

the PARIS REVIEW

Jorge Semprún, *The Art of Fiction* No. 192

Interviewed by Lila Azam Zanganeh

In Paris, in the winter of 1943, Jorge Semprún, a twenty-year-old Spanish-born philosophy student and a member of the Communist Party, was arrested by the Nazi occupiers, tortured, and sent to Buchenwald. Although he survived to lead an extraordinarily eventful life, to this day Semprún describes his deportation as “the only thing that truly defines me.” Yet unlike other survivor-writers—Robert Antelme, say, or Primo Levi—it took Semprún nearly two decades to write about his experience of the camps. “I had to forget,” he has said. “Otherwise life would have been impossible.”

Following his liberation at the end of the war, Semprún returned to Paris, where he worked for UNESCO as an interpreter, a cover he used to coordinate the clandestine activities of the Spanish Communist Party. In 1957 he began traveling secretly to Franco’s Spain, working on and off for five years as an underground Communist agent under the pseudonym Federico Sánchez. It was there, after nearly twenty years of voluntary amnesia, that Semprún felt the undercurrents of memory pulling him back to the camps, prompting him, as it were, to write his first book, *The Long Voyage* (1963), a fictionalized account of his experiences as a deportee. The book, written in French, traces the narrator’s thoughts during his seemingly endless train ride to Buchenwald, as his mind moves back and forth through time, reaching from the years before his arrest to his life after liberation.

As he explored his own experience with totalitarian repression, Semprún became an outspoken critic of Stalin’s terror, and a year after his literary debut he was expelled from the Spanish Communist Party. For the next two decades he lived in France, writing novels, memoirs, and screenplays (for Constantin Costa-Gavras, Chris Marker, and Alain Resnais, among others). Then, in 1988, eager to participate in Spain’s new democratic government, he accepted an appointment as Minister of Culture under Prime Minister Felipe González. He held office for three years before returning to Paris and writing his best-known and most important work, *Literature or Life* (1994). Semprún published the book as a memoir, but in it he declares that “the essential truth of the concentration camp experience is not transmissible.” His literary solution is to introduce fictional scenes and details whenever his own memory is too faint, too incoherent, or when it simply fails to evoke what he feels to be the truth of his experience.

Semprún’s decision to meld fiction with memory in recounting his concentration camp experience sparked heated debate in France, where critics accused him of calling *all* memory and eyewitness accounts into question. Semprún’s fiercest critic was Claude Lanzmann, the director of the epic documentary film *Shoah*, who argues that his own approach to recording the experience of survivors—through direct testimony—is the only legitimate method, and that art and imagination can have no part in such an endeavor. Others complained that it was impossible to distinguish between what Semprún experienced and what he invented. For instance, did Maurice Halbwachs, a well-known French sociologist, really die as the book recounts, in Semprún’s arms? Is Semprún’s literary technique self-aggrandizing? And how does it serve history?

Semprún allows that testimony is vital to historians, but he notes that testimony, too, is not always precisely reliable, and that historians, alas, are never quite as effective as novelists at conveying the essence of experience. “Horror is so repetitive,” he says, “and without literary elaboration, one simply cannot be heard or understood.” Hence he argues, “The only way to make horror palpable is to construct a fictional body of work.”

I met Semprún at his home in Paris, where in 2004 he wrote his third book in Spanish, *Veinte años y un día*. (The novel's title, which translates to "twenty years and a day," refers to the sentence given to political prisoners in Franco's Spain.) Semprún lives in an elegant two-story apartment in the heart of Saint-Germain, the city's elite literary district. His French, although perfect in syntax and pronunciation, still possesses a faintly Spanish cadence. As for the camps, he hastened to tell me that he would never be done "writing all this death." Yet he remains, at the age of eighty-three, a dashing man, and very much alive.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you begin to write at the age of forty, after devoting your life to political action?

JORGE SEMPRÚN

Two reasons. The first is that fifteen years had passed since my release from Buchenwald, and I felt that I finally had sufficient distance from my experience of the camp to talk about it without slipping back into an obsession with death. I had become a different person. So it was almost as if I were telling someone else's story.

The second reason was something concrete, and rather extraordinary. In 1960 I was sharing an apartment with a Communist militant named Manolo, who did not know that I was also a member of the underground Communist movement. He had fought in the Spanish Republican Army and had been a refugee in France before being taken prisoner by the Germans in 1940 and sent, like many other captured Spaniards, to Mauthausen, which was a very harsh Austrian camp. In the evenings, he told me about his experience at Mauthausen. But I did not think that he was able to convey the experience as I had understood it at Buchenwald, a similar sort of camp. Of course there was no way I could say, Hey Manolo, excuse me, that's not how it was—because I couldn't give up my cover. This frustration gave me the impulse to look back on the past. I began writing my first book, *The Long Voyage*, in that apartment. It was as though I suddenly needed to say what Manolo could not. So I talked about my camp, and this book, which I was morally incapable of writing in 1946, unspooled all by itself in a matter of days in 1961.

