

# Magical Realism under the Soviet Occupation: The Case of Zigmunds Skujiņš

Magiškasis realizmas sovietų okupacijos metais:  
Zigmunto Skujinio atvejis

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*Abstract:* A manifestation of magical realism in Latvian literature under the Soviet occupation was affected by literary and theoretical works available exclusively for the elite of the Soviet Union and publications in exile. In this article,<sup>1</sup> the author focuses on the translations of literary works related to magical realism, available in Latvia during the Era of Stagnation, and their impact on the works of Latvian writers. The case study covers the work of Latvian writer Zigmunds Skujiņš, and particularly his novel *Gulta ar zelta kāju* (*The Bed with a Golden Leg*, 1984), one of the most essential Latvian novels written in the 1980s and also the most popular. Some critics have accented novel's similarities with Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1967) in the composition and poetics of the *magic* of the novel. In the novel written on the threshold of Latvian national independence, Skujiņš formally accepted Soviet modernity, though he was keen to follow and explore the paths that led to it, looking for the roots of modernity in the history of the Latvian nation and not the new order brought by its Soviet colonizers. A bestseller, the novel allowed Skujiņš to express essential ideas of non-violent resistance in colonial situation.

*Keywords:* Latvian literature, Era of Stagnation, perestroika, magical realism, Soviet tourism, Soviet colonialism.

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*Santrauka:* Magiškojo realizmo apraiškoms Latvijoje sovietų okupacijos metais įtakos turėjo literatūra ir teoriniai tekstai, prieinami tik Sovietų Sąjungos elitui, ir iševijoje leisti leidiniai. Šiame straipsnyje autorius daugiausia dėmesio skiria

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literatūros kūrinių, susijusių su magiškuoju realizmu ir prieinamų Latvijoje stagnacijos laikotarpiu, vertimams, jų įtakai latvių rašytojų kūrybai. Nagrinėjamas latvių rašytojo Zigmundo Skujinio atvejis, ypač jo romanas *Gulta ar zelta kāju* (*Lova su augsine koja*, 1984), vienas esminių ir populiariausių latvių romanų, parašytų XX a. 9-ame dešimtmetyje. Kai kurie kritikai pabrėžė romano kompozicijos ir *magiškosios* poetikos giminystę su Gabrielio Garcíos Márquezo romanu *Cien años de soledad* (*Šimtas metų vienatvės*, 1967). Romane, sukurtame prieš Latvijos nepriklausomybės lūžį, Skujinis formaliai pripažino sovietinį modernizmą, nors sekė ir tyrinėjo kelius, kurie vedė į išsilaisvinimą, modernizmo šaknų ieškodamas latvių tautos istorijoje, o ne sovietinių kolonizatorių atneštoje naujoje santvarkoje. Skaitomiausiu kūriniu tapęs romanas leido Skujiniui išsakyti esmines nesmurtinio pasipriešinimo kolonijiniame būvyje idėjas.

*Raktažodžiai:* latvių literatūra, stagnacija, *perestroika*, magiškas realizmas, sovietinis turizmas, sovietų kolonializmas.

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## Introduction

The article is based on the author's studies of the relations between the most popular and recognized Latvian prose writers, known as the Soviet *intelligentsia*, and the occupation regime of the middle and late Soviet period (1968–1991) that partly overlaps with the Era of Stagnation (1964–1982), a popular and convenient term to describe the era of Leonid Brezhnev (and his short-term followers, Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko), which lasted until Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985. It has been claimed that “the political, public, and scholarly debate over this period in Soviet history is often wedged over the lines of “pre-crisis” or “pre-renewal” (Fainberg, Kalinovsky 2016: xiv). It has also been stressed that following Gorbachev's reforms, “‘stagnation’ became the primary explanation of the failure of the Soviet socialist project” (Ibid.).

Latvia's situation during the occupation has been directly linked to its geopolitical position. The Estonian scholar Epp Annus has introduced the *Western borderlands* concept regarding the Baltic states, countries that

enjoyed the advantage of a still-active pre-Soviet cultural memory, in comparison with those lands where Sovietization processes started immediately in the post-revolutionary years: in the Western borderlands, a living memory kept alive continuities with pre-Soviet times. (Annus 2018: 240)

These continuities were strengthened by visits to the neighboring West and other foreign countries, the acquisition of prohibited or partly permitted literary works, contacts with like-minded people in neighboring countries, and by the Latvian elite in exile. Through the works published in the 1980s, together with oral memory, writers encouraged non-violent resistance and a return to the pre-war system of Western and democratic values.

In contrast to the West, where literary works often leave an impact only on narrow intellectual circles or serve the entertainment industry, in the Soviet system, literature played an enormous role in almost everyone's life. Thus, it was the popular writers and their works, which reflected both European and general democratic values, who recorded and anticipated changes in the Soviet system and prepared society for those changes—the revival of democratic values and the irreversible social liberalization, which occurred in the late stages of the Soviet system. In addition to their literary work, those writers devoted their energy to preserving national identity and national values and, drawing on their sense of mission and authority, paving the way for the Singing Revolution.

