

# WHAT ARE ELEPHANTS DOING IN A NAZI CONCENTRATION CAMP? THE MEANING OF NATURE IN THE HUMAN CATASTROPHE

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*The Holocaust experience, as presented in Erich Maria Remarque's Spark of Life (1952) and Romain Gary's The Roots of Heaven (1956), witnesses that natural beauty is not just another luxury good of modern societies, but an important sign for those in deepest despair. The analysis of the two novels reveals a rare perspective on nature in the middle of a human catastrophe. In German concentration camps natural phenomena are interpreted by the captives as the embodiment of freedom. Either in a purely imaginative way by African elephants running through the endless savannah, or in a more realistic sense in terms of the first birds and butterflies of spring as a suggestion of the nearing liberation by the Allies. The ethical significance of nature lies at the heart of both novels. It seems as if in the inconceivable destruction of human nature in the concentration camps – when even God has lost power and meaning – outer nature has become the last resort of hope and pride for humanity.*

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As one of the major – if not the major – demarcation line in modern history, the history of the Holocaust, is at the centre of a plethora of studies. However, questions concerning the natural environment during the Nazi regime have only recently emerged. An international debate of historians as to “How Green were the Nazis?” displays the engagement with the relation between National Socialism and Environmentalism (Brüggemeier *et al.* 2005). In particular the conservation efforts of the Nazis have become an object of interest (see Uekötter 2006). While the complex and often ambiguous ideas of nature the Nazis themselves held has been in focus, a perspective that includes the ideas of the victims is still a black spot of historical research.

Two very insightful interpretations of the possible meaning of nature in the Holocaust are given in the novels *Spark of Life* (1952) by Erich Maria Remarque (1898-1970) and *The Roots of Heaven* (1956) by Romain Gary (1914-1980). Looking back at the human catastrophe, both authors rely heavily on the semantics of nature when portraying concentration camp experiences. It appears as if natural phenomena have become a necessity in order to express such fundamental concerns. By interpreting both novels from an environmental history perspective, I try to shed some light on the influence of the Holocaust on ideas of nature and life. While Gary's

story of imaginative elephants functions as the poetic solution<sup>1</sup> of the concentration camp (see Ricoeur 1984: 107), Remarque contrasts the devastating forces of culture with the awakening nature in spring. My approach to these literary sources is mainly informed by Albert Camus (1913-1960), whose philosophy evolved during the same period.

## 1. Human devolution: humiliated and insulted

The idea of discovering human nature in the catastrophe was already existent in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The British author Daniel Defoe intended in his novels to isolate human beings by catastrophic events, in order to study their character while being freed from social bindings. *Robinson Crusoe* (published in 1719) is the most famous of these examples where Defoe used this “subtractive dimension” of disaster (Starr 1999). Robinson’s ship sinks due to a heavy storm and only he is able to save himself, alone, on a deserted island. In this setting his human nature is about to be revealed.

The Holocaust was an incomparably greater catastrophe than Robinson’s shipwreck, not only quantitatively but qualitatively. Millions of prisoners were brutally executed in the Nazi concentration camps. Here, catastrophe meant the trial to destroy human nature, as intensely shown in Remarque’s novel *Spark of Life*. The novel focuses on the destinies of the prisoners in a concentration camp<sup>2</sup> until the liberation by the allies takes place. The main character ‘509’ has lost his name during the ten years of imprisonment, and wants only to be referred to as a number. This is in obedience to the rationalist logic of the Nazis. The camp commandants talk about the prisoners “like two honourable cattle dealers in a slaughterhouse” (Remarque 1981 [1952]: 144). For the integral Nazi “[t]he inmates of the camp were enemies of the Party and the State, and consequently stood outside of the concepts of pity and humanness. [...] Killing them was like killing vermin<sup>3</sup>” (*ibid.*: 193). Accordingly, the prisoners are constantly referred to as “grasshoppers” (*ibid.*: 80) or “tortoises” (*ibid.*: 156). Squad leader Bolte for instance “contemplated the faces of 509 and Bucher as one inspects crushed insects” (*ibid.*: 101). Remarque finds the Nazi degradation program to become reality in the camp. The inmates have become like animals. Most of them merely react to food and pain. When described by Remarque, comparisons to animals appear to be an essential part of drawing on the existentialist proceedings in the concentration camp. On one level, only such fundamental categories of signs as animal species are appropriate to talk about the situation. As the literary critic Fludernik has shown in her *natural narratology*, “the semiotic system of language, and – here – of narrative, is founded on parameters relating to human environment and human embodiment within that environment” (Fludernik 1996: 312). Language was basically developed in an interaction with the environment. The very first signs humans would have discovered in their environment, now seem to be the very last signs apt to put meaning in a world of human deterioration. Metaphors or

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<sup>1</sup> Ricoeur understands narrative as the poetic solution to the problem of time. The story appears as a synthesis of heterogeneity. In this sense, the story of imagined elephants is shown to overcome problems that rationality cannot cope with.