INTERVIEWER

It wasn't published until 1963. Why did it take two years?

SEMPRÚN

I couldn't publish it as long as I was a member of the underground Central Committee. I couldn't risk having my photo in the newspaper while I was crossing the border illegally.

INTERVIEWER

So you owe it to Manolo that you became a writer.

SEMPRÚN

Yes. To him, and to countless others. I remember one time in Paris when I was eighteen, I saw a woman on the street, just a regular woman in wooden-soled shoes, and she'd turn around every time someone passed her, looking carefully at each person as though she were expecting someone. I figured she needed to ask a favor but wanted first to determine whether she could trust the person she was going to ask. And I thought to myself, I must be that person, she must trust me. And when I passed her, she asked me the most ordinary question:

Where is the Montparnasse train station? We exchanged a few cryptic words, and I sensed that she was Jewish and was on her way to a house near the station where she could be hidden, that this was her last hope of escaping the raids. I walked with her to the station and left her there. So it was for her, too, that I began writing.

Many years later, in *The Long Voyage*, I imagined I saw that woman again, after the liberation of France. I imagined she was alive but did not recognize me, and that we continued the conversation we had started that day. In my mind, this imagined scene embraces the historical truth and allows me to deepen my reflection on the Jewish experience in France during the war. In fact, I often feel that fiction is necessary in my writing—even in my historical memoirs—within appropriate moral limits, because it enables me to explore the full dimension of an event or a moment. But I don't believe I have ever invented anything that was not historically true.

INTERVIEWER

“Historically true” seems a slippery phrase. How do you define it? One could argue that your imagined conversation with the woman is historically false, since it never happened.

SEMPRÚN

Sure, my conversation with this woman, in a sense, is historically “false,” since it never happened. But the conversation is entirely plausible. I would put it this way: the conversation is at once a literary invention and a possible historical truth. Perhaps she survived, perhaps she wasn't deported. So as far as I'm concerned, to imagine her later, and to imagine my conversation with her, is necessary in order to bear witness to what is historically true: that Jews had this experience of utter loneliness and abandonment, as opposed to members of the Resistance like myself, who functioned in networks and were constantly helped. This is why in the book I feel compelled to tell her, years later, that now and again I've desired to be Jewish myself, in order to have gone to the end of this experience with her.

I will always defend the legitimacy of literary fiction in expounding historical truth. In the case of deportation, both Jewish and non-Jewish, it is simply not possible to tell, or write, the truth. The truth we experienced is not credible, and this is a fact the Nazis relied upon in terms of their own legacy, for future generations. If we tell the raw, naked truth, no one will believe us. This is why I mentioned Manolo in that Madrid apartment. He was telling the raw truth, which was incomprehensible because it was bereft of verisimilitude. It needed to acquire a human shape, an actual form. This is where literature begins: narration, artifice, art—what Primo Levi calls a “filtered truth.” And I believe ardently that real memory, not historical and documentary memory but living memory, will be perpetuated only through literature. Because literature alone is capable of reinventing and regenerating truth. It is an extraordinary weapon, and you'll see that in ten or fifteen years, the reference material on the destruction of the Jews of Europe will include a collection of literary testimonies—ours, possibly, but also those of younger generations, who have not witnessed but will be able to imagine.

INTERVIEWER

What were the roots of your political activism?

SEMPRÚN

I was born in Spain in 1923, so I was twelve when the Spanish Civil War broke out. When the war ended, I was fifteen and living in exile. Two years later I had started my philosophy degree, and I joined the anti-Nazi Resistance in France. These historical facts determined my entire life, of course. Had I been born a few years earlier or later, my life would have been completely different. This doesn't mean that I didn't make any choices. I did, but within a specific historical context, to which the Spanish Civil War was as vital as my work in the

anti-Nazi Resistance.

It all began, in fact, with my father, a liberal Catholic who in 1931 chose the Republicans over the Franquistas. The Republic assigned him a post in the Spanish Embassy in the Netherlands in 1937. As an adolescent there, the first thing I did every morning before riding my bicycle to school was buy the papers to find out the latest news of the war in Spain. It was always bad. The Republic was being crushed, day after day. In 1939, when we finally lost the war, my parents and I moved to Paris. I wanted to be a philosopher, and I was preparing for the entrance exam to the École Normale Supérieure when I decided to join the Resistance and abandon my studies.

INTERVIEWER

What was your goal as a member of the Resistance?