The purpose of this article is to reveal how a popular Latvian prose writer, highly valued by readers and critics, who cooperated and did not conflict with the Soviet authorities, created a literary work using popular creative techniques known in the Soviet Union and the world, connecting them with the literary trends, traditionally close to the Latvian reader. This study follows the trend within the postcolonial studies revealing the process of realizing and constructing the national and political identity of colonized people groups and nationalities in the colonial state and on the way to regaining independence. The analysis of the novel focuses on a nation as the novel's protagonist and travel impressions as a manifestation of magical realism. The study also traces the entry of the concept of *magical realism* into Latvian literature and criticism.

The postcolonial theory and its proposed view of the changes and historical transformations of the political self-awareness of nations in the second half of the 20th century were chosen as the methodological basis of the study.

## A Theoretical Frame

The manifestation of magical realism in prose in the world or in Latvia during the Soviet occupation can be studied and specified by the colonial and postcolonial

condition (Anderson 2016). The Latvian scholar Benedikts Kalnačs has pointed out that

however, after occupying forces returned to the Baltic area in 1940 and then again, in the aftermath of the Second World War, their history [of the Baltic countries—*JO*] was reinterpreted through the Soviet lens. The earlier historical experience of the nations living in these territories became a subject to be not only forgotten but also intentionally erased from memory, and in this process the Soviet authorities attempted to force oblivion upon the cultural diversity which had been characteristic for these parts of the world. (Kalnačs 2015: 48)

The recovery of nation's memory closely relates to the concept of *national nostalgia*. In the colonial era, national nostalgia includes modernity and the mythical fullness of the past (Annus 2018: 9-11), a framework that helps

to understand national nostalgia and the discourses of national essentialism during the Soviet colonial era in the Western borderlands: the colonial split separated the recent past into an imaginary sphere of authentic existence and mythical fullness, something now violently displaced by the establishment of the new social order (Ibid.: 10).

The modernity of the past in literature of the occupation period tends to collide with the *Soviet modernity*, the concept that refers to the period when the Soviet Union existed as a socialist state with its distinct political, social, and cultural characteristics. During the Era of Stagnation, the 1960s and 1970s saw further social and cultural changes within Soviet society, as it was a period of relative stability and economic growth, marked by advancements in science and technology, and an increase in consumer goods availability. However, political dissent was suppressed, and censorship remained a prominent feature of Soviet life until eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. "For the Baltics," Annus claims, "generally speaking, and with some notable exceptions, Soviet modernity was experienced as an inferior kind of modernity, a second-rate program, compared to the modernity of the more developed West" (Annus 2018: 109).

Writing about another prominent Latvian prose writer of the Era of Stagnation, Mārgeris Zariņš, Latvian scholar Kaspars Zalāns has stated:

When socialist realism meets Western modernism, especially within a single work of art, socialist realism and socialism almost always get outplayed, because their essential thematic, social, and aesthetic ideals are shallow and hypocritical by nature. (Zalāns 2023)

In his novel *The Bed with a Golden Leg*, Skujiņš continued, updated and maintained the idea of the role and involvement of the Latvian people in the most important events of the 20th century, using the techniques of magical realism and modernism to circumvent the usual method of socialist realism.

Speaking about writers during the period of occupation and their relationship with the Soviet power, the concepts of *collaboration* and *resistance* are crucial. The Latvian scholar Daina Bleiere has stated:

In fact, the only practically applicable criterion is one's attitude towards statehood. Collaboration/collaborationism is possible in the case where the independent state still exists in some form or another, or there is a realistic hope or possibility of the restoration of its independence. (Bleiere 2021: 29–30)

Bleiere also claims that a definition that distinguishes the nature of resistance from political objectives helps to better differentiate the opposition of cultural activists from the Soviet authorities in Latvia during the 1960s–1980s. This opposition is generally aligned with the idea of being “not in favor of” the policies, whereas individual acts of resistance include minor actions, like political anecdotes or refusing to participate in elections or Soviet events. It is important to note that while resistance that is “not in favor of” can be seen as bordering on collaboration, it would be incorrect to automatically classify all actions against the Soviet regime as passive resistance, particularly when considering the cultural activists' expressions of resistance. Determining the boundaries between collaboration, resistance, and adaptation can be challenging, as the actions of individuals within specific historical contexts often defy strict classification (Ibid: 41–43).

Skujiņš himself has claimed that he always tried to write in such a way that his works “passed through” and reached the readers: “I am not a carpenter who prides himself on making bookcases without considering the width and height of the door in front” (Skujiņš 2018: 234). Hence, it is reasonable to assert that, at least regarding Skujiņš, a loyal writer who received recognition from both the

authorities and critics, and who was appreciated by readers across generations in occupied Latvia (today referred as a professional and commercial writer), there is no clear reason to discuss his active collaboration or resistance. Instead, it is more accurate to acknowledge the application of his professional skills, talent, and status in the best interest of the nation.