<sup>2</sup> This concentration camp which Remarque named “Mellern” is inspired by “Buchenwald”.

<sup>3</sup> In the German translation (Gary 1957), the text says „schädliche Insekten“ („harmful insects”) instead of “vermin”, which is not the exact translation.

comparisons which draw on any kind of social normalcy would have lost their significance inside the camp's electric fences.

The author repeatedly exerts animal comparisons to describe the state of the prisoners: Lohmann's eyelids "looked like those of a turtle" (*ibid.*: 25) and his thin fist "was as dry as a lizard skin" (*ibid.*: 57); one prisoner crept "like an exhausted frog" (*ibid.*: 156) another looked "like a half-dead toad" (*ibid.*: 339). At different places, groups of captives are compared to wounded or frightened "birds" (*ibid.*: 156, 355); and the ones who had lost a will of their own "died like flies in frost" (*ibid.*: 62).

In the face of the arbitrariness of brutal oppression and senseless murder, the destruction of human nature takes place. In these inhuman proceedings the idea of human-beings as biological organisms is most sadly revealed. "A human, too, dehydrates without water, starves without plants and animals [...]" (Radkau 2008: 19). Humans underlie the same laws as other organisms. From the beginning Remarque makes perfectly clear that laws of nature were the only support to the inmates of the camp: "as long as one remained motionless there was always the chance of being overlooked or taken for dead – a simple law of nature" (Remarque 1981 [1952]: 7).

In an environment where the prisoners can expect nothing but death from their cultivated overseers, the only thing to rely on is nature. Nature in this sense needs to be understood rather as a symbol for the "synthesis of long collective experience and reflection" than as a concept or term (Radkau 2008: 18). It includes human inner nature as well as outer nature (*ibid.*: 6). Also in terms of outer nature the concentration camp is a hostile environment: there live "only rats and bluish flies" and the prisoners know only the "hard earth of the roll ground" (Remarque 1981 [1952]: 380). However, not all hope is lost, because nature beyond the fences comes closer to the camp.

## 2. A spark of life, a spring of hope, or the resistance of a singing thrush

'509', the main character, and a group who call themselves 'Veterans' are inmates of the Small camp. Officially called the Mercy division, not many of the inmates of the Small camp survive this mercy for more than two weeks. The ones who are too weak to work are there to die. Only 509 and the Veterans survive in the Small camp for months (Remarque 1981 [1952]: 8 f.). They "didn't live longer because they had more to eat; they lived because they had preserved a desperate remnant of resistance" (*ibid.*: 19). They resist "men of culture" (*Kulturmenschen*) (*ibid.*: 92, 119) who degrade them and who let them starve. The perfect Nazi Schulte for instance reads a copy of Knigge's *Social Conduct in Society* while burning corpses (*ibid.*: 248). Their resistance is first of all a silent revolt against dying. In Camus' thinking, the revolt necessarily includes the feeling to have a right (Camus 1982 [1951]: 14). In this particular case, this would be no more and no less than to have the right to live. The Nazis expand their rights over a borderline which leaves no room in the world for the prisoners' existence. The feeling that there must be a right beyond this inhumane oppression that means death and destruction, can only be found in a trust in life.

