

Ernests Birznieks-Upītis (born 6 April 1871 – 30 December 1960, Riga) was a Soviet and Latvian writer, translator and librarian.

Biography

Birznieks-Upītis was born in Dzirciems parish. In 1874 he lost his father. From 1880 to 1886 he studied at the Dzirciems Parish School. From 1887 to 1889, Birznieks-Upītis continued his studies at Tukums City School. Then he prepared for the teacher exams through self-study, which he passed as a teacher. In 1889, he returned to his native Dzirciems, where he worked as a home teacher. In 1891, his first work "Mother" was published in the "Baltijas Vēstnesis", as well as a translation of Ivan Krilov's fable. In 1892 he wrote the story "Soldier's Bride".

From 1893 to 1921 Birznieks-Upītis lived in Caucasus. After leaving his job as a home teacher, he worked as a library manager and as an oil company clerk. In 1900, Birznieks-Upītis' first story book "Upītis stories" was published, which ensured the author's popularity. In 1908, Ernests Birznieks-Upītis founded the book publishing house "Dzirciemnieki". In total, by 1921, 67 books had been published, including Birznieks-Upītis' own works.^[2]

In 1912 and 1913, two more books by Birznieks-Upītis were published - "Morning" and "Before the Evening". In 1914, his "Gray Stone Stories" was published separately. In 1922, Ernests Birznieks-Upītis returned to Latvia. In the same year he started publishing the newspaper "Vārds". He also worked in the magazines "Domas", "Rainbow", "Youth Flows", "Small Flows of Youth". In 1924, his cycle of Caucasian stories "Caucasus Mountains" was published, and in 1927 "Caucasian Stories" was published in two parts. From 1922 to 1924, the "Pastariņš Trilogy" and "Nina's Fairy Tales" were published. From 1927 to 1934 he was the head of the Riga City Library Center.

In 1940, after the occupation of Latvia, Birznieks-Upītis joined the Writers' Union. During the German occupation he lived with relatives in Zentene parish. After the Second World War, they mainly lived in Lielupe.



Stories of the grey rock

The grey rock

By Ernests Birznieks-Upitis

This grey rock, he laid there behind the village hillside. As big as a haystack, mossy and, dirty. Surrounded by brown moss, blue blossoms, rare and almost extinct junipers. Between tufts of grass and a dark water pond below, he laid.

Behind him, on a hill, a peak of a sandstone corner and some pale wooden crosses, and a large, black cross in the middle of the graveyard.

Along one side of him stretches marshy meadows and pastures all the way to the forest. Directly across, behind the pond, various crooked fences, and then the village itself- a large pile of variegated houses with thatched roofs covered with green moss.

On the other side stretches the village road along the forest and cereal barn, across the hill to the manor and church.

This grey rock has experienced a lot in his grey, old time. The blue blossoms are burgeoning all around him, blooming until autumn, then falling and remaining under the snow. During spring, little bees come looking for honey in the flowers. Buzzing, then taking off. Junipers had born, grown, greened, then turned brown and fallen down, trunks withered and rotten, while new ones took their place.

All this had happened countless times in his lifetime.

Right here- countless times he had seen the fox walk its trail, galloping into marriage, driving and walking through the blackness of nightfall through the misty barns and fields, and then we walked to the sandhill. For a long time, quietly sitting on the hill, he has been looking down to the village. He meticulously knows every villager's joys and sorrows, and their everyday paths.

But we will let the grey rock tell the story himself ...

Beneath the apple tree

Now, the fourth Kalniņš is growing, rejoicing in the aged apple tree's shadow. The first one's shadow was not very great, but now the mossy branches, on one side, extend all the way to the well and, on the other, up to the road so that, little Jēpis can do somersaults from the apple tree all the way into its shadow.

In the spring, when the first beetles start buzzing, and the apple tree encases with delightfully charming white and albescent red flowers, I see Jēpis outside every day: his linen pants and bare head flashes next to a branch pile, soon in the yard, but mostly under the apple tree. Autumn is an extraordinary time for both Jēpis and the apple tree: every morning, he runs straight to the tree, and it never lets him leave without a tribute.

Jēpis often comes from the field to greet the apple tree, rounds up the pigs and hops right over the fence to the apple tree. Later, the only time he passed the tree was on the way to and back from school, till they were taken apart one autumn.

From this day forward, he began to visit only during the summer. He arrived when the apple tree had already bloomed, strode around it, looked at his old childhood friend, all grey and mossy. He took off his skirt with shiny, little buttons and rushed to help the housewives with hay. And, without waiting for autumn to turn the apples red, he left through the muddy land.

And so, every summer.

Last autumn he left for a shorter time, then reappeared. Now he often goes to the village, and the villagers come to him. On Sundays, the visitors no longer went over the hill to the church and to the bar, but gathered here, on the side of the hill. Jēkabs stood there and explained to them something very thoroughly.

I did not hear or understand all their languages; I, only caught the most frequently used words: freedom, justice. It seemed to me that they had always been looking for them everywhere and finally found them. Now they celebrated their findings.

The whole crowd sang festive songs of victory. The singing sounded more powerful, more solemnly than I could have ever heard from the graveyard.

Everyone seemed to have woken up from a long sleep. Everyone, from children to the elderly, felt truly happy.

When it started to snow, and everything froze, people gathered around and pressed upon Jēkabs house to hear how they found freedom and justice. People came from afar, people I have never seen in the village. Jēkabs went with them, maybe to tell where and how freedom and justice were found...

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After a while, it seemed that the freedom and justice had been lost again: they walked around scattered with their heads down and sad physiognomies.

One day complete strangers arrived. Horsemen with shiny swords and thick, short whips that I had never seen before. They rounded up all the villagers behind the pond and immediately began to beat them.

My rock heart trembled with pity. They hit everyone without exceptions: teenagers and old men, wives and husbands... *Red blood in the white snow.*

Many of the beaten-up victims carried their own to the village, after the horsemen had left.

The only thing that I did not understand why they needed to beat the villagers: did they beat them for finding freedom and justice, or for losing it? Who were the horsemen- seekers for freedom and justice or their safe keepers?

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And the horsemen came back to the village one more time.

Jēkabs was tied to one of the horses. His hands were tied behind him, but his head was raised to the sky.

They approached Kalniņi, next to the apple tree, but were not allowed inside. Some of the horsemen went to gather the villagers together; others, formed a circle around Jēkabs.

The old Kalniņš with his wife ran out, but they were not allowed in the circle around Jēkabs. All they could do was cry under the apple tree.

Villagers accumulated around him with their heads tilted down and faces full of fear. For a moment they let Kalniņi among the horsemen next to Jēkabs, but they were taken away immediately. Jēkabs was brought closer and tied to the apple tree.

The horsemen hopped off the horses, formed a line and stretched out their shiny swords against Jēkabs. *Deep silence.*

“Long live justice and freedom!” in the eerie silence rose Jēkabs’ loud, convincing voice. Just like in the good days. So, justice and freedom were not completely lost: Jēkabs know where they are hidden...

Suddenly the apple tree trembled, as if someone pushed it. I felt it too. Then a loud explosion. Their shiny swords vanished into a cloud of smoke. Jēkabs’ head was not lifted proudly into the sky anymore; it, hung down. A stream of red blood ran on the apple trees branches, on the hands of his old childhood friend...

A man got shot. A man was shot. A *living* man was shot.

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Now I understand: the villagers got attacked for finding justice and freedom, and the beaters were the safe keepers. Now they shot a living man, because THAT living man knew where they had hidden them.

*No latviešu valodas tulkojusi Emīlija Legzdiņa
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