

Elbe: The Great River

Luboš Palata

summary

Darkness. White darkness. Noon. I can only see as far as the next post. The one after is a mere guess. Fog, frost, a breeze. A gust. A tempest. A mountain plain. One thousand three hundred, one thousand four hundred meters above the sea. The highest mountain ridge between the Alps and Scandinavia, even with a bit of high-altitude arctic tundra. Currently as inhospitable as it gets. Such that you could die here. Fall, get lost, freeze.

"Dude, it's just the Krkonoše," runs through my head. But ten people per year still manage to die here. Darkness, white darkness, from one post to the next. Sure, I could have come here in the summer. But it's good that I'm here right now, in this freezing blizzard. Because these are the real Krkonoše.

Thus dramatically opening in the highest, harshest mountain range of Czechia, *Elbe* tells the story of the eponymous northern European river and its span of 1,100 kilometers that connects the Czech heart of Europe to the vast port of Hamburg to the North Sea to the Atlantic Ocean.

In a way, I have lived and experienced the entire book as I have this opening search for the source of the Elbe amidst a thick spring mountain blizzard. Whether it was through traveling along the entire length of the Elbe to Helgoland or through its role as a home river intertwined for centuries with the lineage of Elbe plain farmers and teachers.

In over twenty chapters, I strive to uncover surprising connections—not just historical but also human. The cities and people along the Elbe tell me stories from distant history, when all of what is now Germany, from the right bank of the Elbe to the Baltic Sea, was the realm of the Polabian Slavs.

I reveal for Czech and German readers the Slavic land of Wendland, near Hamburg, inhabited by descendants of the local Slavic Drevan tribe who are reviving their culture and language that disappeared as late as the 18th century. I don't focus solely on history; I also describe the atmosphere of the former East Germany, lingering echoes of World War II, Czech-German relations both historically and in the present, the mood in the "de-Germanized" Czech Sudetenland, and the life of the Frisians on Heligoland Island, where the waters of the Elbe dissolve into the ocean.

"These two Germans in front of me are almost my father's age. A gray-haired couple. Formerly from here in Wittenberge, now from Berlin. They're gazing sadly at a display case containing a sewing machine. A legend. The Veritas Famula 5091. The last Veritas from among millions. The very last. 'It's such a shame,' the man sighs. 'You know, he worked here. Until the end,' adds his wife. I understand. I share their sadness."

And along with these stories, you can experience my personal journey—not just the grand trip itself, but the story of discovering my own roots and the place I call home. As in the case of Stará Boleslav, where the Czech national patron saint St. Wenceslaus and the Blessed Charles I, the last Austrian emperor, intersect with the roots of the Palata family.

“In the pub *U Jelena*, there’s an old black-and-white photograph on the wall near the bar, dating back to the early 20th century. It shows my grandmother Božena as a child, her sister, and her grandfather Jozef Silný. The pub’s owner, with whom my grandmother and her sister were raised after their mother’s death. The pub thrived thanks to the barracks right across the street. In fact, the twin towns of Brandýs nad Labem and Stará Boleslav were mainly garrison towns at the time. From 1908, Archduke Charles, the future Emperor Charles I, served here for many years in the local Dragoon regiment. I never had the chance to ask my great-great-grandfather whether Charles ever stopped by for a beer.”

Magdeburg and the Polabian town of Libice are connected by another great European saint, St. Adalbert, revered in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary alike. “I stand by the river, trying to imagine it all. The capital of the Holy Roman Empire. Adalbert. The Ottonian emperors. Scholars, monks, priests. Pagan Bohemia and the devout Adalbert of Magdeburg. Autumn mists, harsh winters. The Elbe of Magdeburg, then the border of two worlds—Empire and Slavs. The cathedral, the fortress, and the market. The ford, wooden bridges over the river, merchants, craftsmen, pilgrims. The dawn of history’s dawn. And somewhere far upstream along the Elbe lies Libice,” I write in the chapter *The Elbe of St. Adalbert*.

