the tiniest of fish. So tiny, that you can't see them with your eyes, only sense how the tiny fish begin to joyfully play in her heart. How did they get there?

The fish help Laura feel more alive.

Laura doesn't even have sea sickness, not even a bit. Some people are ill with it. How can you be seasick on a river? Papa and mamma aren't ill either. They stand embracing by the edge of the boat called the portside, and silently sing a Latvian song: "Blow ye winds, drive my boat, drive me on to Courland" Not a little boat, but a ship! Laura objects on behalf of the ship, but they just gaze into each other's eyes. They don't notice the child at all!

Laura understands that there is freedom on the ship that sails along the river. That's what the talk has been about, what the talk is about all the time. At least she begins to sense this. At least something like it. Water and the sky. The wind and the sun. Joy that she has the tiny fish in her heart. The ship that calmly sails there, where you, a person, most

avidly yearn to be. When you, the person, can make a deal with the wind for it to help you.

Drive me on to Courland or Kurzeme, as they call it in Latvia.

Kurzeme is the same as Latvia.

### **A Russian Babushka and Eggs**

"Mamma, how long still?" Laura asks and questions, begs and pleads again and again, already for the umpteenth time. Laura knows, however, that it's useless.

Still a while, it can't be helped. Be patient.

Be patient, don't fidget, don't grumble, whimper, whine, wail, don't be silly! — all of it Laura has heard many times before. Laura can recite it all like a verse. Even when she's woken up at night.

"Papa, will it be long now?" Just in case, if after all, miracles do happen, if by the least chance, papa knows better.

"Still a while. Calm down."

Once more the verse. Be calm, quiet down, be well-behaved and obedient, smart, be a big girl and clever. What more can they think of that Laura must be? Oh, yes. Laura also has to be happy because she's going home. But how much longer? What does longer mean? How long is longer? What if it's for all of life?

"Why still a while longer? Mamma?"

"Because Latvia is far."

"Why is Latvia far? Papa?"

"Because it's not near."

"Why isn't it near?"

"Because why ends with y! Vsyo! I'm up to my dofiga! I'm going to go for a smoke."

That too isn't anything new.

The three of them for quite a while now have been alone in their train compartment.

Now and then there is a fourth person. He or she enters the compartment, rides for a day or a night and once more leaves. Or two nights, but also — leaves. Everyone rides for a while and then gets off! Only Laura with her mamma and papa ride and ride and ride. What if they have long ago driven by Latvia?

Laura can't forget the skinny Russian babushka.

On seeing her, Laura falls ill. A person is healthy, healthy and here at once – falls ill. An illness seizes one. She sees the babushka and falls ill. Fever, aching knees and elbows swell growing pink like peonies. Laura is convinced that it's connected to the Russian babushka. She has a bag.

When did the babushka appear here? Did she enter through the walls? Maybe she's an old snake hag? Maybe there are snakes in her bag? It's suspicious that she holds the bag an arm's length away. She's not a good person, certainly not, you can sense that. Evil oozes from babushka. Like coldness. Like the smell of old age. The smell of old age is when you pee your pants but don't wash them, an old age smell is when food goes bad.

What if she's a ghost? She's sitting silently and not moving, stiffly, so very stiffly. What if she's a corpse? A corpse, a corpse, she's not alive! Maybe carried in and placed here? The grey fleecy shawl covers her face, from which only looms a pointed and dried-out chin with a few long, sparse hairs.

Laura wants to, but can't forget her.

Is she mute? Or deaf? Around the old woman's neck is hung a sign with the address where she's headed. She hasn't responded with even half-a word, or a glance either to mamma or to papa, but they've just wanted to help.

A dead corpse, which someone had brought in and propped up in the corner of the compartment. This is what Laura has decided.