While in Camus' analysis the revolt culminates in the moment when the revolting sacrifices his life for the greater good, the revolt of the Veterans in the Small camp tends in the opposite direction: they sacrifice the rest in peace for the greater good of life. Dying would be the easiest way out of the camp. At the same time, it would be the route foreseen for them by their inhuman commanders. Trust in life in

the middle of death opposes to the Nazi rulers, and therefore needs to be understood as a revolt. The conclusion where Camus arrives fits in 509's story nonetheless. The revolt hints at the existence of a human nature, of something that is worth preserving (Remarque 1981 [1952]: 16). The significance of this effort to preserve life is presented by Remarque in the arriving spring. In a scene where 509's fate seems to be finally sealed and his execution only a matter of one night, he refuses to smoke one last cigarette which would be the definite sign of surrender. Nature seems to affirm his will to live: "The night was humid and mild. It was a night in which everything grew. A night of roots and buds. Spring. The first spring of hope" (*ibid.*: 185). This spring of 1945 with the allies nearing from the West does indeed bring hope to the prisoners. However, the belief in the liberation would be an abstract hope without the signs they find in nature. In a secret talk across the barbed wire, the Veteran Josef Bucher shows his girlfriend Ruth Holland a singing thrush.

"A bird singing. It must be a thrush / A thrush? / Yes. No other bird sings so early in the year. It's a thrush. I remember it from the old days [...]" (*ibid.*: 199). After the discovery of the singing thrush, Josef ensures Ruth, that they will be free again: "I'm sure. They are coming to liberate us" (*ibid.*: 199). Just having said that, a bird flies on the electric fence of the camp and dies instantly. Ruth thinks it was their thrush and all hope seems to fade away again, when Josef assures her: "No, Ruth. That was another bird. That wasn't a thrush. And if it were, it wasn't the one that sang – surely not, Ruth – not ours" (*ibid.*: 201 f.).

With the thrush memories of the past have returned to Bucher. Who has a past might also think of a future. The bird symbolizes growing hope of a future life. If the Nazis had power over their thrush, they would fall back into an animal-like state. They would subsist just in the present without memories or expectations. Against this background, the thrush appears like a miracle to them, because its song offers a world where they would be happy belonging to. Jakob von Uexküll has shown how relations to the environment are subject to personal (or animal) character. For the forester the oak tree has a "use-tone" while for the little girl who recognizes a frightening face in the bark it has a "hazard-tone" (Uexküll 1956: 95 ff.). For the fox which has its cave between the tree's roots the oak tree has a "protection-tone" and so on (*ibid.*). Furthermore, the meaning of certain entities in the environment depends on the "mood" of the observer (*ibid.*: 66 f.). In Uexküll's terminology the "mood" of the imprisoned could be characterized as a hunger for freedom; this "mood" leads to the meaningful perception of the thrush. A similar moment was depicted by Leo Tolstoj in *War and Peace*. After some hard strokes of fate, disillusioned and lonesome Duke Andrei Bolkonski finds a way back to a positive and active life. The turning point is illustrated through his observation of a greening oak tree. First, he perceives the bare and sad appearance of the tree in winter as the embodiment of his desperation. On his return he has gained new hope and now the oak tree becomes the flourishing impression of spring (Tolstoj 2002 [1869]: 565-571). As much as the oak tree belongs to the environment *for* Duke Bolkonski's, the thrush belongs to the environment *for* the hoping couple (in contrast to the environment *of*) (Ingold 1992: 41).

The only hope the imprisoned can find lies outside the camp system: outer nature. Camus stated that if one does not want to flee reality – which equates to dying in the camp – one needs to find values in this reality (1982 [1951]: 21). Close to the barbed wire, 509 discovers a world of "growth and forests and green [...] with the smell of rain and fields" (*ibid.*: 282). Even through the stench of the camp he "thought

he smelled [...] spring and burgeoning<sup>4</sup>” (*ibid.*: 283). With these impressions 509’s revolt is portrayed as a belief in nature: “indifferent to war and death and grief and hope. It came. It was there. That was enough” (*ibid.*: 283). There is something beyond the barbed wire that is independent of humans, politics and culture. In the face of destruction through an inhuman culture, the prisoners experience themselves as a part of nature, as living beings amongst living beings. In that moment the contradiction between humans and nature which lies at the centre of Camus’ existentialist existence disappears. If one was tree among trees or cat among the animals, this fundamental problem would not exist (Camus 1998 [1956]: 57 f.). In the existentialist antagonism to the culture of the concentration camp, the inmates dissolve their boundaries to nature and enter its realm. That’s where they find their values in the laws of life.

At the same time, they cannot stay as animals among animals. Obeying their human nature, they need to expect more, they need to resist. In the course of the events, 509 and the Veterans collaborate with prisoners from the Big camp, organize food and hide other prisoners and finally even a revolver. They start to think “like human beings again” (Remarque 1981 [1952]: 282). Adhering to Camus, this revolt against humiliation and destruction, against human devolution, could be comprehended as *the* human revolt as such.