## Magical Realism in Latvia

The concept of magical realism in relation to literature has been known in Latvia at least since 1931, from the annotation of Pierre Herbart's novel *Rôdeur* in the literary periodical *Domas* (L.B. 1931: 970). In the context of this article, an essential mention of the concept was made in November 1969, when the leading Latvian cultural weekly *Literatūra un Māksla* published an article titled "Romāna un kontinenta likteņi" ("The Fates of Romance and the Continent"), with no author mentioned. In fact, it was a retelling of an article from the French newspaper *Le Figaro littéraire*, which discussed the flourishing of South American literature and the success of Garcia Marquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* ([Anon.] 1969).

In the summer of the following year, from June to August, the Russian translation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was published in the literary magazine *Inostrannaja literatura* in Moscow. In 1971 (the second edition in 1979), it was published as a book and was a huge success. Although the novel was published in Latvian more than ten years later, in 1981, from the articles written by writers and critics it is possible to conclude that the Russian translation of the book was widely read and discussed, to the point that Marquez gained practical followers in Latvian literature.<sup>2</sup> Until the next translations of his works in the 1980s, Marquez's name and the concept of magical realism continued to circulate,<sup>3</sup>

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2 See: Čākurs 1973: 164; also later in exile, in the USA, literary scholar Valija Ruņģe wrote about the Latvian exile author, Benita Veisberga, in 1995: "Something that no longer exists" is of great importance in the lives of those who have left this homeland [...]. The writer mentions: "[...] we drive (now) miles far, to other cities, where would be something from Latvia" [...]. Latvia lives in us, we—in Latvia. It could be called our magical realism" (Ruņģe 1995: 3, 18).

3 See: Treimane 1986: 6.

gradually transforming into an idea that had to do less, paradoxically, with means of expression than literary quality and fundamentality of a novel or other literary work or film. Already in the 1970s and 1980s, it was becoming fashionable to tag an author as a magical realist (especially, after the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in Latvian); this continued in the 1990s, when the Baltic writers became a kind of “export product” and had to be placed in a particular box. In 1993, Latvian poet Māra Zālīte said she would like to read “a thick, good [...] [Latvian] novel, in the spirit of magical realism, polyphonic, which would cover all forms of human existence—mythical, intellectual, ethnic, which would carry life-affirming, great power, great ethical potential. A novel to be read without interrupting for a moment” (Ābele 1995).<sup>4</sup> This understanding of a full-blooded work filled with fantasy and historical allusions as being representative of magical realism is also reflected in cinema. Daira Āboliņa’s book about the film director Jānis Streičs is called *Jāņa Streiča maģiskais realisms (Jānis Streičs’ Magical Realism)* (Āboliņa 2016). Streičs, like Skujiņš, created his essential work during the Era of Stagnation. In a critique of this book, the reviewer said:

That is why I conclude that the concept of magical realism in Streičs’ films is basically not used as a term, but as a sign of quality—to say that the director’s works are good, influential, that they are not only realistic. (Radzobe 2017)

In addition to Marquez, it must be mentioned that the most significant manifestation of magical realism in modern European literature occurs in the works of German novelist Günter Grass. He also has followers in Latvian literature. Grass’ *Danziger Trilogie (Danzig Trilogy)*, especially *Die Blechtrommel (The Tin Drum, 1959)*, was imported illegally into the Soviet Union and was available to a narrow circle that could read German or English. The only broadly available publication of Grass’ works in the USSR until 1983 was the translation of *Katz und Maus (Cat and Mouse, 1961)*, the second part of the *Danzig Trilogy*; it was published in a partially censored version in the literary magazine *Inostrannaja literatura* in May 1968.

However, Grass’ works were accessible to Latvian writers in exile, some of whom read, were influenced, and even exchanged letters with Grass, for

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4 All quotations from the Latvian are translated by the author of the article.

example, Gunars Janovskis, who exiled in Great Britain. So Grass' influence, albeit through several filters, also reached Latvia. In the first half of the 1980s, Volker Schlöndorff's film adaptation of *The Tin Drum* (1979) was screened in narrow intelligentsia circles.

In summary, despite its rather widespread use, the term *magical realism* was used merely as a label in Soviet Latvia and in exile, and was not critically applied in literary criticism.

### **A Case Study: Zigmunds Skujiņš and His Novel *The Bed with a Golden Leg* (1984)**

In my research, I distinguish three generations: 1) writers who were already adults by the Soviet occupation in 1940; 2) writers who were teenagers until 1940 and whose vision of the world was only partially related to what they experienced before the war; and 3) writers who were children in 1940 and whose worldview was formed during the Soviet era.