SEMPRÚN

When I signed up to fight Nazism, I was not fully aware of who I was, and I didn't have a clear idea of the society that would emerge afterward. We knew that the invasions of Western European countries had to stop. The question of what might happen afterward—would there be a revolution? a peaceful return to democracy?—was more or less secondary and only became urgent many years later, after the war. At that moment, when I joined, I considered the Resistance to be the natural prolongation of the Spanish war against fascism. But my dream ended abruptly in September 1943, when I was arrested by the Gestapo. I was deported to a camp in Compiègne, then sent directly to Germany, to Buchenwald.

INTERVIEWER

How long were you there?

SEMPRÚN

A lifetime. I was imprisoned for sixteen months. I was not allowed to speak my native tongue. Buchenwald was a peculiar camp, an acute catalyzer of moral conflicts. It was built by the Nazis in 1937 to house their political opponents, mostly Communists and Social Democrats, with a small minority of Christian Democrats. There were more than fifty thousand prisoners at Buchenwald—it was a veritable city, with its own works department, infirmary, kitchens, storerooms—and very quickly the internal administration of the camp was taken over and run by the inmates themselves, with an SS officer in charge of each production unit. It was not an extermination camp like Auschwitz, which was built entirely around the gas chambers and the crematoria. Buchenwald was a work camp. We were integrated into the German war industry and fed enough to sustain us for a few months—in a state beyond exhaustion, but alive. A dead person can't work, you see.

It was, along with the Spanish Civil War, the most powerful upheaval that I have ever gone through. The experience of the camps was absolute. Once, long after the war, a man asked me what I was—French or Spanish, a novelist or a politician? I said, spontaneously, that I was a deportee of Buchenwald. I was only twenty when I got there, you understand. It was a turning point in my life. There was no going back.

INTERVIEWER

But you couldn't talk about the experience afterward?

SEMPRÚN

No, not for many years. Though when I got back from Buchenwald in 1945, I did want to write. I longed for it,

to be honest, but strangely enough I found it impossible. I realized that in order to do so I would have to delve deep inside the memory of the camp, which was the memory, and the womb, of our deaths. And I just knew I could neither relive that experience nor survive it if I worked on the memoir at that time. It is a contradiction I realize—and although saying it today feels almost indecent, I will say it anyway because it is the truth—but for me, remembering would have meant death with absolute certainty, suicide that is, and I was very much aware of it.

If one sets out to describe the experience of the camps, if one must speak about it, it can never stop. It will never be “done.” It is not essential to speak of the horror in all its detail, or about our hunger, our lack of sleep, how we clung together, our fraternity. It is however essential to speak of freedom, of our experience of good and evil. You might object, and you would be right, that there is no need to actually experience a concentration camp in order to ascertain the existence of good and evil. You can ascertain it in other ways, of course, in the most banal portions of our everyday lives, but the camp, because it focuses all experience around the constant risk of death, renders visible what is ordinarily more faint—that a human being is free by definition, that he has the freedom to be good or evil in every circumstance.

INTERVIEWER

What did you do to survive after the war?

SEMPRÚN

My distraction was to go into politics, to join the Spanish anti-Franco movement, the antidictatorial militants screaming, Tomorrow! Tomorrow we will win! Tomorrow, general strike! It was always “tomorrow.” Without giving it much thought, I went to work for the Spanish Communist Party to fight against the Franco regime. I had read Marx in my youth and was impressed by his clear, rigorous thinking. He dared to ask the great impassioned questions that one is consumed by at eighteen. The philosophers have interpreted the world, now it is up to us to change it, as Marx wrote. And right after reading him, thanks to some Austrians who were hiding us in the early stages of the war, I discovered the 1923 edition of a book by Georg Lukács called *History and Class Consciousness*, which for me opened entirely new vistas.

INTERVIEWER

What exactly did you do for the Communist Party in Spain?

SEMPRÚN

I split my time between Madrid, where I was illegal, and Paris. In France I was officially a translator for the UN and UNESCO. So when I disappeared to work underground in Madrid, my wife would say, Oh, he’s off translating at an international conference, he’ll be back in a month. I was leading a double life.

My mission for the Communists was to reorganize the underground anti-Franco cells, mostly those made up of intellectuals and academics. When I first got to Madrid in 1953, there were almost no cells left, Franco’s repression had been so brutal. But there was deep discontent, and one felt that culturally and politically there was a growing thirst for freedom, for democracy. I spoke to the generation of people who had not lived through the Spanish Civil War, and I found hundreds of them eager to build another future for their country. My underground alias was Federico Sánchez. So while Jorge Semprún remained unknown, Federico Sánchez became a notorious instigator of the anti-Franco movement. Later I wrote books about that anonymous time in Spain: *The Autobiography of Federico Sánchez* and *Federico Sánchez se despide de ustedes*.

INTERVIEWER

Is that why there are so many doubles, alter egos, and narrators who stand in for you in your literary work?

SEMPRÚN

I lived twenty years of my life underground, and to live underground is, by definition, to be a double. In Spain I never introduced myself as Jorge Semprún. I was always someone else, and I got quite used to it. Later I found that when I referred to myself as *you*, as in *The Long Voyage*, I was able to convey a more objective sense of my experience. I observed myself as my own double—not as the actor, but as the witness of my own life.