But no such thing! Babushka just pretends to be dead! Like a fox, well that fox which the fisherman found on the road. Well, that fisherman who had caught a whole wagon-full of fish and going home also found a dead fox on the road. What luck! The fisherman was delighted – his wife would have the best of collars. But the fox quietly threw all the fish out of the wagon and in the end fled, so there! Animals do this to fool someone, to escape. Pretend to be dead. But do people?

A fly lands on babushka's nose. If she were a corpse, she wouldn't have raised her hand, wouldn't have swatted and killed the fly, but, if she had tried to kill it, wouldn't have. She's alive after all and crafty.

Laura doesn't sleep the whole night because babushka also doesn't sleep, just pretends to. Mamma and papa already are snoring, when babushka totally comes to life in the dark and begins to busy herself. Hastily she sets to checking if any of her eggs have cracked. Those are snake's eggs! Laura has seen in the boreal forest how a snake lays, no releases eggs from itself. A whole string of them. They're held together by a transparent membrane. When the membrane dries out, tiny snakelets crawl out of the eggs. Well at the beginning the snakelets are the size of fat worms. Just black not rosy like worms. Just quick, not slow like worms. The minute they're out of the eggs, they hurry away in all directions like swift flowing rivulets. What's to happen now, if in the compartment snakelets should

hatch? The emergency stop lever will have to be pulled. Laura will pull it! The train will have to stop; it won't be able to continue driving being full of snakes!

Each one of the eggs is wrapped separately in newspaper. Babushka carefully unwraps each egg, then makes sure the egg isn't broken, and wraps it up again. Now and then the old woman turns the egg this way and that, clicking her tongue with pleasure – oh, what a lovely egg! Then she wraps it up again, all the time mumbling, grumbling something to herself. The eggs do however look much like hens' eggs. Too big to be snake eggs. But what if they're the eggs of a big boa constrictor? It's good that Laura knows where the emergency stop lever is; good that papa has shown it to her. But if the stop lever is pulled for no good reason, then she'd be in lots of trouble. Then she could be put off the train and asked to pay a fine and she would not get to Latvia! No, Laura will wait for a while yet to pull the stop lever; Laura won't pull the lever at all, then better that the train be full of boa constrictors! The rustling of the newspapers and the mumbling has prevented Laura from falling asleep. From the upper baggage rack she covertly watches babushka; maybe after all she is a ghost. Maybe she is?

Suddenly their eyes meet. Laura shrinks back in embarrassment, because it's not good to lurk about like this and look secretly at someone.

In babushka's eyes fear and hatred appear. Great, great dreadful fear. Great, great, dreadful hatred. Laura freezes. Fear of Laura? Hatred of Laura? Why? What for?

The old woman draws the bag of eggs to her gaunt chest and presses it close. Laura hears the fragile egg shells crack. Hens' eggs. Hens. Snake eggs wouldn't crack like that.

"Don't squeeze the eggs like that, they'll break!" Laura whispers and realizes that she's speaking in Latvian.

Maybe she should have whispered in Russian because babushka now grows more afraid, presses the bag of eggs even closer to her chest, the eggshells cracking even more audibly. Babushka keeps crossing herself, as if Laura were the devil himself, and groans so furiously, furiously groans, casts an evil eye at her, maybe curses her, the old witch?

No way, snake hag! Laura will stand firm. It's not for nothing that Barrack Madalina knew such things! In thought you had to draw around yourself a kind of gold hoop, erect a kind of strong wall. In thought. But what was most important, Madalina always urged – that when you're being cursed, you shouldn't be afraid! Never ever! Otherwise you'd be cursed. Fear is like a hole in the wall, like a break in the gold hoop. But if you're not afraid then the curse boomerangs back to the person cursing you. In addition it increases ten times in its power.

Laura draws the hoop around herself, erects a wall and is not afraid. With all her strength. A gold hoop, a strong wall. And she's not afraid. Why should Laura be afraid? If there's no ghost or corpse? If the eggs are not snake eggs. Why should Laura be afraid if around her is the gold hoop and the strong wall? They're there.

