



RAINIS

Biography

Rainis (né Jānis Pliekšāns, 1865 – 1929) is a prominent Latvian poet, playwright, translator, and politician. Rainis studied law at the University of St. Petersburg. Together with Pēteris Stučka he edited a collection of epigrams and satire, *Mazie dunduri/The Small Gadflies* and published *Apdziedāšanas dziesmas/Mocking Songs* devoted to the 3rd Latvian Song Festival. After completing his studies, he worked at regional courtrooms in Lithuania and Latvia. From 1891 to 1895 Rainis was editor in chief of *Dienas Lapa/The Daily Page* where he worked side by side with young Latvian liberal and socialist intellectuals who came to

be known as the New Current. Because of their social criticism and promotion of reforms and class consciousness, the New Current was a dissident movement subject to Tsarist crackdown. In 1897 Rainis was arrested and deported. It was during this period of internal exile that Rainis translated Goethe's *Faust*, works by William Shakespeare, Friedrich Schiller, Heinrich Heine, Aleksandr Pushkin, *et al.* These translations greatly revitalized Latvian language by introducing neologisms and coining expressions, and are still among the most important works shaping the modern Latvian literary language. While in exile, he also wrote his first book of poems, *Tālas noskaņas zilā vakarā/Far-Off Reflections on a Blue Evening*, published in 1903. *Gals un sākums/End and Beginning* is imbued with G.W.F. Hegel's dialectics. In his plays Rainis used motifs from folklore as symbols for his political ideals. Due to the failure of the Revolution in 1905, he had to emigrate to Switzerland with his wife Aspazija, settling in Castagnola,

Lugano, where he wrote plays and poetry. He returned home in 1920, to a now independent Latvia, where he was elected to the Saeima (Parliament), worked as minister of education and director of the National Theatre.

"The Golden Horse" (Zelta zirgs) a play written by Rainis is one of the most important pieces of Latvian literature. It is now translated to English by Vilis Inde. "The Golden Horse" is a fairy tale that provided Latvians with lessons to achieve cultural autonomy and independence. Idealism - Altruism - Unity! These were the keys for victory over Imperialist Russia and the Baltic Germans who controlled Latvia at the turn of the 20th century. Rainis wrote "The Golden Horse" following the 1905 Russian/Latvian Revolution and before the Declaration of Independence in 1918. He and his wife Aspazija were the spiritual leaders in the fight for greater rights for workers, peasants and Latvian culture. Although independence was achieved, it was short lived. The Soviet Union annexed Latvia during World War II. Fifty years passed, and a new opportunity for freedom arose as the Soviet Union disintegrated. Therefore, Latvia achieved its second opportunity for independence in 1991. In this play, a young peasant climbs the mountain of blue glass and green ice, wakes the princess and saves the kingdom. Good prevails over evil. Light overcomes darkness. Idealism, altruism and unity provide the path to victory at any level of society. The "Afterword" of the book includes an extensive discussion of Latvian history and Rainis' crucial role in Latvia's independence movement. It provides the key to understanding the symbolism that was obvious to every Latvian at the time it was written. The translation also introduces the reader to important aspects of Latvian culture. Perhaps, the most important is the close relationship with nature. Rainis polishes the amber so that the reader can see

the detail within. Rainis' lessons are forever timely and relevant though out the world, Latvia and even the individual.