



Józef Szajna from the series *Ant Hills*, the collection of the IYMC in Oświęcim

## JÓZEF SZAJNA.

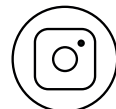
ON THE 80<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF LIBERATION

INTERNATIONAL YOUTH MEETING CENTRE  
OŚWIĘCIM, UL. LEGIONÓW 11

THE EXHIBITION WILL BE ON DISPLAY UNTIL 15.03.2025

**The International Youth Meeting Centre** in Oświęcim exists since 1986 and is a German-Polish institution of extracurricular education founded by Action Reconciliation Service for Peace and the City of Oświęcim with the support of former Auschwitz prisoners, among others in the International Auschwitz Committee. Since 1995, the IYMC has been run by the German-Polish Foundation for the IYMC. Situated between the City of Oświęcim and the former German concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz, the Youth Meeting Centre offers a place to prepare and process the visit to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial with experienced educators.

The IYMC is a place of international and intergenerational meetings, a forum for the exchange of ideas, understanding between nations, and dialogue across cultural, social, and religious borders.



**The Silesian Museum** has in its possession the largest collection of Szajna's works in Poland, a selection of which relates to his experience in the camp are presented during the exhibition titled Józef Szajna. On the 80th anniversary of liberation. The aim of the exhibition is to present works derived directly from the experience of the Holocaust, composed as a spatial installation as well as paintings. At the forefront of the exhibition is *Reminiscences* (1969–1990), a monumental work that speaks of the eternal memory of the absent. The installation uses one of the most important symbols used by Józef Szajna in his work since the 1950s – the silhouette. During the 1958 performance *What a Lovely Day!* at the Sary Theatre in Kraków, it was only hinted at, only to be on full display in the 1969 performance of *The November Thing* (Silesian Theatre). The installation *Reminiscences* was created in 1969 on commission from the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków. It was then presented at the Contemporary Gallery in Warsaw and the BWA Art Gallery in Lublin. In 1970, it was presented at the XXXV Venice Biennale and was bought by the private collector F. Johnssen. In later years, until 1990, its fragments, composed by Szajna in several variants, were presented at world art exhibitions: Recklinghausen (1971), Frankfurt (1978 and 1988), Essen (1990). The first version is now owned by the Buchenwald Concentration Camp Memorial. The Silesian Museum has a second, abridged version of the installation in its collection. The work contains an image of Professor Ludwik Puget, a pedagogue at the

Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków who was murdered in Auschwitz, and symbolic images of artists murdered during the Second World War. The silhouette cut out from a camp photograph took the form of a shield to which a gate leads – a trace of the place deserted after the victim. Fifteen silhouettes of various sizes stand atop 'ant hills' of camp mugshots, canvases, and ropes. It does not contain the broken easels characteristic of the first version. The form of *Reminiscences* had evolved from environmental art to set design for the famous performance of *Replica* (Edinburgh, 1971). The combined form of the silhouette and the gate has been continuously used and reproduced by Szajna since 1969. It is presented with the quote:

"Reminiscences is not only a piece about memory, but a warning against annihilation, possible even today. It is a world of Great Silence encapsulating broken life." Located in the recess of the floor are the characters: the Pregnant Woman, the Figure with a Wheel, the Lying Woman from the plays *Replica* and *Traces*. Completing the painting are the compositions: *Last Station*, *Auschwitz I*, *Silhouettes*, and *Appeal*.

Szajna's compositions are not beautiful, they are meant to be moving, to reflect the state of his emotions. They are a warning to the audience, who should find in them their own anxieties and tormenting questions. In them, he manifested his consciousness as an artist, an individual deeply marked by suffering, who affirms and appreciates life, while warning, questioning and provoking the viewer. The fate of the human being exposed to aggression and unification was Szajna's loudest plea. In his autobiographical text *The Bottom*

