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'Exile, Writer, Soldier, Spy' Review: A Man of Many Lives

As a subject for biography, Spanish writer Jorge Semprún is as hard to pin down as the Scarlet Pimpernel.



Jorge Semprún in 1998. PHOTO: RAPHAEL GAILLARDE/GAMMA-RAPHO VIA GETTY IMAGES

By *Tobias Grey*

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As a subject for biography, Jorge Semprún is as hard to pin down as the Scarlet Pimpernel. He was a man of many facets: a Spanish Republican, a Resistance fighter in occupied France, a Buchenwald survivor, a Communist undercover agent in Franco-era Spain, a garlanded author, an Oscar-nominated screenwriter (“The War Is Over” and “Z”) and a Spanish culture minister. One can only sympathize with author Soledad Fox Maura for wondering whether she was going to “spend the rest of [her] life writing this book.”

Ms. Fox Maura, a professor of Spanish and literature at Williams College, has been teaching Semprún’s work for over 15 years. She is distantly related to her subject, who died in 2011, age 87. It is debatable whether this first English-language biography, which grapples dauntlessly with Semprún’s “poetic license” as a memoiristic writer, will awaken American interest in an author whose fame was, and still is, far greater in Europe.

“What was exceptional about Semprún’s life is not that it coincided with so many of the historical convulsions that defined his era,” writes Ms. Fox

Maura, “but that he involved himself so assiduously in all of them.” To begin with, Semprún grew up in the lap of Spanish luxury. His maternal grandfather, Antonio Maura (1853- 1925), was a five-time Spanish prime minister whose political reforms helped to entrench the country’s constitutional monarchy.

Semprún’s privileged childhood was turned upside-down at age 9, when his mother died, and again four years later, when the Spanish Civil War erupted. Like many Spanish Republicans opposed to Franco, Semprún’s diplomat father and his strictly authoritarian new wife gathered their family and fled to France. The hand-to-mouth life they led there did not preclude Semprún’s attending one of Paris’s elite high schools. It was at the lycée that he mastered French, the language in which he would write most of his books.

EXILE, WRITER, SOLDIER, SPY

By Soledad Fox Maura
Arcade, 299 pages, \$25.99

In 1940, while Semprún was studying for the baccalauréat, the Germans occupied Paris. This led him to join the communist French Resistance

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group Jean-Marie Action, for which he collected arms dropped by parachute at night. According to Semprún’s later boss Felipe González, who was Spain’s longest-serving prime minister (from 1982 to 1996): “The sole reason” that Semprún joined the Communist Party was because it was “the most committed group willing to fight in the Resistance movement.”

Semprún’s work for the Resistance ended when he was arrested by the Gestapo in October 1943. His subsequent deportation to Buchenwald, where he remained until its liberation at the end of the war, became the defining event of his life and the inspiration for much of his work. It is here that Ms. Fox Maura’s sleuthing really comes into its own. Many who have read Semprún’s Buchenwald books, including “The Long Voyage” (1963), “What a Beautiful Sunday!” (1980) and the best-selling “Literature or Life” (1994), will have wondered whether these are works of testimony or if they contain elements of fiction.

From her years of research, Ms. Fox Maura is convinced of the latter: “Semprún has been misclassified as a testimonial author, when what he in fact writes is a sophisticated autobiographical fiction most akin to the picaresque.” It is not as though Semprún made a secret of his technique. He himself said that “the only way to make horror palpable is to construct a fictional body of work.” But what he does not provide his readers with is any

kind of road map demarking where testimony ends and fiction begins.

Semprún's first book, "The Long Voyage," which was published 18 years after his liberation from Buchenwald, paints a very muddy picture. Ms. Fox Maura calls Semprún out here for "co-opt[ing] the most well-known representations of the Holocaust." For a start he describes Buchenwald as a "death camp," which it patently was not. Despite thousands of people dying there, no gas chambers were ever built on the site. Semprún also writes lyrically about the significance of the sign above the Buchenwald entrance gates. The only problem: The sign he describes, with the motto "Arbeit Macht Frei" (Work Sets You Free), was used at Auschwitz and elsewhere but not at Buchenwald.

In one of the novel's most moving scenes, Semprún, who was not Jewish, recalls a Jew singing the Kaddish in Yiddish. Ms. Fox Maura notes that this was yet another example of "poetic license," as the Kaddish was habitually recited in Aramaic. Far more damning was Semprún's depiction of Ilse Koch, the sadistic wife of Buchenwald's commandant Karl-Otto Koch, whom he luridly imagines collecting the tattooed skins of inked inmates to cover the lampshades of her living room. Not only was Ilse Koch gone by the time Semprún arrived in Buchenwald, but the scene is pure kitsch.

None of this escaped the attention of the Hungarian Nobel laureate Imre Kertész, a fellow Holocaust survivor who criticized Semprún for choosing "the wrong technique, narrating only the most spectacular of events and mangling temporality in the process." While there is no doubt that Semprún was a deeply cultivated writer, one has to wonder at his motivations.

His champions celebrate him for having kept the flame of Holocaust memory alive in both his literature and his numerous public pronouncements. But there is something jarring about how Semprún frames himself in his work. "His camp narratives, in general, avoid any kind of self-portrayal as a victim," Ms. Fox Maura writes. "On the contrary, he retains an unusually healthy sense of vanity, humor, irony, and a kind of literary showmanship that other survivors have found disquieting." What, she asks, was this seducer's "personal relationships to trauma, memory, and forgetting?" The mystery remains.

—*Mr. Grey is a writer and critic living in Paris.*

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