Zigmunds Skujiņš (1926–2022), one of the most outstanding and popular Latvian writers in the second half of the 20th century, belongs to the second group. His biography is complex, atypical for writers of his generation, but his rise from the working-class environment and activity in the first year of communist occupation allow him to occupy almost as stable a position as his slightly older writers who served in the Red Army (see: Oga 2022). During the first Russian occupation, in 1940, at the age of thirteen, as a young pioneer, Skujiņš was included in the Latvian youth group to participate in the International Youth Day celebrations in Moscow. During the German occupation in 1944, he was taken to Germany, ended up in a hospital and later in the camp of interned Latvian legionnaires. He decided to return to Riga. In 1946, Skujiņš started working in the Komsomol newspaper *Padomju Jaunatne*, and in 1948, he published his first literary works. In September 1957, Skujiņš's short story *Vienas nakts hronika* (*A Night's Chronicle*) was published in *Karogs* magazine, and a short story *Traģēdija* (*Tragedy*) was published a year later. Both works provoked a wide discussion and attacks on the author for denigrating Soviet life in the press and society. Leading and young writers were involved in the debates siding with Skujiņš, articles defending the writer were published in the exile press in the



UK and the USA. Skujiņš left his job at the new *Padomju Jaunatne* and started working at the satirical magazine *Dadzis*. With his first novel *Kolumba mazdēli* (*The Grandsons of Columbus*, 1961; 11 editions in 7 languages), Skujiņš became known in Latvia and in the USSR. Within ten years, Skujiņš had walked the path from an almost dangerous anti-Soviet element to the laureate of the LPSR State Prize (1965). Approaching the threshold of forty years, he was aware of his mission that the writer must be fully responsible for what he writes—both as temporary arrangement and in front of eternity.

Since the mid-1960s, he had been increasingly touching on topics that other writers avoided, including the issues of Latvia, the nation, and the identity of the artist in the context of Europe and the world, with an observant and unashamed view across time. It is his interest in life, not only his own, but that of a person and humanity in general, following not only literary phenomena but also historical and political developments, inventions and innovations that enabled Skujiņš to be interesting to the readers of different generations. At the time of the publication of *The Bed with a Golden Leg*, he had a solid readership and was highly valued both in Latvia and exile. The high quality of Skujiņš' prose was to some extent guaranteed by his success; books, titles and honors, and especially translations, allowed him to be financially independent and unaffiliated (except for the work as a prose consultant in the Latvia's Writers' Union). He had also never been a member of the Communist Party.

In 1976, the scholar in exile, Rolfs Ekmanis, admitted that Skujiņš was “one of those literati who have been able to straddle the literary fence: he writes good literature as easily as he does sermonizing propaganda pieces” (Ekmanis 1978: 315). These “sermonizing propaganda pieces” also touch important issues (for example, the relationship between Latvians in the occupied Latvia and exile).

In 1982, at the event organized by the Academy of Sciences, Skujiņš read a paper (also later published in periodical) opposing Russification,<sup>5</sup> and continued with this topic in a public event in 1987. In 1988, Skujiņš opposed the initiative of Boris Pugo, the first secretary of the Communist Party of Latvia, to merge schools with the Latvian language of instruction with Russian schools. Skujiņš also spoke on this topic at the Plenum of Creative Unions in 1988, demanding

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5 In the 1940s, the Latvian population of 1.9 million shrank about 30 percent. The demographic losses were caused by Latvia's accession to the USSR because of the people being evacuated, deported, or shot (Krūmiņš [n.d.]).

to strengthen the right to education in the native language. In the play *Brunču medības* (*The Hunt for Skirts*, written in 1971, published in 1973), an 18th-century mast sorter says to his children:

No step back! And we have nowhere to retreat. Where shall we retreat? To the manor? No, dear children, rights do not fall into one's lap by themselves. Rights must be fought for. And first of all, you should be convinced in your heart that you have such a right. I sincerely believe that all people come into this world free and that everyone has the right to be free. Latvians also have such rights. (Skujiņš 1973: 124)

In 1985, for *The Bed with a Golden Leg* Skujiņš was awarded the honorary title of People's Writer of the LPSR. In 1986, he was one of the founders of the Latvian Cultural Foundation. In 1989, he joined the People's Front, participated in demonstrations and meetings, in 1991, was actively involved in the barricade movement. In 1992, the Supreme Council of Latvia elected Skujiņš the chairman of the first Latvian Radio and Television Council for a term of three years.

Skujiņš's works have been published in about 7 million copies in more than 20 languages, ranking him among the most translated Latvian writers. *The Bed with a Golden Leg* has been translated into Russian, Estonian, Bulgarian, and more recently in German (in 2022); English and Dutch translations are forthcoming.

Zigmunds Skujiņš, popular and, largely because of that popularity, influential writer, was rather acting as an opinion leader (speaking in contemporary terminology), defender of interests of the nation under the circumstances where the restoration of Latvia's independence, except for some dissidents, was neither an idealistic nor a realistic plan, having concerns about the existence of the Latvian language and nation in the current totalitarian situation. Poetically, it could be described as maintaining hope in a collaborative environment, as Skujiņš claims in the last chapter of *The Bed with a Golden Leg*:

Let the legends of Vējagali end with the scream of the arrival of the newly born Kristaps. With him comes new hope. With him comes a new energy. Because the big swirls of human passions are driven forward by an unstoppable driving force—people's destinies, creating equally unstoppable consequences—new destinies. (Skujiņš 1984: 445)

In 2008, in the afterword of the Bulgarian translation of the novel, Skujiņš was much more direct, stating that “recently, many pages of history are being revised and rewritten. This does not apply to the Legends of Vējagali. The Vējagali [read *Latvians—JO*] have always lived by the Vējagali laws, sometimes losing a lot, but never losing hope. Hope that was needed yesterday and will be needed tomorrow. For us and for you and for everyone” (Skujiņš 2008a: 471).

