

Jorge Semprún: *writing in tension*

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Writer

On 10 December 2023, Jorge Semprún Maura would have turned one hundred years old. Commemorating a life means considering the different times in which it has been led, both personal and family-related, in addition to a strictly historical timeline. To begin, then: Jorge Semprún Maura was born in Madrid, into a wealthy family formed by the couple of Susana Maura, daughter of Antonio Maura, who served as president of the government several times during the reign of Alfonso XIII, and José María Semprún, a diplomat. Susana Maura died in 1932 and José María Semprún married Annette Litschi, the German governess of their seven children. The coup d'état in July 1936 took them by surprise while they were on holidays in the Basque Country. The family then embarked on a journey that would take them to France, Switzerland and the Netherlands. When the war had ended, they settled in Paris, where Jorge Semprún studied philosophy at the Sorbonne.

In 1941, young Semprún joined the Resistance and in 1942 he joined the Spanish Communist Party, which operated between France and Spain. Nevertheless, he continued to do clandestine work in the Jean-Marie Action network. In September 1943, Semprún was arrested by the Gestapo in Joigny, in Burgundy, and sent to the Buchenwald Nazi concentration camp as a French political deportee, where he remained in contact with the camp's clandestine communist organisation.

After the camps were liberated in 1945, Jorge Semprún moved back to Paris. The return to everyday life was difficult for him, like so many other survivors. He would record this in his written work, especially the difficulty of writing about his experience in the concentration camp. Starting in the 1950s, his activity in the Spanish Communist Party became intense and risky for the next two decades because it was clandestine, as he was forced to cross



1. Jorge Semprún in 1970. Photography extracted from *Primera Plana* magazine. Year VIII number 408, November 1970, Buenos Aires, Argentina. Public Domain

2. Jorge Semprún, at La Comédie du livre de Montpellier, May 23, 2009. Picture: Dinkley/CC BY SA 3.0



the border and carry out activity in Spain, forcing him to adopt several personalities under different names. The best known of these names was Federico Sánchez, and he also transferred the experience to his literary work. After democracy was restored in Spain, Semprún served as the Minister of Culture under the government of Felipe González. He left the office in 1991.

His literary career began with the publication of *Le grand voyage* in 1936, in which he tangentially explains the experience of the Nazi camps, since it is a story about the transport of deportees from Compiègne to Buchenwald. It would be in 1994, with the publication of *L'Écriture ou la vie*, that his actual experience of the camp itself would appear in his literary work.

Jorge Semprún's work is marked by ambiguity, paradox and opposition, the most relevant of which is that of writing or living. This characteristic has also influenced his reception: is it not significant that he is considered both a Spanish and a French writer, and therefore that his writing can testify to the experience of the deportees of one or the other country? Does this ambiguity of reception not also say something about how the memory of political deportation has been passed down?

It must be understood that Jorge Semprún began to write about his experience as a deportee in French. Moreover, he did so in France

during the 1960s, a context politically marked by Communism, building a testimonial recreated in both film and literature that focuses on the hero who strives to embody a morally unsullied resistance figure in the deportee survivor. It is in this context that *Le grand voyage* was published, which was translated into Spanish under the title *El largo viaje*, published by Seix Barral first in Mexico in 1965 due to the imperatives of Franco's censorship, and later in Spain in 1976.

Notably, *Le grand voyage* appeared in France shortly after the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, in 1961, an event of great impact because it raised the survivors of the Nazi camps as central testimonial figures. It was also an event from which Spain was quite left out.

L'Écriture ou la vie appeared in France in 1994 at a time of social fear of the resurgence of neo-Nazi groups not only in France, but in Europe. Therefore, the book resonated greatly among readers who considered it necessary to be informed about the Nazi camps and to use this knowledge of containment to prevent it from happening again. The book soon became required reading in French schools, while in Spain it defined Semprún as an author dealing with the subject of concentration camps. We remember that it was only in the 1980s that Primo Levi's first texts became known in Spain. The delay in discovering these two authors led to entangled memories, making it harder to distinguish between the Jewish experience of the extermination camps (Levi's case) and the experience of the political deportee (Semprún's case). Jorge Semprún always made this distinction and in fact demanded it, almost as a moral imperative.

The construction of memory in Semprún's work can be reminiscent of Proust. In other words, he makes use of a dynamic moving back and forth between the past and the present that is not done through leaps in time, but by seeing relationships between the reality of the present, with the past, so that the world is seen through the various layers that one's own experience has built up. However, Semprún's work is not about recovering a "lost object". According to the experience of the camps, there is no nostalgia for the past, only pain. Hence the construction of the dichotomy between writing or living.