INTERVIEWER

You constructed a dialogue with yourself?

SEMPRÚN

Yes, I did, but I also found instinctively that it was easier to speak of oneself from the outside than to be God proclaiming, On the first day this happened, and on the second day . . . This is why I find it more artificial to tell things in chronological order than randomly, following the vagaries of memory. And while I have often used the second person in order to achieve greater narrative freedom, in the novel I am writing now I'm trying to find a different approach. There will be different kinds of narrators—one will be an invented writer-narrator who says, he did this, she moved. The characters in the book will be people who worked with me in the Communist underground, French men and women who drove the cars and shuttled the illegals across the border. They meet again years later and speak of me, this man they knew. So the gaze of others will cause me, Jorge Semprún, to appear.

INTERVIEWER

In your books on the camps, *The Long Voyage*, *Le Mort qu'il faut*, and *Literature or Life*, you do use the first person.

SEMPRÚN

In those books, there is indeed a narrative *I*, which is there all the time but is sometimes doubled. Then the *I* becomes a *you*, and now, in this latest work, even a *he*.

INTERVIEWER

Given that most of your work is unmistakably autobiographical, do you consider yourself a novelist in the traditional sense?

SEMPRÚN

I have often said I am not a “real” novelist, because for me the true novelist can use elements of reality to create a world that is more true to reality than reality itself, precisely because it is completely imaginary. I love that line by Boris Vian, “In this novel everything is true because I made it all up.” That, in my view, is a novel. And I will never be able to do that because I feel pulled inexorably toward the autobiographical material. I have written four books about the camps, but I could write countless others. There are still a thousand stories to tell. And I have more to say, to write, in the fourth book than on the day I began writing *The Long Voyage*. When I first undertook this work of remembering, a flood of memories long hidden and nearly obliterated suddenly

came bubbling to the surface.

INTERVIEWER

What kind of stories interest you?

SEMPRÚN

Stories of survival, whether heroic or tragic. Stories of confrontation between man and the historical period in which he lives. I am especially fascinated by the tenacity of the human will.

INTERVIEWER

Does writing these stories down come easily to you? Do you write quickly?

SEMPRÚN

I am often sidetracked by other stories I want to tell, so I find it difficult to get to the end of a novel. There is a strong narrative tension in the books, including the last one, *Veinte años y un día*, which I decided to write in Spanish. And now I give in, I realize I don't have enough time to tell myself that I am writing a novel in which everything is true because it is all made up. I am too haunted by my own life to be able to speak about anything else.

INTERVIEWER

Adieu, vive clarté, published in 1998, is not about the camps.

SEMPRÚN

Adieu, vive clarté was written with one goal in mind—to avoid mentioning the camps. In order to do that I had to write about a time *before* the camps. So this book is a mélange of fiction and reality going back to certain events of my adolescence, from the time of my arrival in France in 1939. The summer of 1939 was way too brief. It marked the end of the Spanish Civil War, the war of my adolescence, and the beginning of World War II, the war of the young man I'd become. It was a summer between two wars. And I wrote this memoir because I desperately needed to get away from the curse of Buchenwald. It had infiltrated all of my writing, even *La Montagne blanche*, which had nothing to do with the war. Yet one of the characters in *Adieu, vive clarté* is suddenly overwhelmed by his memory of the camps. I couldn't help it! So I had to push most of my story back to 1939, when, in my own eyes, the very notion of deportation as a possible future was unthinkable. But then there's this moment when the narrator says that in his books he systematically condemns the characters with false names to die, like a sacrifice, a ritual to get on with life.

INTERVIEWER

And you have done that in several of your books.

SEMPRÚN

In *L'Algarabie*, Artigas—one of the aliases I used in Madrid—dies. And the narrator of *Adieu, vive clarté* says at one point, "Now I have no more aliases who will die in my place. It is finally my turn. Now I am naked, destitute." In short, he is afraid.

I knew so many men and women who were forced to assume false names and false identities, and in doing so

experienced all kinds of fantastic adventures. Any one of their lives could be the stuff of a great novel. Ultimately, however, I came to believe that Communist rule was the most tragic event of the twentieth century. Perhaps this is the reason I seem so difficult to understand in the United States, because for most Americans today, Communism seems like something almost alien, unfathomably distant. Whereas, quite blatantly, it was the beating pulse of my life. In the stories I tell, there are always two specific ideas—deportation and Communism. Two things Americans do not understand.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever been influenced by American literature?