Skujiņš’s novel *The Bed with a Golden Leg* is his most ambitious work, one of the most impressive and popular novels among the works published during the Era of Stagnation and in Latvian literature in general, with a total print run of 195,000. The subtitle of the novel, *The Legends of the Vējagali*, describes the nature of the book: it is a story of one Latvian family over a century, told through tales and legends. Some critics have acknowledged its similarities with García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in the composition and poetics of the *magic* of the novel (Rožkalne 1985; Berelis 1989: 15–16), though Skujiņš himself only partially recognized Marquez’s influence, drawing attention to Selma Lagerlöf’s novel *Gösta Berlings saga* (*The Saga of Gosta Berling*, 1891) and other works that always been popular in Latvia<sup>6</sup> (Skujiņš 2018: 323–324), i.e., a combination of fables, tales and writer’s own memory and stories about the efforts of earlier generations. It is also consistent with what Rushdie, the epigone of magical realism, has said: “The thing about magical realism—so called—is that it’s a newish name for a very old thing” (Rushdie 2015). Undeniably, Skujiņš’s novel was also somewhat influenced by Knut Hamsun’s *The August Trilogy* (1927–1933). The echoes of Lagerlöf and Hamsun strengthened the interest of Latvian readers in Scandinavian literature, and its reflections probably contributed to the popularity of Skujiņš’s novel.

The novel, like most of the Skujiņš’s works from the 1970s–1990s, encouraged to believe in the power of the nation, to learn about the Latvian people and the history of Latvia, important personalities, educating the readers about hidden or unwanted episodes of history as much as possible.

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6 Lagerlöf’s complete works in fifteen volumes, translated directly from Swedish, were published in Latvia in 1938–1939; *The Saga of Gosta Berling* has been staged in various and long-lived versions since 1933 (Orehovs [n.d.]).

## A Nation as the Novel's Protagonist

Lithuanian scholar Violeta Kelertas has stated: a literary work in the Soviet period,

if it can be made to include things like magical realism, was also convenient for the colonized mentality in various cultural efforts, as it disrupted the colonizer's unilateral discourse and opened it up to possibilities for censorship evasion. Censors read only on a superficial level and could not delve into the depths of a normal analysis because subtexts and extra-textual allusions were too complicated to prove. There was a complicity between the author and the reader and this was a loop the censor was left out of. (Kelertas 2006: 5)

Most probably, Skujiņš chose a particular literary technique to tell his story without restrictions for historical periods or events, hiding behind the genre of *legend*. It is also possible that he was influenced by an article, in 1981, in *Literatūra un Māksla*, which promoted the newly published translation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by García Márquez. The Russian critic highlighted the epigraph of one of Vargas Llosa's works, i.e., the quote of Honoré de Balzac, stating that “a real novelist must study the life of the whole society, because the novel is the private history of the people” (Zverevs 1981: 14).

A common genre of Latvian prose in the Era of Stagnation was the *family saga*, the revival of which began in the 1980s with *The Bed with a Golden Leg* and some other voluminous novels.<sup>7</sup> The genre regained its popularity in the 1980s, portraying “almost everything that in the 20th century alone, the entire Latvian nation has experienced, and definitely—the most tragic developments of that time” (Berelis 2021). In Skujiņš's novel, unlike the works of other authors (Ilze Indrāne, Harijs Gulbis, and Dagnija Zigmonte), “history [...] is treated not only as a tragedy or eternal fate for Latvians, “the heavy plough,” but rather like a kaleidoscopic burlesque” (Ibid.). In this aspect, Skujiņš was the pioneer, and he also added some magical realism attributes to his novel.

The plot of the novel begins in the second half of the 19th century. The Vējagali family of the seaside has two patriarchs. The first patriarch is Noass

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<sup>7</sup> Harijs' Gulbis *Doņuleja* (*Rush Vale*, 1981), Ilze Indrāne's *Zemesvēži dzirdēt* (*Hearing the Mole-Cricket*, 1984), also novels by Alberts Bels and Visvaldis Lāms.

(Noah): a classical embodiment of a sea wolf, a captain with great strength and boisterous temperament, and a successful merchant and owner of many ships who, at the end of the sailing era, loses a large part of his property. The other man is Augusts, Noass' opposite: a gentle farmer who lives to the age of ninety-nine. The family experiences Latvia's history throughout the 20th century, until the early 1980s. For example, one of Noass' sons is shot during the 1905 revolution; the other becomes a professional revolutionary, travels to the United States and organizes a revolutionary movement there, spends a long time in prison in a Central American country before returning to Russia in the late 1930s.