When an American plane flies over the camp and signifies help to them, “they were human beings again – for human beings who didn’t know them” (*ibid.*: 344). The plane moves its wings up and down, “like the wings of a bird”, and for the prisoners it was a “greeting from freedom” (*ibid.*: 344). Even the American plane is integrated in the metaphorical structure of natural phenomena. The reality of a flying bird seems to affirm the reality of the idea of liberty. It might be reasoned that in the return to human nature, humans also found the roots of an ethical perspective. With the German philosopher Steinfath it can be assumed that moral considerations have historically evolved from emotional experiences (Steinfath 2002: 115 ff.). Accordingly, once upon a time the bird flying through the air, and overcoming every possible boundary with ease, may have triggered positive emotions in our ancestors that led to a rudimentary idea of freedom. In some sense, the human devolution of the concentration camp brings the prisoners back to where humanity had intellectually started.

This perspective seems to be confirmed in the very end when the Nazis are defeated and the camp is liberated by the Americans. Leaving the camp, Josef Bucher and Ruth Holland explore their new life. They feel the soft grass under their feet and enjoy the smell of the air. They sit down next to some poplars, watch “the beetles and the birds [...]” and listen “to the murmuring of the stream beneath the poplars. The water was clear and flowed fast. In the camp they’d never had enough water. Here it flowed freely and wasn’t even needed” (*ibid.*: 380). They start again with fundamental experiences in nature that people could have had millennia ago. The couple simply enjoys life and Bucher is convinced that’s the way it has to begin: “with the simplest things. With the feeling that one is alive” (*ibid.*: 380). The human revolt was successful because they have survived and will have children some day.

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<sup>4</sup> In the German original the word which is translated as „growing“ and “burgeoning“ is both times “Wachsen”.

509, who has acquired his name and memories back during his revolt, – he is called Friedrich Koller – finally sacrifices his life to rescue others. With the hidden revolver he shoots the ruthless commandant Weber, but he is hit by a bullet himself.

### 3. The roots of heaven: elephants in the concentration camp

Another aspect of revolt can be found in Romain Gary's novel *The Roots of Heaven*. Here, the revolt is firstly expressed in the "defence of may-beetles" (Gary 1958<sup>5</sup>: 362). The rescue of the beetles is perceived as the hardest fight of the prisoners in the concentration camp (*ibid.*). Morel, the main character, and a group of prisoners are carrying heavy sacks of cement when they become aware of may-beetles on the ground. Morel rescues the first one that was fallen on its back "trying in vain to turn over" (*ibid.*: 363). "He bent his knee, keeping the sacks balanced on his shoulder, and with a movement of his forefinger placed the insect on its feet again" (*ibid.*: 363). Rotstein the pianist and Revel the publisher follow his example though "to lose balance under the weight could be fatal" (*ibid.*: 362).

In Camus' sense it is the core of the revolt to aim at something that seems to be beyond reach, beyond human power. Exactly this uprising against the impossible is the Herculean task that Camus held responsible for the existence of human dignity. In the human revolt, life gains meaning (Camus 1982 [1951]). During the short break the forced workers is given, instead of falling exhausted on the ground and lie still until the next whistle, they continue helping may-beetles. "They seemed to have found new strength" (Gary 1958: 363). By risking their own lives, a value appears, that surpasses the individual. In this revolt solidarity not only with human beings but with living beings rises and signifies human nature as the locus of empathy (Camus 1982 [1951]: 16 f.). It would have been necessary "to kill all human beings down to the very last" stated Gary, in order to eradicate this sign of a moral value. The overseers immediately recognize the newly risen spirit, the "proclamation of dignity, totally inadmissible in men reduced to zero", but they are unable to erase it (Gary 1958: 364). However, Sergeant Gruber tries it: "he began running through the grass with his eyes cast down, and every time he saw a may-beetle he stamped on it" (*ibid.*: 364). But his aim is out of reach. It is not pride that leads the prisoners' fight for the may-beetles, it was something else, something that lies out of reach of their commanders: it was the trust in the value of life.

