

# Nooit Meer Auschwitz Lezing

2007 Semprún

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LAUDATIO Jorge Semprún 25.01.2007

Honoured guest, Jorge Semprún,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On the 27<sup>th</sup> January 1945, the Red Army liberated Auschwitz-Birkenau. Since that time the name Auschwitz has grown to become THE symbol for the mega-death, destruction of Jewish life, civilisation and culture in Europe, the Holocaust. In consequence **"Auschwitz Never Again"** has become the most important message to civilised mankind. We still live under the threat and danger of man's inhumanity to fellow man. Mega- death, genocide and destruction are still within our grasp. The Holocaust is never far from us.

*{Cuando contemplo el cielo de innumerables luces adornado,  
Y miro hacia el suelo de noche rodeado, en sueño y olvido sepultado,  
El amor y la Peña, despiertan en mi pecho un ansia ardiente;  
Templo de claridad y hermosura;  
Mi alma que a tu alteza nacio,  
Que desventura  
la tiene en esta Carcel baja, oscura}.* Luis de Leon, Noche Serena 1527-1591

When I contemplate the heavens embellished and adorned with countless lights,  
then look down at the earth enveloped in dark night  
Buried deep in oblivion and sleep,  
The love and sorrow I feel awakes in my breast an ardent longing.  
Temple of light, of clarity, of beauty,  
My soul was born for your heights;  
Yet what immense misfortune keeps it  
in this vile prison, in the dark.

Jorge Semprún was born into an aristocratic Spanish family on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December 1923. Coming from a cultural heritage based on such figures as Miguel de Cervantes, Garcilaso de la Vega, Luis de Gongora and many more inspiring writers, there had to be an inspiring writer in his DNA. What was not anticipated was the subject matter that would be his material; mass murder, incarceration, the destruction of an epoch of European culture, human suffering, all carried out by other beings not even pretending to be human.

Jorge Semprún became a political refugee at the age of 14. With his family he left Spain to settle in France when Spain was in disarray, fighting for civil liberties against the forces of evil, that were attempting to take over the country. In France there followed a few years of emigrant normality; school, university and then the Nazi occupation.

Jorge Semprún started to look down at the earth enveloped in a dark night. Occupation, transportations, an iron rule against the basic freedoms of a free society. His deep love for mankind, the pain and sorrow that he shared with his fellow human beings under stress and threat, were motivation enough for him to join the Resistance and Partisan movement that sprung up to defy and sabotage the occupying Nazi forces. Eventually

this cost him his own freedom. He was incarcerated in 1943 as a political prisoner in KZ, concentration camp Buchenwald.

Jorge Semprún's journey to that camp and his experiences in that camp are the subject matter for two of his most impressive books. They touch the heart and search the soul of what it is like to be robbed of basic human rights and be caught up in the processes of dehumanisation; how light can be turned into darkness; how evil can rule the day; how the longings and hopes that fill the hearts and minds of those who are being made victims in the factories that breed darkness and hopelessness, can be destroyed.

On his arrival in Buchenwald in 1945 direct from Auschwitz, Paul Bernstein tells of his meeting with Jorge Semprún. He describes him as "this strong figure who can stand up to the SS, is even superior to them, and they know it". Jorge Semprún was "a light in the darkness of evil" to be experienced in that vile prison.

With victory over the Nazis, life was to be continued, but it could never be the same as before. Determined to continue his share in the war against the abuse of human rights and the suppression of human dignity, he firstly tried the civil trade of translator, but found that not enough. And so he became a leading figure in the underground organisations that were active against the Franco regime in his beloved Spain. His experiences in the dark world of Nazi suppression had taught him that all organisations had to be above suspicion and incorruptible.

To his credit he was expelled from the Spanish Communist Party and Frederico Sanchez, one of his pseudonyms died into the history books of that period.

Jorge Semprún was and is an inspired figure who does not give up easily. He has written many books, scenarios for films and has even acted in them. His talents are legion and he has used them unsparingly. So much so that he was invited to be Minister of Culture in a renewed Spain, a position that he occupied with energy and fervour from 1988 to 1991. Since that time he has been constantly at work, spreading his knowledge of the dangers that lie before mankind and Europe in particular, when we make wrong choices in political and human affairs.

Jorge Semprún was born a Spaniard and remains in heart and soul, a "Spanish Red." His words "je suis refugie espanol", his refusal to hide as a Frenchman on his return from Buchenwald, in 1945, cost him 1,000 French francs, (at that time a lot of real money) is an example of his integrity and honour even when he was penniless and homeless.

In Spain there is an exclusive cultural tradition called *Corrida de Torros*, Bull fighting. Six bulls are selected and allocated in pairs to three individual matadores (bullfighters). This takes place at noon on the day of the fight. In the final section the star matador engages the bull with his elegance and control, then exchanges the purple and yellow capote (large cape) for the red muleta (smaller cape) and curved sword. He might dedicate the bull to an individual or the audience.

If he performs well the audience will wave white handkerchiefs to try to oblige the president to award an ear or two and a tail to him. Occasionally a matador may be carried out of the arena through the main gates on the shoulders of his fans. This is the ultimate accolade.

Jorge Semprún is a *Matador de la pluma*. He has shown the world that the pen is mightier than the sword. He has constantly fought the fearsome bulls of Racism, Fascism, Nazism, Discrimination and the many forms of injustice and dehumanising processes that he has encountered. As one commentator has put it "you have managed to pull life out of an inkwell, even after the catastrophe that we call by the collective name Auschwitz."

Jorge Semprún, like the Matador of the bullring, you has faced these enemies of freedom and human dignity with unyielding and uncompromising strength. Facing torture and death, expulsion and banishment, so that others may live in freedom and peace.

Jorge Semprún, Cabalero, Matador de la Pluma, this morning I went down to the abattoir with the idea of bringing 12 ears and 6 tails to present to you, but they had no ears and the tails were very, very short indeed. Instead, on behalf of the Netherlands Auschwitz Committee, it is my privilege to present you with something more befitting and hopefully closer to your heart, for being the voice that cries out with your pen,

**"Auschwitz Never Again,"**

The Annetje Fels Kupferschmit Award 2007