

# The Elephants in Mauthausen (Slony v Mauthausene)

**Author:** Ján Johanides

**First Published:** 1985

**Translations:** Czech (*Sloni v Mauthausenu*, 1985); Hungarian (*Mauthauseni elefántok*, 1988).

**About the Author:** Ján Johanides (1934–2008), a Slovak prose writer and essayist, belonged to the 1960s generation. He came from a Lutheran family, his ancestors had emigrated from Moravia to Slovakia because of their faith. He studied at the Faculty of Arts in Bratislava, but was excluded from the faculty, due to his behaviour which was considered as “inconsistent with the morality of socialist society”. His literary work was inspired by existentialism as well as by the French Nouveau Roman. After the suppression of the Prague Spring, between 1972 and 1976, he was unable to publish. The fictional world in his literary works is very complex, sophisticated and provocative. That is true of his late works in the 1980s and 1990s which often include Jewish topics. The Shoah and fate of the Jews are represented by the viciousness and unpredictability of the modern world in Ján Johanides’ prose. The plots of his short stories and novels are filled with allusions, digressions, reminiscences, and anticipations. The realistic scenes of everyday life are intermixed with scenes of grotesqueness, unexpected brutality (murders and suicides) as well as dreams. Johanides’ characters, mostly outsiders or bizarre figures, are frequently unclear and enigmatic. The point of view is very limited. The plot is often full of contradictions, gaps and mysteries. Readers can perceive just a part of the characters’ complex and intricate minds.

**Further Important Publications:** *Zločin plachej lesbičky. Holomráz* (1991, The Crime of a Shy Lesbian. Black Frost; novellas); *Inzeráty pre večnosť* (1992, Advertisements for Eternity; short story); *Kocúr a zimný človek* (1994, Tomcat and Winter Man; novella).

## Content and Interpretation

The narrative components of the novel *The Elephants in Mauthausen* are very complex and sophisticated. In the novel, two former prisoners of the Nazis, a Slovakian communist who is a former miner, Fero Holenyšt (a telling name, meaning “Absolutely Nothing” in English) and a Dutch businessman Winston van Maase, meet 37 years after World War II in the small Central Slovakian town of Handlová. They talk about their memories of the Mauthausen concentration camp, remember the fate of their fellow prisoners who have gone mad or committed suicide since the war. Holenyšt saved van Maase’s life in the camp. Nevertheless, they mostly keep silent, because “it is impossible to discuss Mauthausen” (Johanides, 1985, p. 57). These words can be a hint to

the famous Adorno's statement that it is impossible to write poetry after Auschwitz. "Mauthausen was an experiment with horrible lies and horrible truths" (p. 42). Surprisingly, the very identical sentences can be found in Johanides' later story *Tomcat and Winter Man* (1994): "I don't like to talk about Mauthausen! It is impossible to discuss Mauthausen!" (Johanides, 1994, p. 67). Both Holenyšt and van Maase, were in the resistance against the Nazis. They survived the concentration camp and want to testify in the trial against the brutal German doctor Gross, so-called "Gambusino", who has been caught in Brazil. But in the end, they see the contemporary world as one where brutality, egoism and forgetting the past have been restored.

The plot of *The Elephants in Mauthausen* is extraordinarily complicated, filled with digressions, reminiscences, and anticipations. The author uses different means to vary the style of the novel. The narrator does not merely use standard Slovak, but for instance uses also Czech in various modifications, the language of Slovakian Jews, other languages (German, French or Spanish), different dialects and non-standard phrases.

The Shoah in Slovakia is presented in a few significant scenes. For instance, in the story of a Jewish merchant named Ringelhaupt depicted by Holenyšt's individual memory. Ringelhaupt was an honest man. At the moment that the Jewish synagogue was set on fire, Ringelhaupt died of a heart attack. Holenyšt also recalls another story. In Mauthausen he saw Alfred Ganz, a prisoner and cook, giving an egg to a young Jewish prisoner. Ganz was caught, his right hand was broken twice and then he was executed. Later after the war, Holenyšt surprisingly meets Ganz in Dresden in East Germany. Ganz tells to him that he had only been saved by sheer luck. But after returning home to Dresden, he had found nobody alive and he could not recognise his street which was in ruins. He collapsed and was taken to a mental hospital. His doctor was a young Jew whose office walls were covered with posters of pin-up girls. The doctor told him: "So your first name is Alfred. [...] Every German should feel like Alfred Rosenberg. You were responsible for the fate of the Jews. [...] You Germans need more sexuality, and less militarism" (Johanides, 1985, pp. 72–73). Ganz was shocked and he could not explain his position. He was not a Nazi, he had been imprisoned in the camps Buchenwald and Mauthausen. Eventually, he thought of a distant relative named Rosenberg and began to feel like Alfred Rosenberg. (The Nazi racial ideologist, executed in the Nuremberg trials in 1946.) He spent six years in the psychiatry department. After meeting Holenyšt and telling him his story he only repeats „Ist das wahr?“ "Is it true?" Holenyšt and Ganz celebrate their meeting in Dresden all night. In the morning, they find out it is carnival time. They meet a group of merry and unscrupulous French students singing Mozart. Suddenly Ganz sinks to the ground and whispers "Holenyšt... Holenyšt... Ich sterbe. Das ist wahr." "... I am dying, that is true" (p. 76).

### Main Topics and Problems

According to Peter Zajac, Johanides' works are based on a "network of metaphors that illuminate each other" (Zajac, 2009, p. 758). Throughout the story, recurring motifs with symbolic significance, especially the motif of "elephants" connect a changing flow of images. At first, this motif appears in the form of elephantiasis, a disease that is characterised by the thickening of the skin and malformation of the afflicted person's body parts. Before the war, Holenyšt was convinced, he had this disease because his hands had swollen. For the second time, the word "elephant" evokes a scene in Mauthausen. Holenyšt and his friend Stráňai (who probably was a real person – due to the fact the book was also dedicated to the author's relative Karol Stráňai) find a French textbook for children in Mauthausen that has pictures of elephants in it. At this moment the sadistic Nazi guard Gambusin begins to shoot the prisoners. In the middle of the shooting Stráňai reads the captions under the pictures and laughs lamentably. The caption reads "with God and his blessing" (Johanides, 1985, p. 31). That reminds van Maase of another scene in Mauthausen where he sees a group of Jewish or Roma children in front of a bus that serves as a gas chamber. They are extremely exhausted and are speaking French. Suddenly one boy says to the others: "Come, we'll play elephants!" (p. 82). He makes tusks from his fingers and a trunk from his arms. So the children playing elephants enter the gas chamber. Later, van Maase meets a bizarre old man one night in Amsterdam. His face is similar to Rembrandt's self-portrait and his gestures similar to elephants' moves in the zoo. Finally, the elephant motif appears during van Maase's visit to Indonesia. He buys a miniature figure of an elephant there. The elephant is incredibly flawless; it had been made by an Indian in a British concentration camp. It seems, there are some words in Sanskrit or Hebrew on the figure: maybe "peace and life" (p. 104). These words are analogous to the words in the textbook from Mauthausen "with God and his blessing".

Holenyšt and van Maase are both traumatised by their Mauthausen experience. "Mauthausen presents mankind from another point of view, from the side of mankind's inner forest in Brazil" (p. 42). This is the invisible Mauthausen in their mind. And they both feel, the cruelty and brutality (for instance students dying and at the same time Ganz is dying in Dresden, the sadistic games of young people in the hotel where van Maase is staying, but also van Maase's and Holenyšt's children) continue in the contemporary world in the West as well as in the East.

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