It's a pity though that the old woman is crushing all the eggs. Lovely brown and white hens' eggs. Hens have hatched them, tried their best, babushka has saved and wrapped them, brought them for somebody, and now she takes and crashes them. Some of the eggs babushka has saved too long and now they're broken and, ugh, how they smell!

But she herself is to blame! Why hate? Why curse? Why be afraid? Why put old eggs in a bag? What reasonable person ever puts eggs in a bag? Could she not have brought a basket?

Laura turns away, doesn't look any more, gets sleepy because Laura is dreadfully tired from having drawn the hoop, erected a wall and not having fought her fear. Also

babushka has again become still and is silent. There's nothing more to look at there. The eggs smell. Laura draws a white sheet over her head. She feels illness in her elbows and knees. In the dark she can't see them, but she knows they're swollen and rosy like peonies.

In the morning babushka as mysteriously as she had arrived just as mysteriously has disappeared. There's not even a whiff of babushka. That's just a saying. In fact the smell has remained, but the illness has passed. Laura is no longer feverish. The peonies in her knees are no longer blooming. Maybe babushka had been a ghost or a corpse after all? Was or wasn't a corpse, was or wasn't a ghost, but the tiny fish that Laura had breathed in on the ship, babushka has tossed from the wagon like the crafty fox. The tiny fish no longer play in Laura's heart.

Laura hasn't rested at all during her sleep. The Laughing Child was racing all night along the narrow wagon corridor. The laughter of the Laughing Child was loud. The attendant tried to catch the child, caught him and threw him out of the window, but after a while the Laughing Child was back again and once more raced along the narrow wagon corridor and laughed, and the conductor again tried to catch him and throw him out of the window, and so on many times.

And what's more Laura also experienced her own birth and that was altogether terrible, because Laura was inside an egg. Inside an egg wanting to get out, because Laura had to be born, but the egg didn't have a crackable, thin shell, which Laura could have broken easily. The egg was soft-shelled, and Laura had to press with all her strength against soft and glutinous rubber, against the strong and unyielding casing with all her strength, until she got out. Laura had nearly smothered in that egg, that soft-shell egg, and besides it was terrible not knowing what kind of an egg it was and what Laura would be when she got out.

### **When Laura Was Born**

When Laura was born, no one held her among sweet pea blossoms for her to grow up beautiful.

When Laura was born no one swaddled her in a tablecloth so she always would in her life always be at a bounteous table.

When Laura was born, no one heated up water with linden wood.

When Laura was born no one smeared honey on her lips so she, when grown, would have many suitors.

All these ancient Latvian customs ensuring good fortune did not ease Laura's entry into this world.

When Laura was born, it was a freezing minus 50 degrees centigrade.

When Laura was born, she was born before full-term.

Mamma didn't have milk in her breasts.

For mamma to have milk in her breasts, these words should have been spoken: my milk comes from Jelgava, my milk comes from Liepāja, my milk comes from Riga, my milk comes from all the lakes, my milk comes from all the rivers, from all the springs, from all around!

When Laura was born, no one said such words because the barrack in Siberia was too far from the Latvian cities of Jelgava, Liepāja and Riga, too far were the lakes, rivers and springs.

Mamma's breasts were dry.

When Laura was born, she was meant to die.

When Laura was born she wasn't Laura yet.

Then the barrack came to life.

Three Lithuanian women insisted that the infant was not allowed to die without being christened because without a christening no one can enter God's kingdom, no one can receive His mercy and salvation.

Three Lithuanian women – Maria, Laima and Laura – created an altar, decorating it with the straw from their beds and with cedar cones.

Maria gave up her white embroidered blouse and that became the altar cloth.

Laima gave her brightest ploska – a little tea light, which then became the christening candle.

Laura melted some snow in a bowl, and that was the holy water.

I baptize you in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

And although I'm neither a bishop nor a priest and not even a deacon, my rights and duties as a catholic woman are to baptize you.