Regarding the historical references in the plot, Skujiņš uses every tool available to him, including until-then hidden and undisclosed facts, for example, Stalin's Great Purge of 1936-1938 in Moscow, deportations, and Latvian legionnaires during WWII. In the mid-1980s, this was considered a bold and compelling move; though critics, pretending to be naïve, blamed the author for historical inaccuracies, too much harmony and optimism, and even a lack of tragedy. They also worried about incompetent local and foreign readers (Jugāne 1985; Vāverniece 1985; Sokolova 1986; Plēsuma 1985).

The following examples illustrate how the author described a historical episode about the deportations of 1949, hiding behind an uncertain imagery, corresponding to the genre of legend:

It was at the end of February or the beginning of March, how can one remember so finely after so many years. Paulis, having spent the night playing, reappeared at home in a dim light. Understandably, he's tired as hell and he's already drunk a bit too. As if through the fog, as through the smoke, he had noticed—everywhere such lively movement, cars are driving, people are running. (Skujiņš 1984: 329-330)

The shooting of Latvians in Moscow in 1937-1938 is concealed in the following terrifying sentences:

After taking a shower, putting on a fresh shirt and shaving his beard, Eduards tried to call Peterss, but the connection was lost. He also tried to call Bērziņš and Eidemanis, Alksnis and Rudzutaks, but equally unsuccessfully. No one answered, there was a strange tone, as if he had not dialed the number at all. (Skujiņš 1984: 238)

On the re-publication of the novel *Vīrietis labākajos gados* (*Man in His Prime*, 1974), the author commented on the sentence “After the tragic death of his father in 1937” and the involvement of censorship, which was similar to the case discussed above:

The mysterious wording was dictated by Soviet censorship. In fact, it should be said directly that Kalsons as a Latvian was shot in the repressions in Russia in 1937-1938. (Skujins 2008b: 67)

In *The Bed with a Golden Leg*, there are about forty characters who are family members. The plot of the novel involves Latvians on all continents of the world. One might accept the Vējagali family as the main hero of the novel, or, more generally, the Latvian nation, expressed as an allegory of the Vējagali house, where the two families live under one roof, symbolizing the two parts of the nation: those engaged in seafaring and those who tend the land. As the writer and critic Regīna Ezera has stated, there are two ancestral types, which Skujiņš programmed into the Vējagali family, sailors and peasants. These types reoccur from generation to generation, are born again in another person, another era, another rendition. These archetypes also determine not only propensities, but fate, as the novel strongly shows through Jēkabs Ernests, who is so deeply attached to the earth that, when detached from it forcefully, he dies first mentally and then physically (Ezera 1985). Some critics have also noted that “relatively paler images [id est, inexpressive characters] exist in the final section of the book” (Ibid.), and that the narration becomes hasty. This can be interpreted as “a sign of the population’s dwindling viability” (Hausmanis 2001: 103), as a warning cry for the crucial phase of non-violent resistance in the name of the nation’s continuation. There is even an episode where the author suggests that he—under the name of Zigmunds Vējagals—is also a successor to the large Vējagali family (Skujiņš 1984: 47-48).

Noass’ gold, playfully mentioned in the novel’s title, is an important symbol in the novel. The legend carried through the generations tells that gold is hidden in the leg of Noass’ bed, and the family, especially Noass’ daughter Leontīne, is keen to find it. This hidden gold may symbolize the Latvian nation’s core value and the fundamental value of life. In the concluding section of the novel, the diggers find Noass’ tools hidden before leaving the family house during World

War I. Symbolically, these tools are gold, a lasting value that Noass has saved for his descendants. On the contrary, Noass had never hidden his precious metal, instead he remelted it into his uniform's bright buttons. As this had been unknown to Noass' descendants, over the years they lost some of the buttons, considering them worthless trinkets that can be used in a jukebox instead of coins.

The oppressed nation's vital strength, creative spirit, and optimism in the face of fate have been embodied in the diverse characters and destinies of the Vējagali family. The repeated burning and renewal of the Vējagali family house ("Fortress") symbolizes the revival of the Latvian nation. One can also interpret it as the re-restoring of national independence, though the author himself has never claimed such symbolism.

### **Travel Impressions as a Manifestation of Magical Realism**

Skujiņš was also one of the few who devoted himself exclusively to literature since 1973. The novels and their translations into foreign languages, as well as popularity provided financial opportunities for tourist trips. Writer's daughter, Inga Skujiņa, has written: "Parents traveled a lot. As soon as money for the books appeared, they packed their bags for closer or farther journeys" (Skujiņa 2005: 487). Skujiņš and his wife were among the first Soviet tourists who visited Japan in 1964; as a tourist Skujiņš also went to Sweden and Finland (1963), Africa (Sierra Leone, Senegal, Morocco and Algeria in 1965), cruise trip to Italy, Greece and Turkey (1965), Belgium (1965), Zambia and Tanzania (1967) and France (1968). In the 1970s and 1980s, Skujiņš traveled little. As a member of the prose section of the Latvian Committee for Cultural Relations Committee with Compatriots Abroad, Skujiņš went to Romania in 1971, where he met Romanian writers to discuss the problems of a novel and the Federal Republic of Germany in 1973 (together with Andris Vējāns, poet and editor-in-chief of the literary magazine *Karogs*). In 1977, Skujiņš traveled to Great Britain with his daughter by a private invitation of the writer Gunars Janovskis. In 1988, he visited Australia. The evidence of all those trips, except for the business trip to Romania and the trip to Australia, can be found in the archives of the Latvian Soviet Writers' Union. (See: Eversone, Oga 2022)