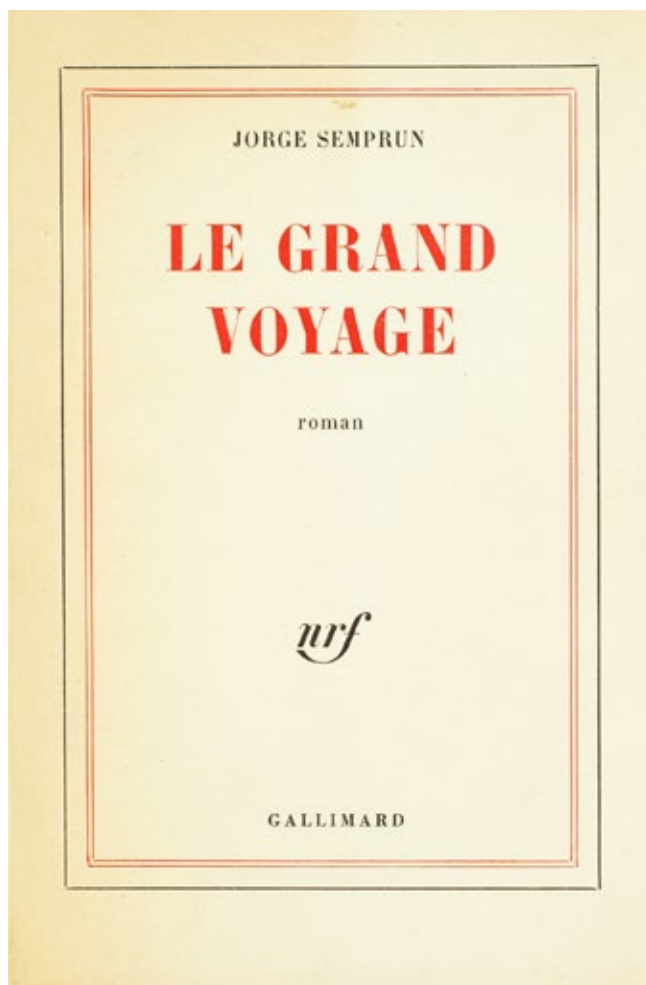
At least as a literary construction, this tension explains Semprún's late entry into the world of testimonial writing, though we know that there are also political reasons, as he wrote in *Autobiografía de Federico Sánchez*. As I mentioned above, the Communist Party was interested in building an image of the resistance figure, and not the destitute image of the Nazi camp survivor.

Despite the dichotomy between writing and life that presides over Semprún's literary work dedicated to his deportation to the Buchenwald camp, his perspective is never rigid, since he understood the word "testimony" not as absolute truth, but as a possibility of truth. This is what he stated in the prologue he wrote for *El no de Klara* by Soazig Aron (2003): "narration does not aim to reconstruct a documentary truth, but to create a spiritual reality".

To finish, I would like to mention an interesting feature of Semprún's testimonial work that makes it somewhat easy to read despite the tragic content. I am referring to the short duration of the narrative voice within the camp. The past is reconstructed narratively through chains of thought that lead us outside the concentration camp, so that we can open ourselves to reflecting on other topics ranging from history to more subjective issues such as experiences

of love. This technique allows us to temporarily avoid the concentration camp issue and helps us to identify with other aspects of the narrator's life or existence at the same time. In other words, as readers, we are often "outside the camp".

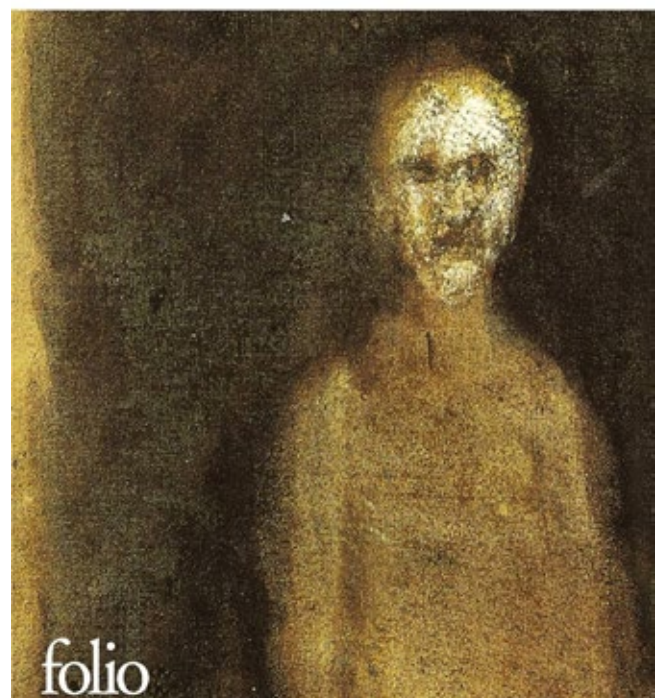
The constant flashbacks that characterise Semprún's literature remind us that the narrator's life should not be interpreted as frozen in an experience, but rather makes sense both in the periods before and after the deportation. It is a life that has to do with politics, but also with knowledge. All this knowledge—we could call it academic knowledge—will act as a guide. It will be the Virgil of Semprún's work, which will rescue us as readers from a knowledge otherwise impossible to share, that of the Nazi camp. But it also saves the author, who sees himself trapped in the dichotomy between writing and life.



3. *The long voyage*, cover of the first edition published by Gallimard, Paris, in 1963

Jorge Semprun

L'écriture ou la vie



4. *Literature or Life (L'écriture Ou La Vie)*, Memoir by Jorge Semprun, 1994