Without your consent, you have been given a frail and dimming life of the body, thus, not asking for consent, I give you eternal life in Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the name of the most holy Trinity I make the sign of the cross on your forehead. And although I'm neither a bishop nor a priest and not even a deacon, by my rights and duties as a catholic woman I make the sign of the cross on your forehead.

Thus spoke all – Maria, Laima and Laura – one after the other.

"A name!" What name for the child? We have to give her a name," whispered Juka the Finn from Karelia. From the Kalevala lands, he always used to proudly add.

"Maybe there's no need? You do understand," quietly protested the Ukrainian Oleksander.

His parents at one time were veterinarians in Rivna, a town near Lviva. They had no objections to animal meat in their diet, live or dead, big or small. All of it is just protein, they taught Oleksander and he had survived eating his own lice.

A left-over, I'm a leftover, he laughed.

In the barrack all were left-overs.

"Why no need? Of course, there's a need! Loudly, as she was accustomed to, exclaimed Ciganka Moldovanka.

She wasn't either a gypsy or a Moldovian. Hers was just a nickname. Madalina was a Romanian. She knew how to tell fortunes with cards.

"It must be done quickly," urged Kima.

Kima herself was not enthusiastic about her name because it was formed from Komunistchesky Internacional Melodiozi, but such and similar word combinations were frowned upon in the barrack. Nonetheless it was Kima's only memento left by her parents. They were Russian engineers and created the plans for submarines in Leningrad. Dog-faced monsters shot them already before the war even though they were chistiye that is pure Russians and committed Communists. Kima had ceased growing at seven years of age, and the barrack people had trouble dealing with her as an adult.

Mamma was weak, she reached out for her little girl, which the Lithuanian women were now holding and baptizing in the Pope's faith, "But we're Lutherans", she whispered soundlessly, "but we're Lutherans". She was reaching out also in her mind only, also screaming and weeping only in her mind, because in reality she lay there silent and unmoving.

Was she screaming and crying from happiness in her mind that the child conceived in love, had been born?

Was she screaming and crying from sorrow that she didn't have milk in her breasts, didn't have sustenance for the child, because her breasts were empty and she, in giving life, would also be the death of her child?

Guilt broke mamma's heart and crushed her with a helplessness as heavy as the ice the length of a river.

Mamma lost consciousness.

Mrs. Austrums was the oldest person in the barrack, and this wasn't at all the first birth that she, who had once been the Lames district postmistress in Latvia, had to assist with in Siberia.

But this was almost like her own child.

Why almost? She and Lillia, the newborn's grandmother, had been driven to Siberia in the same cattle car from one and the same rural district, torn from the same soil like live flesh, from Latvia.

Their husbands had been friends from elementary school times and eleven years before had been shot and killed on the same day in Riga, in the KGB building's basement, in ancient beautiful Riga! They had shared everything equally, even a nut kernel. Mrs Austrums would never have grandchildren because she was the only one remaining of her vast family.

Lillia's first grandchild had by now been washed and swaddled; everything had been done as it had to be done. Lillia herself didn't yet know that the little one had arrived. She just as/along with Mrs. Austrums, lived in the adjacent barrack since Anda had married Jānis. That's why Lillia's knitted little hats and booties weren't here. They could do without them for a while. Mrs. Austrums knew that Lillia had not only sewn little shirts but also crocheted around the edges of the cloth diapers, but who could have foreseen this before-term birth.

Lillia had been called away to the city.

It was fortunate that these were no longer the insane years, when you didn't know in what to swaddle or not a baby. Men in those times had to give away the rags with which they wrapped their feet, their last rags. If the child died, the men could get their foot wrappings back. Usually they got them back.

This child could live if only her sucking instinct had developed. Mrs Austrums anxiously placed the child at her mother's breast.

The instincts had developed, but there was no milk in the mother's breast.

In such instances one had to think of the mother. First of all about the mother. Let the child fend as it might. The mother had to be saved. The mother who herself was no more than a child, not even twenty years old. With luck, she'd have other children.

