

# Personal histories

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Caroline Moorehead

A TRAIN IN WINTER

A story of resistance, friendship and survival  
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Caroline Moorehead is in many ways an ideal biographer: an assiduous gatherer of facts, whose books provide a deep and empathetic immersion into whatever world she has made her subject. Her subjects range widely, from Bertrand Russell to Freya Stark, Martha Gellhorn and Lucie de la Tour du Pin, lady-in-waiting to Marie Antoinette and eyewitness to the French Revolution.

Her latest biography is unusual in that it takes as its subject the lives of a group of French women resistants who were deported to three of the most notorious Nazi concentration camps; it is simultaneously a multiple biography and a detailed anatomy of the nature of friendship. Moorehead has a profound sympathy for these women and the shared belief of the few who survived that they simply would not have done so without each other. Their bond is what helped to keep them alive and it is in a way the subject of her book.

What brought these women together in the months and years after the fall of France in June 1940 was a shared commitment to resisting the enemy. The first half of *A Train in Winter* describes their disparate backgrounds. Some were highly educated, sophisticated Parisians, intellectuals involved with the Communist Party, writers and editors, biochemists and university lecturers; others were midwives, teachers, nurses or working-class women who ran cafés or supported their families as dressmakers, cooks, secretaries or factory workers. Some were still at school – the youngest was only fifteen; others were mothers of young children. The oldest of the women was sixty-seven. Many had husbands or lovers who were also in the Resistance. They came from all over France, from the city and the countryside. Only a handful were Jewish; those who were generally kept it hidden.

A few of these women became known

cross the demarcation lines. Some, mostly those who lived in and around Paris, were friends and colleagues, though their stories are rather sketchily told and the multiple characters at times make it somewhat hard to follow the many narrative strands and to distinguish between the women. The book really comes alive when they have been arrested and interned in various French prisons and internment camps, before being sent in January 1943 to Auschwitz-Birkenau, and finally, towards the very end of the war, on forced marches to Ravensbrück and Mauthausen.

Moorehead uses interviews she conducted between 2008 and 2010 with four of the women, interwoven with material taken from unpublished letters and diaries and published memoirs by Delbo, de Gaulle, Tillon and others, to construct an extremely moving and intensely personal history of the Auschwitz universe as experienced by these women. Only forty-three of the original 230 survived their imprisonment.

As immediate and powerful as this material is, depending on these testimonies as primary sources presents certain problems. The literary historian Lawrence Langer has written extensively on both oral and written Holocaust survivor testimony; in the essay “Remembering Survival” he writes, “As audience to these testimonies, we sit in the presence of tainted memory as it dredges up the anguish of loss with a brave face”. Any writer who depends on survivor testimony as her primary source of evidence must make the decision whether to allow the testimony to speak for itself or to attempt an interpreta-

tion, to mediate it in some way. Moorehead makes use of the wealth of historical material available, detailing daily existence in Birkenau, and freely uses published memoirs by Delbo (who herself wrote about the problem of writing memory) and others to describe the inner lives of the women in the camp, though without necessarily indicating when she has done so; the style of the narrative makes it impossible to distinguish between material drawn from memoirs published in the 1950s, just a few years after the Liberation, and interviews conducted between 2008 and 2010. Yet Moorehead never broaches the vexed issue of the stability of memory, and elects to privilege narrative immediacy by not reminding the reader when what is being described is a memory of an event, or a feeling, that took place sixty years before it was recounted to her. The consequence of this is that the historian’s rigour is sometimes sacrificed in favour of the novelist’s empathy: “Rising before dawn next morning, Gilberte carried her [sister’s] body outside and laid it tenderly by a wall”. Moorehead does not tell us her source for this incident. It could have been told to her by one of her interviewees; perhaps she found it in an unpublished text by Gilberte herself. By failing to contextualize the event and using an omniscient narrator to describe it, and by embellishing it with the unnecessarily novelistic “tenderly”, Moorehead robs the episode of its emotional truth.

Nonetheless, *A Train in Winter* is a powerful and moving book; its significance is in bringing to a wider, non-French readership the particular and terrible fate of a group of women whose only crime was to love their country and to wish to do something to defend it, at a time when its government chose craven obedience to the occupier, with terrible consequences for so many of its people.