



## Interview: Latvian author Osvalds Zebris on Courage and Moral Choices



By [Olivia Snaije](#)

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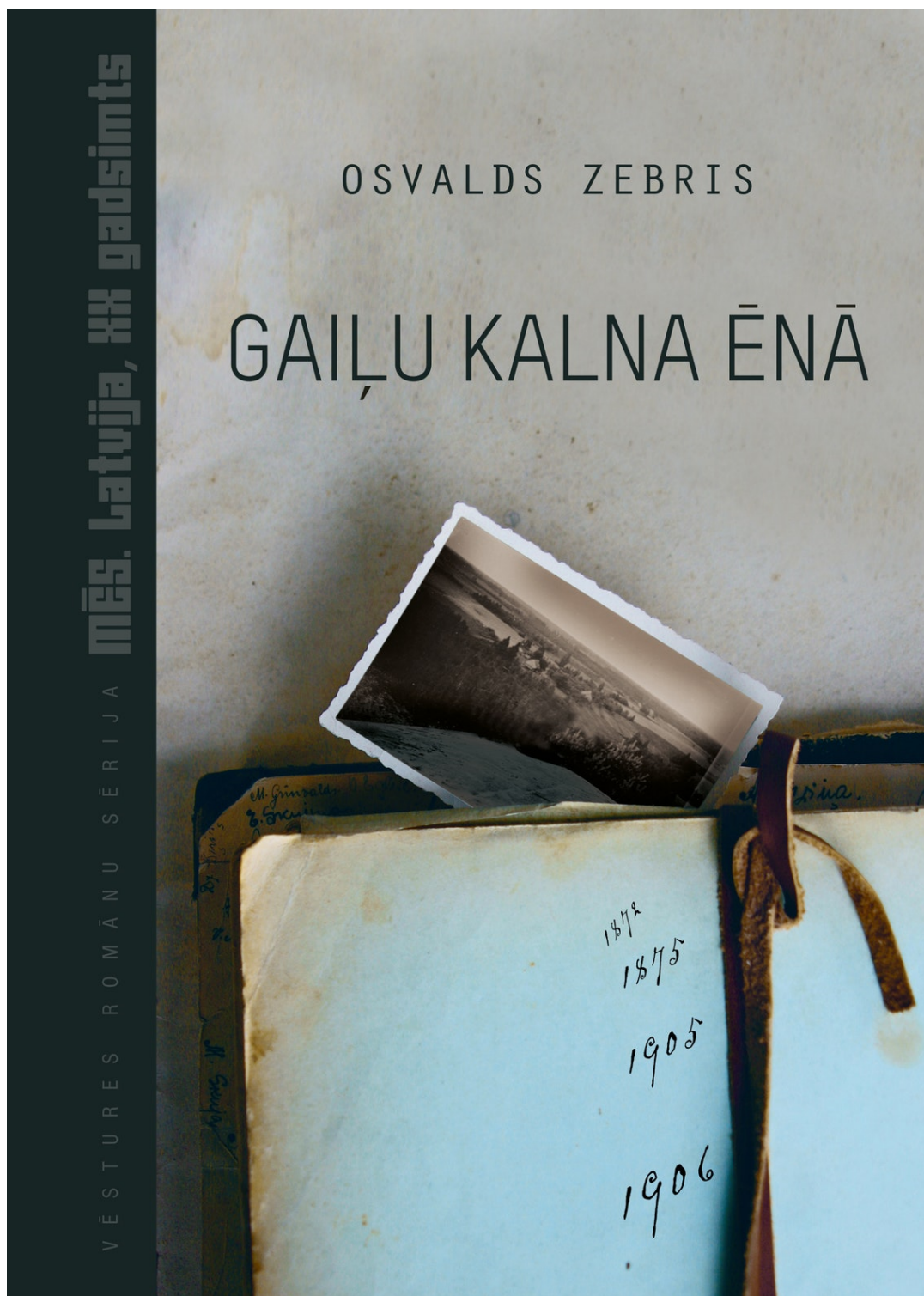
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Osvalds Zebris, whose historical novel *In the Shadow of Rooster Hill* will soon be available in English, is a Latvian journalist and author. In journalism, Zebris covered economics, he then wrote a prize-winning book of short stories, followed by a novel in which an old wooden house in Riga is the main character.