Hamburg, a vast, colorful metropolis, is a place of dramatic cultural clashes in the novel. It serves as the epicenter of a globalized world, with its harbor and massive train station, where I arrive after many days of almost monk-like silent wandering along the Elbe in northern Germany. But even here, there is a catharsis. “In the morning, on my way to catch the first train to Prague, we waded through a sea of shards. A small street-sweeping machine drives toward us. A bored-looking guy who seems quintessentially German expertly cleans up the aftermath of Saturday night. Just as he has done a thousand Sunday mornings before and will again.”

And then there is the sea—the purpose and meaning of the entire journey, the meaning of the Elbe. At the end, as its waters merge with the ocean, lies the solitary island of Heligoland, seen through the eyes of a Central European. “To disappear at the end of the world. To live life here, raise children, die. And have a gravestone in the cemetery here. Life and death in Heligoland. On a rock in the sea. At the end of the Elbe, at the end of the Elbe’s waters, at the absolute end of Germany. And at the beginning of the infinite ocean. The beginning of Heaven.”

The novel *Elbe: The Great River* received glowing reviews. A contract is prepared for its publication in Poland, Czech Radio is planning a serialized reading in 2025, and director and screenwriter Jolana Matějková, in collaboration with Sirius Film and the author, is preparing a film adaptation of the book.

Reviews and Recommendations:

Tomáš Vích, Seznam.cz

He waited patiently for his first novel, *Elbe*. And it was worth it. It matured like fine wine. A page-turner. Luboš Palata is a skilled writer, and his gently poetically transcendental narrative in the spirit of Hrabal and Čapek flows like water, like butter spreading, like reeds swaying in the wind along the river, the countryside, the nation.

Marek Hudema, MF DNES, Orientace supplement, Lidovky.cz

The result is a work rich in facts but never boring. Some readers may even find themselves connecting deeply with the author, or rather with his work, forging an almost intimate relationship. As a journalist, Luboš Palata achieved this with his book *Elbe*—or *Labe* in Czech. Thanks to its quality writing, it maintains a balanced mix of poetry and factuality throughout most chapters.

Jozef Greš, Deník Právo

The prose flows smoothly. Big and small stories, all linked by their setting along the Elbe's banks, are unearthed and recounted with polished skill. Time and again, it surprises even those who think they know Vrchlabí, Děčín, Magdeburg, or Tangermünde intimately.

Jan Lukavec, Forum 24

It's simply the Elbe seen through the eyes of a political commentator. One needn't always agree with him, but he has a gift for describing the political and societal histories of the "Polabian" lands in an unconventional, captivating, and sometimes even revealing way—even if occasionally provocative.

Jan Holoubek, Praha IN

Elbe: The Great River, authored by journalist Luboš Palata, is enchanting. The Elbe is *Elbe*. Elbe is a journey. A journey over a thousand kilometers long. A dreamlike journey from Bohemia to the sea, to the ocean. Elbe is the river of the Czechs and Germans, Germans and Slavs, the West and the East. An artery connecting the Czech basin—Bohemia, Böhmen—to the world beyond, through the Czech Gate in our mountainous walls. *Elbe* is a story—a story of us, the people along the river.

Jan Rejžek, literary and music critic

An excellent, informed, and instructive book. Now I even know how to say Krakonoš in Polish.

Libor Rouček, Co-chair of the Czech-German Discussion Forum, former Vice-President of the European Parliament

If you were to ask me what book I'm currently reading, it's *Elbe* by renowned journalist Luboš Palata. He cycled 1,100 km from the source of the Elbe to its mouth at the North Sea near Cuxhaven, and in the book, he describes the present and the thousand-year history of this great Czech, German, and European river—its towns and its people, Czechs, Germans, and Polabian Slavs. I highly recommend it and congratulate Luboš on his prose debut!