The defence of this value of life lies at the heart of Gary's novel. Its major expression can be found in the shape of African elephants as "life's most beautiful and noble manifestations" (*ibid.*: 61). The main topic of *The Roots of Heaven* is the protection of the African elephants. The reason why Morel engages in the practical project of elephant conservation after the war, leads back from the African savannas to the concentration camp.

Here, the prisoners resist the destruction of the crude materialist Nazi ideology through imagination. Looking back at the time in the concentration camp, Morel, a French resistance fighter, explains how imagining elephants helped them to survive:

They were the most different thing I could imagine from what surrounded me: they were the very image of an immense liberty. Every time we looked at the

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<sup>5</sup> The original French edition of *Les Racines du Ciel* was first published in 1956.

barbed wire or were almost dying of misery and claustrophobia in solitary confinement, we tried to think of this big animals marching irresistibly through the open spaces of Africa, and it made us feel better.[...] We held on to that gigantic liberty, and somehow it helped us to survive (*ibid.*: 38 f.).

Throughout the whole novel, the motive of the African elephant symbolizing freedom is perpetuated. For instance, Morel claims in his petition against elephant hunting, that “[i]t is time to show that we are capable of preserving this gigantic, clumsy, natural splendour which still lives in our midst [...] that there is still room among us for such a freedom” (*ibid.*: 32). The idea is repeated in many variations. It is e.g. supported by the wisdom of the old pathfinder Idriss who explains that “when elephants exist, there is freedom”<sup>6</sup>; an idea that has its roots in the utmost individual oppression in solitary confinement: “Three and a half feet by five, so not a hope of lying down — there were moments when I felt like banging my head against the wall to try and get out into fresh air” (*ibid.*: 163). The absolute materialism of the concrete cell disappears behind the image of elephants.

In ethical terms this relation hints in the direction of Johnson’s (1993) moral imagination. In his theory, images and metaphors replace logical systems in order to establish morality. Gary’s elephants then become an instance of a moral claim for human freedom. In his world, utilitarian culture would always end in the concentration camp (Gary 1958: 61). However, the “image” of the elephants was not enough: morality depended on the existence of real elephants. The fight for the protection of the African elephants and other animals that the natural scientist and combatant of Morel, Peer Qvist, lead, was always also a fight for “liberty” (*ibid.*: 261). In his view, the destruction of nature and the creation of concentration camps share the same roots. They endangered the sources of life itself (*ibid.*: 112)<sup>7</sup>. The ancient thunder of the moving elephant herd triggered the feeling that human beings had not been cut off from these “sources” (*ibid.*: 114). Despite the age of enslavement and physiological submission, there was hope. On the other hand, there was the fear that in the modern world there would be no space for such “royal clumsiness, such magnificent freedom” (*ibid.*: 114). The modern world, referred to, proved to be able to reserve at least certain spaces for the survival of this freedom. The conservation of wildlife through protected areas prevented the extinction of the African elephants until today. The Serengeti National Park, founded in 1951 by the Tanzanian government, is one famous example of such a successful initiative.

#### 4. Human evolution: the return to Africa

In Gary’s novel there can be seen a strong link between German concentration camps and Africa through the elephant. While the setting of the major action of *The Roots of Heaven* lies in equatorial Africa (Chad), it is more surprising that also in Remarque’s German concentration camp, signs from African nature emerge. First of all, Remarque compares prisoners several times with African animals. Berger, one of the Veterans, for example, is pictured “as if a marabou were wading through swamp”

<sup>6</sup> The English translation gets rid of this metaphor by saying: “Where there are elephants, there I go free” (Gary 1958: 338). The German translation is more accurate here (Gary 1957: 421).

<sup>7</sup> This connection is better shown in the German than in the English translation, which is slightly abbreviated at this point.

(Remarque 1981 [1952]: 28), when climbing over bodies on the ground. The labour gangs of the Big camp standing in columns of ten on the roll ground, appear in their striped garb as “an immense herd of dead-tired zebras” (*ibid.*: 47). Finally, when the nearby city is under bombing attack, the sky is described by Remarque as a “soft grey layer of clouds [with] a pink sheen like the feathers of flamingos” (*ibid.*: 134).