SEMPRÚN

Yes, the way I've approached these themes in my books was heavily influenced by my reading of American novels. I admire Hemingway, for instance. When Hemingway is at the top of his form, in his short stories and in some of his novels, his work has the nearly divine ability to conjure up the present: she stands up, she is sad, she is in love. But stylistically, I can't do that. I am incapable of writing in the present tense like he does. In terms of pure craft, I have always been drawn to the Faulknerian style of writing, where an old lady starts off telling a story and then that story segues into another story, which sends us back to the distant past and then loops around to the present. It's a specific way of perceiving time, and this is why Faulkner has always been one of my most significant literary influences.

INTERVIEWER

Which book by Faulkner did you discover first?

SEMPRÚN

I read *Sartoris* when I was finishing my philosophy degree at the Sorbonne, in 1942. Later I found *Absalom, Absalom!* in the Buchenwald library, in a German translation. There were people who were amazed when I would talk about this library. They would say, Well, if they had a library over there, it couldn't have been *that* bad. They didn't get it. Only a few of the camps had libraries, and they were created by the SS themselves, since a priori, they were meant to be reeducation camps, *Umschulungslager*. At Buchenwald there were several hundred Nazi books, like *Mein Kampf* and *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* by Alfred Rosenberg. But for most deportees the library was useless, because you had to know German to read the books. More to the point, you had to have the time and the desire to read, and most deportees, obviously, did not. You had to be in a slightly privileged situation. I was lucky enough to be on night duty every three or four weeks, where I was able to read because there wasn't much work. So I managed to read Faulkner.

I remember it well, because I wanted to be a writer but I was in the camp and had just turned twenty-one, so I didn't know when I'd be able to begin writing. But there I said to myself, that's how you should write, like *Absalom, Absalom!* That is why, I suspect, my writing style can seem at times a little complicated—some might say overwrought—compared to traditional, linear French writing. It's Faulkner's influence.

INTERVIEWER

In *Literature or Life*, you say you read Schelling, Hegel, and Nietzsche at Buchenwald as well.

SEMPRÚN

I was given a volume from the collected works of Schelling, about human liberty, by a German Jehovah's

witness. It affected me, because I had already read it in French, in a Marxist translation. It is written in an idealistic, metaphysical language, but there are words about freedom, about good and evil that are deep and troubling. And also about the individual's efforts to survive the tyranny of the crowd.

INTERVIEWER

Do you spend a lot of time reading now?

SEMPRÚN

Not enough. I prefer to read history books, essays, books about economy or philosophy rather than novels. It is so much easier to chance upon a great essay than a great novel. When I read essays, I'm hoping to find something that will reveal certain elemental particles to me, unveil things as yet unseen. I seek out novels that will keep the world alive for me, but I have less and less faith in finding such novels. I am appalled in particular by French novels: petty, pathetically subjective, navel-gazing, egotistical stories written around an insignificant adolescent or senescent experience but never, or rarely, in touch with reality. In the Anglo-Saxon novel there is much more contact with the political, the concreteness of the world, so to speak. When a novel accomplishes that, it is worth more than a philosophical treatise or a historical essay, because the form of the novel is infinitely supple and flexible and can express more variegated aspects of reality, using characters, speech, and style.

INTERVIEWER

In the past you described yourself as a "stateless bilingual" writer. You have written most of your books in French, and three books in Spanish. What is it that prompted you to write your latest book in Spanish again?

SEMPRÚN

I wrote the first two Spanish books, the Federico Sánchez books, for historical, practical reasons. I wrote them about the Spanish political experience, primarily for my Spanish readers, since the subject would interest other readers only episodically. The French translation of *The Autobiography of Federico Sánchez* sold fifteen thousand copies, whereas in Spain hundreds of thousands of copies have now been sold. As for *Veinte años y un día*, it's apples and oranges: I had already published many books in French and was thus in a rather bizarre situation in Spain, where I am considered a Spanish writer who writes in French! The whole thing is either comic, tragic, or just plain silly, depending on your point of view, since technically I am a Spanish writer whose works are translated *into* Spanish.

INTERVIEWER

Do you check the translations for accuracy?

SEMPRÚN

I read them, but it's difficult. The Spanish translation of *Literature or Life* is very good. But I know I would not have written it like that in Spanish. I proofread them, I make sure there are no heinous mistakes or mistranslations, but I can't correct for style, and the translations are not in my style. I do not write in Spanish the way I do in French. I would use other words. So it's always painful to look at translations. Once I was talking with the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes, after *The Long Voyage* was published in French. He asked me if I had done the Spanish translation myself, and I explained that I hadn't because it would have felt strained, and quite insane in a sense, like writing the same book twice. He immediately replied, Listen, you are wrong. You write

The Long Voyage, and when you translate it into Spanish it will be a different book. Then you translate it back into French, and it's an entirely different book all over again. You'll spend your entire life on the same book—that's the ideal life for a writer! One book lasting a lifetime, yet different each and every time. He was right, in a way.

INTERVIEWER

Does one language affect the other?