Skujiņš had written relatively few travel notes; his impressions from the trips to Japan, Africa and France in the 1960s were published in periodicals and about ten years later were included in the collection of short stories and descriptions *Uzbrukums vēdzirnāvām* (*An Attack on the Windmill*, 1976). It is important to emphasize that unlike other authors, such as Zenta Ērgle, Andrejs Dripe and others, who published documentary travel notes, Skujiņš rendered his experiences in the USSR and abroad into fiction: in the short stories *Elbrus Driver* (1952), *Juhannes from Ruhnu* (1958), *Toast* (1967) and *Double Fantasy* (1985), the novels *Silver Clouds* (1966), *An Ermine on Asphalt* (1978), and *The Bed with a Golden Leg* (1984).

A significant role in the structure, plot, characters, historical and informational aspects of *The Bed with a Golden Leg* is played by the wide geography of the action both in the territory of Latvia and the countries near and far, where the author has made the heroes of his novel go. As a message about the fate of the Latvian family for almost a century, in terms of reflecting historical events, the novel describes equally well both the possible and the impossible themes during the Era of Stagnation.

*The Bed with a Golden Leg* reflects on various journeys—the impressions gained from author's direct experiences (in Moscow, Finland and England), imagined trips (USA and Mexico), memories and legends (his childhood in Rīga and its suburbs (Ilģuciems), the stories of friends and acquaintances about rural towns and villages—(Ainaži and Burtnieki), covering both real and imaginary places: Zunte, which in many ways resembles Ainaži, also various other imagined places in Latvia, as well as the country in South America, Mundos, and its capital Suarez, which is depicted in relative detail in the novel.<sup>8</sup>

The following part of the article analyses two Skujiņš's trips abroad, their reflection in the novel and echoes in writer's memoirs.

The first episode—year 1940 in Moscow—testifies to the vividness of Skujiņš's memory, which has remained unique and unchanged despite the later multiple business trips to Moscow, for example, regularly participating in the congresses of the Writers' Union of the USSR (from 1967 to 1991, Skujiņš was a board member of the Union of Writers of the USSR). In this episode, the author

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8 More than 200 geographical places and objects are mentioned in the novel; the scope of author's fantasy allows Limbaži and Rio de Janeiro, Detroit and Vestiena, Ludza and *La Manche* to appear next to each other in the novel.



portrays Marta Vējagala, the foster daughter of Augusts Vējagals, a cleaner at the Opera House, who became a responsible Soviet employee in 1940:

At the end of August, Marta was assigned to a delegation that went to Moscow. The thought that for the first time in her life she would go on a trip seemed to throw her from reality into a dream. Of course, this dream was also a reality, but a different one, unrelated to what was previously known [...]. (Skujiņš 1984: 264)

In the episode, the boundary between the dream and reality is vividly marked and at the same time blurred, because

this journey in Marta's life became something like a mountain range in a monotonous plain; the most significant, the most remarkable element from any point of view, the peak, the landmark and to some extent also the divide. Time suddenly seemed to break, dividing into two significantly different stages—before the trip and after the trip (Ibid.).

The episode directly reflects Skujiņš's own experiences in Moscow, where he as one of the first young pioneers of occupied Latvia went to the international youth festival in August 1940. Several scenes from his memory are integrated into the novel and the memoir. It can be identified by comparing the two quotes—one from *The Bed with a Golden Leg* and another one from the memoirs published after the restoration of independence:

If Marta were asked what she expected from the trip, she would answer—miracles. And that's why in Marta's memory both *the luxurious hotel*<sup>9</sup>, where the Indian maharaja stayed on the same floor with her, and the pink, black-seeded watermelon, which she had not even heard of before, and the jewelry vault of the ancient Russian rulers, and the passenger palaces of the underground train, and *the jump with a parachute from the tower*, a boat ride on an artificially created sea, touching a tent that was on the North Pole, and a spatial cinema mirage. (Skujiņš 1984: 264–265)

Life in Moscow's only *luxury hotel* at that time is a different story. The lobby is huge and stunningly rich, surrounded by pink marble and green malachite columns.

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9 Here and hereinafter, the italics are made by the author of the article.

There was a strange emptiness in the dining hall, a palace decorated with *barbaric luxury*, where we had breakfast, lunch and dinner. [...] The program included *jumping with a parachute from the tower* in the Culture and Leisure Park, attending a football match. (Skujiņš 2018: 48)

Although Skujiņš is often recognized as an excellent stylist who also uses various stylistic techniques in different works according to the characters' traits, way of thinking, and language, it is still possible to conclude that the episodes, where the direct Skujiņš's experiences are depicted, have a surprising similarity—both in the literary works and in memoirs.

