

# Vizma BELŠEVICA

Vizma Elsberga  
1931—2005

Poet, writer, prose and poetry translator



Vizma Belševica was one of the Latvian writers who were committed to sustaining the Latvian spirit throughout the long years of Soviet occupation. Her lyrics enjoyed the love of her nationwide readership.

Vizma Belševica was born on 30 May 1931 in Riga.

In 1961 she graduated from the M. Gorky Institute of Literature in Moscow.

Her first poem was published in 1947, but in 1955 her first collection of poems *"Visu ziemu šogad pavasaris"* [All Winter is Spring this Year] came out, which she later disclaimed for having been too indulgent to the Stalinist regime. From a Soviet-lifestyle-asserting komsomol, naively credulous of Communist ideals, Vizma Belševica soon turned into an equally fervent protester when she witnessed the discrepancy between the ideals and the reality of life and understood the falsity and hypocrisy of the preachers of Communism. Her dissent was manifest in her refusal to sing the compulsory praise to the "progress of Soviet life"; instead, she went into the world of emotions, the multitude of experiential nuances and everyday events.

Vizma Belševica's collections of poetry of the 1960s ran in a circulation of many tens of thousands. She did not give in to the pressure of the Soviet authorities and did not write what was due — poems about the Party, the victories of Socialist labour, the Soviet Army. Very soon she fell out of favour with the occupation authorities. After her poetry book *"Gadu gredzeni"* [Rings of Years] came out in 1969, her works were banned from publication for many years. Her home was searched and she was questioned to reveal alleged anti-Soviet activities. Her next poetry book *"Madaras"* [Madder Root Flowers] was published only in 1976.

From Vizma Belševica's entire literary heritage, eight collections of poetry must be singled out for their meticulously polished style, richness of language, precision, laconic

expression and diversity of rhythm. Her works have been translated and published in Sweden, Finland, the United Kingdom, France, the USA and other countries.

Vizma Belševica herself has extensively translated — folk songs of the Aztecs and the Uicholi, works by Dante Alighieri, William Shakespeare, William Blake, Alexander Pushkin, Artur Rembaud, Marina Tsvetayeva, Vladimir Mayakovsky and other poets. She has translated W. Shakespeare's comedy "Measure for Measure", prose works by K. Paustovsky, E. A. Poe, E. Hemingway, A. A. Milne and others.

Of her prose works the greatest publicity and appreciation was earned by the trilogy "Bille" which she wrote in the 1990s. The trilogy lacks neither in brightness nor in warm-hearted irony because its author possesses the rare skill of lending colour and expression even when telling of drabness. The trilogy "Bille" is published also in Swedish and Russian.

A very special part of Vizma Belševica's literary heritage constitutes her fairy-tale books for children *"Zem zilās debesu bļodas"* [Under the Blue Bowl of Skies] and *"Ceļreiz ceļš uz pasaciņu"* [A Simple Way to the Fairy-tale].

In 1990 Vizma Belševica was elected an honorary member of the Latvian Academy of Sciences. Her literary work has won various prizes, including the prestigious Tomas Tranströmer Prize for poetry (Sweden, 1998) and the Prize of the Year for lifelong contribution to literature (Latvia, 2003).

Vizma Belševica died on 6 August 2005 in Riga and was buried in Riga's Rainis Cemetery.

A poet much loved by her people. Her lyrics display high-quality poetic form and content; they are rich in contrasts and expression, their defiant harshness being entwined with subtle tenderness.

A poet much disliked by the Soviet occupation regime. Her poetry was disavowed and even banned from publication.

A poet whose works have been much translated, especially into the Scandinavian languages. She has been repeatedly nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

For Latvian readership she has translated folk songs, prose and poetry of numerous nations of the world.

### "Bille".

The most outstanding prose work by Vizma Belševica is a trilogy about a girl named Bille, a partly autobiographical novel. We see "Bille" in Vizma Belševica's childhood photo



### Honest and brave.

"Vizma was a dissident in the truest sense of the word: she thought in her own way, she lived her own life. Since the moment Vizma understood that the bright horizon of Soviet power is only mendacious props, she became a fighter of the spiritual opposition." (Latvian poet Knuts Skujenieks)



Together with her husband Zigurds and their sons, Klāvs and Jānis. Zigurds Elsbergs, the viola player and violinist. Klāvs Elsbergs, the poet and translator: he worked in the publishing house *Liesma* [Flame] and journal *Avots* [Source], translated G. Apollinaire's poetry and K. Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse Five". He perished under obscure conditions. The poet Jānis Elsbergs has worked in the journals *Karogs* [Flag] and *Luna*, and has translated works written by G. Corso, G. Snyder, W. Whitman, K. Vonnegut, C. Bukowski, A. Miller and W. Shakespeare



Love and honour received from the people. Guntis Ulmanis, the President of Latvia, expresses thanks to Vizma Belševica for her contribution to Latvian literature



### Nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Vizma Belševica is the Latvian author most often translated into foreign languages, and has translated and rendered a great deal of material herself. She was also Honorary Member of the Latvian Academy of Sciences

In Sweden. Together with her husband Z. Elsbergs and Juris Kronbergs, the Latvian poet and translator, in Gotland. Kronbergs has translated Vizma Belševica's poems and Latvian folk songs into the Swedish language, as well as the works of V. Strēlerte, I. Ziedonis, K. Skujenieks and other poets. The collection of Swedish poems rendered by J. Kronbergs *"Mani ziedri"* [My Swedes] (2000) was published in Latvia



### Together with her mother Ieva Belševica in 1954



On Poetry Days. Together with Uldis Bērziņš, at Rainis' monument on Poetry Days in 1995