SEMPRÚN

I think so. It isn't for me to judge, but I think there is a cross-pollination, a contamination, an enrichment, not necessarily of the lexicon but of the linguistic form. This is because Spanish is a richer, more flexible, and less systematic language than French. And I suppose my French is a touch more baroque than contemporary French.

INTERVIEWER

And conversely, does French at times influence your Spanish?

SEMPRÚN

Yes, because Spanish is an ornate, splendid language with extraordinary variety, but it is also a dangerous language. If you don't master it, Spanish quickly becomes a crazy, quixotic language, it gets ahead of itself, sounds shamelessly grandiloquent, turns into a divine voice, the very voice of God. It is ideal for orating, defining good and evil, dividing worlds. All you have to do is compare French and Spanish political speeches to see what I'm talking about. So I feel that my French reins in my Spanish.

INTERVIEWER

Your work contains frequent digressions, and you often rewrite certain sentences to remind the reader that you are reformulating a previous thought or abandoning it in order to say something else. Why do you do this?

SEMPRÚN

I cannot write any other way. It would feel false to write my memoirs in chronological order. You know: I was born in Madrid in December of 1923, on Alberto Lista Street, which is now called José Ortega y Gasset. That is a reconstruction of an event at which I was not present—a completely artificial action. It would be more natural to speak of my birth in the middle of a passage that has nothing to do with it, to insert it as a digression and tell the story within the story. If I am telling a story to a group of friends at the Café de Flore, where every Sunday morning we meet for breakfast, that is how I would do it. I would try to speak succinctly, I guess, but in the end I cannot tell the story any other way.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever worry that this technique might excessively complicate, even obscure, your writing?

SEMPRÚN

When I write, I try on the one hand to be as complicated as possible, insofar as I perceive life as complication, and on the other hand, to be as limpid as possible, since clearly I will have no readers if I am not understood.

INTERVIEWER

And yet in *Veinte años y un día*, which tells the story of a country under Francoist fascism still suffering from the legacy of the Spanish Civil War, you don't use any of these techniques.

SEMPRÚN

There is a limit: there are novels whose structure is so arbitrary that they seem to be sneering at the reader. The reader needs a master's degree in narratology to be able to read them. In my case, there is the risk that, since my storytelling style is "natural," it could also become a tic, which worries me a great deal. But I am unable to use a different narrative style because then I would feel I was no longer myself. At the same time, I am constantly adjusting, with glimpses of clarity and straightforward narration, so that we are not completely lost. In my upcoming books I am trying to blend passages of reflection with events of personal significance, adventures, and memories, framed for once in a linear chronology.

INTERVIEWER

What themes dominate your writing, and your imagination, these days?

SEMPRÚN

What was the Resistance's ethic in the camps? Should we have used to our political advantage the responsibilities the SS delegated to the deportees when they allowed us to administer the camp at Buchenwald? This is a fundamental moral question. The chief of the SS work unit orders the Kapo of the prisoner command, The day after tomorrow, Thursday, at six o'clock, I need three thousand men assembled in the yard to be sent to Dora. The Kapo consults with me, and I know that Dora is a harsher camp, where these men will likely die—so what do I do? Should I answer, No, I do not want to select three thousand men, they are all my comrades, I cannot choose? The idiot who says this is shot on the spot, and there will still be three thousand men chosen the following morning at six o'clock. The choice is not between three thousand prisoners and no prisoners at all. The choice is as follows: either the SS will make the selection or we will do it in their place, thereby using the process to save some prisoners. We will make up a list of three thousand men who are already dying, who are quarantined, or who have not yet been assigned to jobs. And we will confer secretly with the national organizations in the camp, asking them if there is anyone on this list we should save. But years later I got these hate letters saying, You collaborated, you are a war criminal!

INTERVIEWER

In France you have been publicly accused of having spared the lives of your Communist Party comrades over the lives of others.

SEMPRÚN

Do we have the right to make a choice in those circumstances? Can we apply an ethic to the Resistance that we don't apply to everyday ethics? What is considered moral in this context? What is moral is that we were required to save those who were closest to the ethic of the Resistance, meaning the heads of the networks, the ones working in transport, and so on.

You ask what haunts my writing. Well, after the camp, there was the moral question of being a Communist. Trying to explain the folly and the necessity of that choice. Trying to show how it came to be my *raison d'être*, and why this dead star hovered for so long above the previous century. Here are my obsessions, in no particular order: torture, the camps, the Jewish experience during the Holocaust, the singularity of that experience in the larger context of deportation. It is not easy to reflect on these issues today. Historically, the most significant

pitfall has been the most dangerous—silence, the refusal to talk about what happened.

INTERVIEWER

The Resistance was a vast movement, made up of many factions. Is it possible to talk about a shared experience among those who took part in it?