Apparently, Remarque deliberately used a set of distinctly African animals for his concentration camp narrative. In the course of the events these African connections become more concrete. Hope spreads in the camp as the German troops have been driven out from Africa and Stalingrad<sup>8</sup>; and the prisoners discuss the incident of a flight of swallows appearing over the camp: “They’re looking for somewhere to nest”, declared Bucher. “And that’s what they’re coming back from Africa for! Here of all places!” is the answer (*ibid.*: 276 f.). Africa appears in this context as the place where the sources of life exist. From there, nature sends the message of freedom in the shape of the flight of swallows. The prisoners have never seen birds before in the camp (*ibid.*). The first ones that arrive came from Africa – how likely is that?

In Remarque’s story it seems to be necessary, as one can see in the very end. When Josef Bucher and Ruth Holland leave the camp to start a new life, Ruth has the feeling that they were the last man. Bucher, however, corrects her: “Not the last. *The first*” (*ibid.*: 382 f.; emphasis added). As the first human beings, they do start in Africa. Having been degraded to animals, they need to return to the cradle of human kind, back to their natural sources, in order to live as humans again. In the 1950s, the idea that humanity evolved in Africa was already an accepted theory. In *The Roots of Heaven*, the natural scientist Peer Qvist explains that Africa is the place “where mankind began. The cradle of humanity is in Nyasaland. It’s been pretty well proved” (Gary 1958: 115). To him, Africa in some way represents the home of his species (*ibid.*).

Moreover, for Gary Africa entails a moral claim: i.e. the possibility to restart human morality. The idea of Camus’ revolt against the impossible is depicted by Gary by the evolution of the first living being with lungs. In Gary’s analogy, it must have been inconceivable to enter land without lungs and try to breathe, but still the first reptiles did. In terms of evolutionary biology such a concept is surely mistaken. However, Gary entails it with the notion of a historical moment: Morel’s companion, a young woman from Berlin, is described as the female reptile which “had crawled bravely to the side of Morel out of the mud and ruins of Berlin [...]” (*ibid.*: 340). In an allegorical sense the reptiles which experienced the German catastrophe come to Africa in order to learn breathing again. Gary’s idea entails the image of moral evolution on a historical rather than geological time scale. To Remarque the first steps as human beings are less revolutionary. It is the idea of simple life that makes Ruth and Joseph learn to enjoy breathing again: “The air here is different”, Ruth breathed deeply. “It’s live air. Not dead [...] / Yes, it’s live air” (Remarque 1981 [1952]: 380). This resembles aspects of Camus’ earlier works. Before the Second World War started Camus expressed his thoughts about nature in connection with his Algerian home (1994 [1937]). The philosopher found peace in the primordial North African landscape, he felt being part of nature and “learned breathing” (*ibid.*: 11). He

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<sup>8</sup> This is explicitly said in the German original (Gary 1957: 253), while in the English translation the idea of „Africa“ has gotten lost in the sentence: „The war is as good as lost. German troops have been driven out of France and Russia [...]“ (Gary 1958 [1956]: 245).



praised the simple life and the simple truths expressed by stones, stars and sun (*ibid.*: 10 ff.).

Gary went a step further when he derived an ethic of nature conservation from the catastrophe of the concentration camp. The protection of the African elephants is portrayed as an enterprise that inevitably needs someone from Berlin. This point is repeated four times throughout the novel. In this context, coming from Germany to Africa and learning to breathe is not only a way to become a human being, but further, a way of moral evolution. Such a concept of moral evolution is more promising than what the philosopher Callicott (1986) has put forward, because it is embedded historically rather than in terms of biological evolution. Resting on a Darwinian biological model, the ethics of nature remains an ambiguous model. There are equally strong arguments that would suggest an evolution to anthropocentrism rather than biocentrism (Ott 1997: 606). In contrast, the concentration camp experience phrases a claim for an ethics of nature: "Breathing", for Gary's main character, means learning to care for the African elephants. It means, to speak with Camus, to heal the European disease of coldness for life (Camus 1982 [1951]: 247). The problem Camus had already recognized in the 1930s, i.e. that civilisation had turned its back to nature (Camus 1994 [1937]: 83), remains the same problem in his essay on the rebel (Camus 1982 [1951]: 247). Gary and also Remarque found a way to make people aware of this problem by drawing on catastrophic proceedings of Nazi Germany as the historical embodiment of coldness towards life. In the end, the initiative to protect the African elephants from excessive hunting and consequent extinction points to Camus' positive nature experience before the Holocaust. Simple life in its most majestic shape, that's what the elephant symbolizes.