Mrs Austrums washed mamma's groin with alcohol and camphor oil, and she collected the afterbirth from the sheet. It looked as if it had been ejected nicely, they'd throw it out later, for now it wasn't good to open and shut the door, she was happy that the bleeding had almost stopped. The child was small so there were no tears. Only the weakness.

Papa, stunned and confused, was stroking mamma's face and looking around in a daze. What is happening here? What are the barrack people doing? What kind of a theatre have they staged here? At a time when he was perhaps going to lose both – his daughter and wife, his only precious, live souls? What salvation, what mercy? What eternal life?

Papa didn't believe in either a Catholic or a Lutheran God, or in a devil, or Allah, or cards, or Mohammed. Not one of them. In nothing.

Now and then papa hurried to add firewood to the cast iron stove. To boil more water. One more tea kettle, one more. Fire up the stove, again and again. Only thus could

he help his first born. His beloved wife! By not letting in the cold from outside, the freezing minus fifty centigrade.

"Give the child a name! She should be called after one of the godmothers. Maybe – Maria?" proposed the Tatar Ibrahim.

He came from an ancient and famous Crimean merchant family and his God was Allah, and His Prophet Muhammad. He had carved an arrow in a barrack's log. It pointed in the direction of Mecca.

"Or else Laima? That's both a Lithuanian and a Latvian word meaning both happiness and good fortune," said Juka.

"Laima sounds too gentle. The name needs harshness and power," said Asya.

Asya was a Jewess from London, an opera singer with perfect pitch and she was an English spy. The latter she had denied despite extensive torture.

That's why she had broken fingers, one by one the Cheka dog-faced monsters had broken all of Asya's fingers. Five fingers of her right hand and five fingers of her left hand. Now her hands tenderly touched the child's head.

"Laura?"

"Laura," said Maria.

"Laura," said Laima.

"Laura," whispered Laura. "Jesus Maria," she continued, crossing herself and shivering in superstitious fear.

At that moment little Laura began to cry. Maria, holding the child close to her breast, blushed like a rose, because the little one plainly was turning her mouth to Maria's breast, but Maria was still a young girl.

"She wants to eat." Maria was frightened and embarrassed.

"Maybe Anda her mamma will still have milk. She needs protein. I've got bear's meat buried. It just needs to be unfrozen." Oleksander headed for the door and ran into the Georgian woman Maja.

Mrs Austrums had brought Maja from the adjacent barrack, remembering, thanks be to God, thank God, remembering that nine months ago she had brought little Levan into this world! If the barrack's floor was not so cold, the boy would already be crawling.

"Too soon you mourn that child! Give her here!" Maja said and drew out her large milk-filled breast from her floral flannel blouse. Maja stuck her nipple in Laura's mouth. The crying ceased. From Maja's crown of abundant and black hair dripped melting frost. Bare-headed she had run here.

Silence set in in the barrack.

If the child would take to the breast, she would live. If not...

Mamma regained consciousness. As if through a shifting mist she gazed at Maja's large, milk-filled breast and at her little one, who restlessly fidgeted and moaned.

Papa standing at the open stove door holding firewood froze.

Juka's round face turned rosy.

Maria, Laima and Laura, in whose name the child now was called, were praying.

Hail Maria, full of grace.

Madalina hastily laid out some cards.

Ibrahim gazed in the direction of Mecca.

Kima repeatedly crossed herself, like the Greek Orthodox do.

Asya firmly grasped her broken fingers.

Maja squirted a stream of milk into the little one's mouth.

The little one choked and sneezed.

Everyone waited.

Maja, her movements assured, once more placed her nipple as brown and firm as a bud into the child's tiny mouth.

Laura began to avidly suck.

"Chame, chame, deda genazvalos," Maja, smiling, said in Georgian." Levan will be your milk brother. I'll have enough for both of you," Maya added proudly.

"A crazy life. The cards show a crazy life. Crazy. But the main thing is that she's alive."

Madalina had finally laid out the cards.