SEMPRÚN

Yes, and that experience is torture. Sometimes I find myself at a dinner with old men wearing their military decorations—not that they're much older than I am, but I still think of them as old men, decorated, noble—and in the middle of the conversation, we find out that of the five of us, three were in the Resistance! One was a leftist and one was more from the right, the third was a teacher or the head of some administrative council, but what all three of us had in common was the experience of being tortured. The shared experience of the Jewish and the Gypsy communities was selection. They were not tortured, they were arrested en masse and sent directly to the death camps. So the experience of selection for the crime of merely being born, *that* belongs to the Jews and to the Gypsies—and also the experience of being deported collectively, entire families, entire Eastern European villages, entire neighborhoods from Paris. These people arrived at the camps in Poland already knowing each other, and to their left and to their right stood the henchmen of the SS, the angels of death, who would say, You—this way. You—that way. And who is being sent to die? It is not simply a friend, a comrade, it is a mother, a brother, a child. Only the Jews and Gypsies experienced that. The members of the Resistance were arrested separately and their experiences were essentially solitary.

INTERVIEWER

You were expelled from the Communist Party in 1964. Would you now call yourself an anticommunist?

SEMPRÚN

No, I wouldn't go that far. I would say I have become a stranger to communism. I suppose I am anticommunist in the theoretical criticizing of communism as a solution to socioeconomic issues, but not militantly anticommunist.

Clearly the fight against dictatorship was justified, in spite of whatever tactical errors we in the Resistance may have committed. But what—and who—would take over in its place? This is where I began to engage in the discussion, examining the gaps between the monolithic, seamless visions we had built for ourselves and the reality of our situation—the fading, tarnished image of a Spain that was not at all as we had imagined it. Then there were all the events taking place in the USSR, the Twentieth Congress, the so-called secret report by Khrushchev, a whole series of things that undermined our fiercest hopes. So the day came when that contradiction became intolerable, when I refused to perform self-censorship and was thus definitively expelled from the Communist Party.

I would put it this way: I didn't choose to become a writer, but I did choose to quit being a man of action. And that opened up the possibility of becoming a writer.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think you would have managed to survive being expelled had you not begun writing?

SEMPRÚN

No, not at all. I am sure I would have disintegrated emotionally.

INTERVIEWER

The book you're working on now, "Exercice de survie," is made up of memoir as well as reflections on memory. Is this a response to your critics who objected to your adding fiction to your memoirs of the camps? Claude Lanzmann went so far as to argue that the use of fictional detail renders the narrative of the deportee entirely counterfeit.

SEMPRÚN

I think it is very difficult to enter into a discussion with Claude Lanzmann. Once he said, All Semprún does is literature! *Shoah* is indeed a remarkable film, but he would like us to believe that it is not a film composed partly of fiction? The disturbing truth, the great paradox of the gas chambers, is that it left no surviving witnesses. And that changes everything. All the other massacres of history have left a few survivors who could serve as witnesses. But no one survived the gas chamber. We have never been inside the gas chamber, because had we been there, we would be dead. There are a few cases where someone was pulled out at the last minute, but then that person did not experience the gas chamber, just the entrance *into* the chamber. We only have the testimony of those who ran the gas chambers and dragged out the bodies of the dead. So in a sense, Lanzmann's film is also fictional. It takes place years later, and people are telling their stories with the measure of artifice it necessarily entails. I find this approximation both artistic and fascinating, but it is a strict reconstruction of the truth.

INTERVIEWER

But that poses the problem of genre, obviously. *Literature or Life* is a memoir that detours occasionally into novelistic territory. Do you consider it an authentic memoir?

SEMPRÚN

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

Was the question of genre—of fact versus fiction and how it should be labeled—relevant in your mind at the time you were writing the book?

SEMPRÚN

Of course, and I would say I tried even harder with *Literature or Life* to step away from the traditional genres—my books are generally both memoirs and novels, both fiction and first-hand testimony. My aim was to create a synthesis of the two genres. This is what speaks to me, this synthesis that cannot be defined according to the rules of traditional literary criticism. But in *Literature or Life* I pushed the hybrid form much farther. When I was working on the most painful parts of the autobiographical narrative, the ones I had postponed for so long, I forced myself to be as stringent as possible, to be absolutely faithful to the historical truth. I did not want to romanticize any of the details, or to distract the reader with dramatic turns of event or artificial moments of narrative tension. So I decided to use my imagination only when it felt necessary in order to produce a more lucid image of my overall experience of the camp.

INTERVIEWER

In your books you discuss the paradoxical nature of pleasure as something that might have reconnected you to life after the camp but which in fact drew you back to the memory of death.

SEMPRÚN

Yes, pleasure was, in reality, the complete opposite of oblivion. I could see the shadow of Buchenwald in the gaze of the girls who looked at me after I'd left the camp. And so to me pleasure became, to put it bluntly, a reminder of the life I had stolen from others. The sheer guilt of being in the world, of having survived the collective hell of the camp.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel more at peace today, more than fifty years and fifteen books later?