The second example is year 1977 in England. Writer Gunars Janovskis (1916–2000), with whom Skujiņš had corresponded since 1970, invited to visit him. Although the trip to England was planned for August and September 1976 and Skujiņš's application was considered at the meeting of the First Organization Office of the Writers' Union Communist Party on June 2, 1976 (LNA LVA: 74), the writer visited England only in January and February 1977. Together with his daughter, Inga Skujiņa, a student at that time, Skujiņš spent a month at Janovskis' house in the middle of the forest, about 20 km away from Nottingham, and in London, where they stayed with the friends of the Janovskis family. Although Skujiņš used his status and popularity as a creative intelligentsia, this trip was repeatedly delayed and postponed both by the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom.

In *The Bed with a Golden Leg*, Leontine Vējagala goes to England to visit her son Indriķis. In accordance with the subtitle of the novel and at the same time the genre, the author has blurred the chronological boundaries, because

the genre of legend gave me more opportunities in this respect, in legends, “yesterday” just as well means what has passed as what is yet to come, the events in the legends are just like checkers ladies walking all over the square. (Skujiņš 2008a: 512–513)

However, several events, including the aforementioned Marta Vējagala's trip to Moscow in 1940, have a fairly specific time frame. It can be understood that Leontine went to England already in the mid-1960s, thus portraying an impossible episode—for a socially insignificant person from a small town to go

alone to see a relative in England, stay there for a long time and return to Soviet Latvia. Even though it was already possible to leave occupied Latvia in order to live with the relatives abroad already during the first years of Khrushchev's Thaw, however, with some exceptions, there was no possibility of returning.

Here, two surprisingly stylistically similar quotes from the novel and Skujiņš's essay about Janovskis are given.

Victoria station with its glazed, huge, sooty roof vault reminded Leontīne of the enlarged *old Dinaburga railway station in Riga*, from which Aleksis Ozols had once taken her to Russia. *And there, at the end of the platform, at the newspaper kiosk, Indriķis was already standing. Like they broke up a week or two ago. [...]* It was like a dream and a reality at the same time. She understood everything and understood nothing. (Skujiņš 1984: 380)

The train arrived at Victoria station. Trains used to arrive under such a canopy at *the old Riga station*, which was demolished after the war. Peron joined the people. Natural anxiety, attention of ignorance. The stream of arrivals carried itself to the exit. *And look, there was Gunars standing at the newspaper stand. [...]* We knew each other immediately. We didn't need to cross the fences of separation, nor to unwrap ourselves from the coolness of foreignness. *A normal reunion of acquaintances who haven't seen each other in a year or two.* But the event was extraordinary. To some extent, the mechanics by which the divided world of time was built collapsed. The gravity that had maintained the divide was overcome. (Skujiņš 2005: 245-246)

In the first quote, Skujiņš portrays Leontīne's arrival at the Victoria station in London, where her son Indriķis is waiting for her; in the second quote, the meeting between Skujiņš and Janovskis is depicted. Both the depicted reality: Riga's old Dinaburga train station, the greeter at the newspaper stand, and the writer's own emotions are surprisingly similar.

This technique is also used in the episode in which Leontīne goes to Indriķis' house in his car. In terms of the details of the portrayal and in terms of emotion, it is very similar to Skujiņš's arrival at the Janovskis' house in the forest, as the writer portrayed it in the essay *Caurums žogā (Hole in the Fence, 1996)* (cf. Skujiņš 1984: 381 and Skujiņš 2005: 247-248).

Using his travel impressions, Skujiņš infused his own experienced reality into the novel, which, due to the geopolitical situation, for the absolute majority

of readers was a story about the impossible and never-to-be-experienced. Using the techniques of magical realism, the author could also convey to the reader information about his own experience, for example, the stay at the home of a colleague in exile, for he had no other opportunity to tell his reader about a writer whose works were not only unavailable in Latvia but who was also considered dangerous to the Soviet system.

## Conclusion

Skujiņš portrayed the history of Latvia and important personalities in both fiction and journalism, and with his novel he took the reader beyond the borders of occupied Latvia, showing Latvia and Latvians as a part of Europe and the world. He rendered the impressions gained during his trips abroad, proving in a sense that every reader can cross borders—perhaps only in imagination at the time, but with a rather undisguised belief that the historical situation had been slowly but irreversibly changing.

At a superficial level in *The Bed with a Golden Leg*, written on the threshold of Latvian national independence, Skujiņš formally accepts Soviet modernity, as at the time he needed to express his loyalty to the Soviet regime. However, he was keen to follow and explore the paths that led to Soviet modernity. Skujiņš claims that one must look for the roots of modernity in the history of the Latvian nation instead of the new order brought by its Soviet colonizers. The plot, narrative, vocabulary, artistic expression, and characters confirm the successful usage and adaptation of the stylistics of magical realism, introduced to Soviet and Latvian readers by García Márquez. A widely read bestseller, the novel allowed Skujiņš to express essential ideas of non-violent resistance in colonial state.

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