His current book won a 2017 [European Union Prize for Literature](#), and is set in Riga in 1905. It is the first in a [series](#) of historical novels written by over a dozen Latvian authors about their recent history. The collaborative project among writers, shepherded by the author Gundega Repše, covers 20th century Latvia. In agreeing to the year 1905, Zebris had to sit down and seriously study his history. In fact, his regular desk at Riga's [National Library](#) is now pointed out to visitors.



“With this novel I realized that I needed to be close to historical events, and because I’m not an historian, two thirds of my time was spent studying all this history,” said Zebris.

*In the Shadow of Rooster Hill*, published in Latvian in 2014, is translated by Jayde Will and will be available in September 2018 with [Jantar Publishing](#). It is set at a time when Latvia was under the Russian Empire's rule, and demonstrations were taking place against Russian autocracy and German landowners in the country. Zebris was interested in writing about issues of morality and the choices Latvians made when

they were under pressure; his main character, Rūdolfs, is unable to make decisions or stand up for what he believes in. Zebris put the city of Riga into context at the time:

“Only some educated Latvians had begun to dream about independence. There were revolutionary movements in Russia and this spread to Latvia in 1905 and 1906, which were years of violence in Riga and elsewhere. What choices did we make when we were under pressure to do something courageous and to express ourselves? It’s not so easy during difficult times. I read lots of research by historians, news items published in newspapers, and a diary of a policeman. I realized that people often didn’t have feelings of shame or regret when violent actions were committed. I tried to imagine how a normal person might feel, and this is how I invented Rūdolfs, who wasn’t strong enough to go against the general flow.”

Zebris points out that at the beginning of the 20th century Latvia was living under the Russian empire and was just beginning to think about itself as an independent nation.

“We began to realize that we could do something together. People from different cities and from the country began to think about national identity. There was a first generation of Latvian teachers who tried to teach in Latvian, which was prohibited during the Czar’s regime. Punitive action was taken not only against revolutionaries but also against teachers. About 1,000 teachers were killed, imprisoned, or fired from schools. This is a large number for a small nation.”

What continues to fascinate Zebris about this failed revolution—and he freely admits to being unable to answer the question—is how people actually organized themselves?

“Two universes came together; the factory workers in Riga and the farmers in the countryside who were living a nearly feudal system with German landowners. How were they united during this time when Facebook didn’t exist, and who was behind it?”

Zebris has maintained his interest in courage and moral choices in his newer work, whether it’s writing a short story or a script for television about teenagers.

“Nowadays in life, lack of courage is the root of very big problems. As human beings we can’t realize ourselves fully if we are not courageous. Latvia used to be full of brave men and women because the time called for bravery. The more comfortable we are,

the more complacent we risk becoming. As a small nation we need to continue to change, otherwise it's dangerous for us. I feel that we are going backwards with nationalistic tendencies and corruption and we are seeking simple answers to complicated questions.”

Clearly an engaged and concerned author, Zebris' questions are perennial and universal. In a recent short story entitled "The Straw Man", he takes inspiration from two poems written by T.S. Eliot post World War I; the "The Hollow Men", and "The Waste Land", about moral paralysis. Zebris begins his story with the sentence "They say April is the cruellest month..."

To read an excerpt from *In the Shadow of Rooster Hill* click [here](#).

*Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are the Market Focus countries at this year's London Book Fair, 10-14 April 2018. Public author events around the UK are organised by the [British Council Literature](#).*

## Tags

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