SEMPRÚN

Literature has played a dual and contradictory role in my life. The act of writing appeases one's memories and eases the act of forgetting. When I write, I make my memories tangible, and in this way I can get rid of them. On the other hand, writing is but a ploy to convulse memory back into life. And the more I write, the more my memories return to inhabit me.

For a long time I only dreamt strange, penetrating nightmares, whereas now I no longer have nightmares at all. Literature has appeased my anxieties. The memories are there, but they remain quiescent. Some of them, the difficult moments, the freezing cold, the hunger, the horror of death—I am going to say something rather brutal here—have become nearly fictional in my eyes, as if I had invented them in order to write about them, as if they had never actually happened to me. But then I've come to realize that this process of dredging up old memories never ends. Here's an idea that presents itself, clearly and concretely, in my book *Quel beau dimanche!* when I tell the story of a dog stew we made and ate in the camp. But I could write a whole book about just that one memory, about people's reaction to the stew, the Czech who says, No, I will not touch it, and another man who says, No, it is just the *idea* of the dog that revolts you, and so on. There are so many episodes like that, which remain so vivid in my mind. Hence literature, in the end, has caused me new anxieties as well, because the idea that I may still have things to say and not have the time in which to say them is terribly unsettling. But that's how it is.

INTERVIEWER

In *Le Mort qu'il faut*, there is an extraordinary instant when all of a sudden this other voice comes echoing out of you, spouting poetry. Is that something that really happened to you in the camp?

SEMPRÚN

Absolutely. That is not fiction. In a concentration camp you're not really afraid of looking crazy by talking to yourself, since everyone there has something or other affecting them. Whispering poetry to yourself or reciting it out loud lends you a sort of solitude, allows you to imagine for an instant that you belong to yourself again. It's like therapy. In fact, the richer and more complex the poetry, the more effective. You're in the middle of the communal bathroom, being shoved by people trying to get to the water basin. That's a discipline you must keep up, because if you don't wash, you let go of yourself and begin looking like a tramp. So everyone is pushing to get to the giant sinks where the water is running, and in the middle of that formidable stench, those inhumanly foul odors, you are saying, "Calm, calm, stay calm! Feel the weight of a palm"—you are reciting Paul Valéry and suddenly you are alone, autonomous, private. Of course thirty seconds later somebody knees you in the leg and

you're right back in that roiling mass of people, but for that one second you've managed to escape. You went deep inside yourself to find strength, and you alone know that it took incredible resourcefulness to be anything *but* yourself.

INTERVIEWER

Did you learn a lot of poetry by heart in your youth?

SEMPRÚN

I am from the time when students were taught to do that. Reciting poetry is a pedagogical instrument. It certainly had its wretched aspects—it is mechanical, repetitive. But on the other hand, you do have permanent access to your own private anthology.

INTERVIEWER

You use a line by André Malraux as an epigraph to *Literature or Life*: “The crucial region of the soul where absolute Evil and fraternity clash.” This clash seems to be a recurring idea in your work.

SEMPRÚN

Yes, perhaps. The only problem is that we would need our own Dostoyevsky to shed light on that matter, absolute evil. The force that shaped the twentieth century.

INTERVIEWER

Do you fear that you have not succeeded in depicting absolute evil in your work?

SEMPRÚN

I think I have helped people see that it is a fundamental theme of our era. But I have not been able to articulate it in my novels. At least not yet, and I don't know that I ever will. Perhaps in bursts, in the corners of some of my anecdotes, my adventures, my tales. Man's liberty resides in his freedom to do good as well as evil. In the camps, which quite literally collected and concentrated souls, it was all the more striking. I saw men who would turn a comrade in to the SS just to obtain a few supplementary morsels of bread and live a few days longer. But I also saw men who shared their bread with a comrade, even though that meant they would lose days of their own lives. I prefer speaking of the man who shares his bread, but we can also speak of the others. And we can speak about how men of higher social rank were capable of committing horrendous acts in order to survive, while at times men of modest origins were capable of heroic acts of self-sacrifice. The privileges of class and education were thoroughly shattered in the face of the conditions at the camps. And humanity lay revealed, completely bare, terrifying, eerily beautiful.

INTERVIEWER

At eighty-three years of age, you seem astonishingly young. Have you any idea why?

SEMPRÚN

I am not blasé, that much I know. I find something or someone new every day, or perhaps at my age every week. One must revel in the effort, of course— keep making choices, lust after life.

INTERVIEWER

Are there any literary forms you haven't yet tried that you wish to pursue?

SEMPRÚN

I once thought of writing futuristic books, science fiction that would be based on the anticipation of political events in the distant future. But I'm not sure I can do it. I always tiptoe back to memory.

—Translated from French by Sara Sugihara

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