## Conclusion

In sum, it appears that autarchic nature represents a valid and important counterpart to the death-producing machineries of the Nazi concentration camps. Whether in form of imagined elephants or by the singing of the first thrush in spring, nature brings hope to humiliated and degraded prisoners. Treated like animals, slaughtered like cattle, they seem to have lost all meaning and worth. Clinging to life in this hour of deepest despair, in a situation where death rules, needs to be considered as the strongest revolt in my interpretation of Camus. The belief in the worth of life and nature itself transcends the limits of the conceivable in the endless deterioration of the concentration camp. In such a hostile environment, where even a belief in God cannot survive, the concrete manifestations of life found in animals and plants are the last resort for humanness in three different ways.

First, by rescuing the may-beetles, the forced workers have a real opportunity to rebel against their overseers. The action shows that the prisoners uphold the ideal of life regardless of their own personal existence. This ideal is something beyond the control of the Nazis. They can kill some may-beetles but never all of them, and never all of life. Life would prevail.

Second, this certainty represented by growing life in the spring of 1945 helps Remarque's prisoners to trust in something outside of the limitations of the concentration camp. In the blossoming plants, the singing birds and the returning swallows they would find the strength to fight for their own right to live. The degradation to an animal-like state, the identification with all living beings and the

final intellectual restart as human beings builds the central philosophical message of Remarque. This message can be observed to be revolving around Africa as the cradle of humanity.

Third, the mere image of the African elephants in the isolation confinement rescued the concentration camp inmates from insanity. The contrast between the isolation chamber and the African savannah, crowded with elephants, serves as a strong analogy: It provides an image of the divide between the destructive forces of Nazi terror, as the final upshot of a materialist and utilitarian ideology, and the conservation of nature, as the embodiment of humanitarianism (!). That these real animals worked not only as a symbol, that they are not only representatives of life, but life itself, is the upshot of Romain Gary in his plea for the protection of endangered species. What history nevertheless showed, was a twofold reaction.

On the one hand, hunting in Africa was excessive in the 1950s and drove the African elephants near extinction. Resource exploitation reached new heights and the historian Joachim Radkau holds the “1950s syndrome” to be the sharpest divide in environmental history (2008: 250 ff.): “in a single year, this economy burns and vents into the atmosphere fossil fuels that took a million years to create, without comprehending [...] the full consequences of this processes” (*ibid.*: 250). On the other hand, the establishment of the big national parks in Africa, such as the Serengeti took place, and a consciousness for ecological integrity grew in the West. If the ideas found in the novels of Gary and Remarque were part of the philosophical background for environmental politics in those days is an open question. That human nature and outer nature coincide in Africa, and that humans need to remember the sources of life as their own sources seems to be an important message in this regards.

It should not be forgotten that the human catastrophe of the Holocaust is one of these existentialist moments in which life’s nature is revealed – without the rupture of normal proceedings, the view on what is normal remains blind. Who else could be surer about the meaning of the arriving swallows than the inmates of the concentration camp? Who else could be more certain about the moral significance of an elephant than Gary’s victim of isolation confinement? The Holocaust experience laid the ground not only for humanitarian thinking, but also for the existentialist significance of natural phenomena.

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Mida teevad elevandid koonduslaagris? Looduse tähendus inimkatastroofis

Holokausti kogemus, nagu seda kirjeldavad Erich Maria Remarque'i teos „Elusäde” ja Romain Gary romaani „Taevajuured”, näitab, et looduse ilu ei ole pelgalt kaasaegsete ühiskondade järjekordne luksuskaup, vaid oluline märk neile, kes on sügavaimas meeleheites. Kahe romaani analüüs toob välja haruldase loodustunnetuse, mis avaldub inimkatastroofi keskmes. Saksamaa koonduslaagrite asunikud kirjeldavad looduslikke nähtusi kui vabaduse kehastust. Selleks kujutletakse

nt lõpututes savannides jooksvaid Aafrika elevanti või tabatakse realistlikumalt kevade esimestes lindudes ja liblikates viidet liitlasvägede vabastustegevusele. Looduse eetiline tähtsus on mõlema romaani kese. Tundub, et koonduslaagrite inimloomuse kujuteldamatu hävitamise tingimustes, kus isegi Jumal on kaotanud võimu ja tähenduse, on loodusest saanud inimkonna uhkuse ja lootuse viimane varjupaik.

**Märksõnad:** loodus, evolutsioon, moraalsus, vabadus