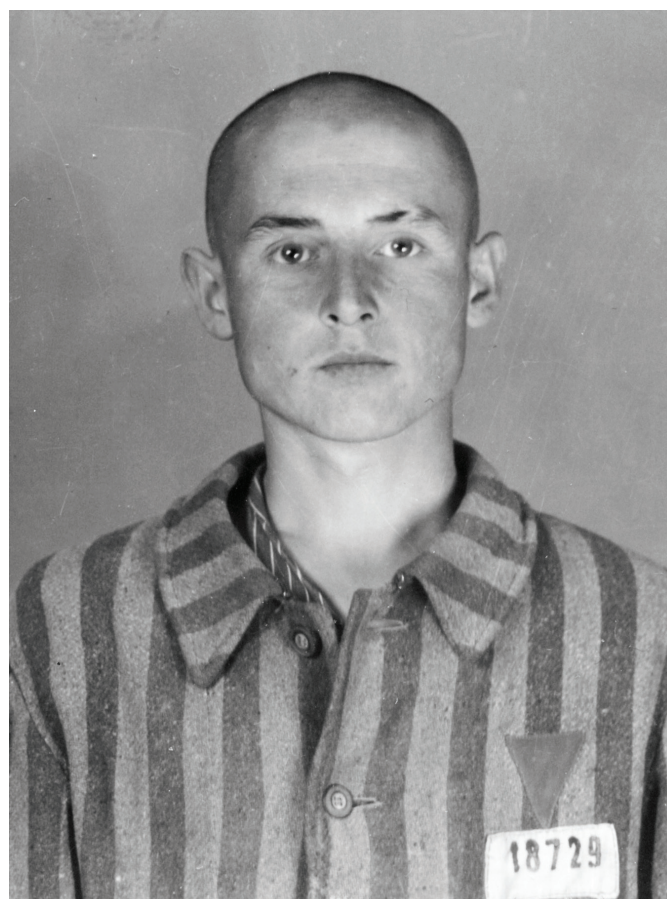
(1985), which he amended several times, he evokes the time of contempt:

"The smell of soup and the stench of diarrhoea reach us. Everything mixes and permeates the other. The high, infrequently flying rooks resemble vultures, and the white smoke rising from the chimney of the crematorium – Abel's sacrifice. We do not arouse the interest of the older prisoners. We are undressed and quickly changed. We are given striped uniforms, trousers, a shirt, a hat, and wooden shoes. The hat is to be removed in front of the masters of our lives, the SS men, the shoes are to hurt our feet and the trousers are to fall off us. I now weigh 43 kilograms, I suffer from diarrhea, and my name is: number 18729."

For Szajna, the primary value was the freedom that unlimited creation gave him. The art to which he devoted his life allowed him to come to terms with his past in the camp; it was a kind of catharsis and a cry of defiance against tyranny:

"Escape into art is self-defence against helpless surrender!"

On the grounds of the Silesian Museum stands the sculpture *Passage*, created according to Szajna's design. It was meant to crown the mound of reconciliation, to express the idea he wrote about in his text *Szajna's Testament* (2007). The words on it could be the motto of any Szajna exhibition, including the one presented at the IYMC in Oświęcim. The sculpture-gate symbolises the transition from the times of contempt for basic human values to times of respect for human dignity based on tolerance, trust, love of thy neighbour, and the idea of reconciliation.



Auschwitz camp registration photo of Józef Szajna  
Auschwitz Museum Archives

*Memory is a human thing.  
Some people are not able to forget,  
others do not want to remember.*

**Józef Szajna** was born on 13 March 1922 in Rzeszów and died on 24 June 2008 in Warsaw. One of the most eminent artists in the world of theatre and art. Painter, stage designer, director, theatre theoretician, creator of original and innovative performances. A prisoner of KL Auschwitz and KL Buchenwald. Szajna's experiences during World War II, including his many years in concentration camps, and their material manifestations in his work are an indisputable cultural legacy. The artistic skills acquired at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, in juxtaposition with his traumatic personal experience, has forged Szajna into an outstanding individual of national and international significance.



Józef Szajna  
*Drang nach Osten – Drang nach Westen* (1987)  
Collection of the Silesian Museum in Katowice





*Reminiscence* (1969-1990)  
Józef Szajna