The Value of Memory
Author:
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El valor de la memoria: De la Cárcel de Ventas al campo de Ravensbrück, by Mercedes Núñez Targa, is an autobiographical recounting of the author's harrowing experiences as a political prisoner for her opposition to fascism and Nazism. Born in Barcelona, Núñez Targa was active in socialist and communist organizations when Franco's troops took the city, and she was soon detained and imprisoned in Cárcel de Ventas, a women's prison in Madrid. Finally freed after years in prison, she fled to France and joined the Resistance in their combat against the Nazis during World War II. Eventually discovered and arrested by the Gestapo, she spent the rest of the war in different concentration camps. When allied forces liberated the camps at the conclusion of the war, she went into exile in France.

This is two books in one volume: Cárcel de Ventas, published in Spanish in 1967, and El Carretó dels gossos. Una catalana a Ravensbruck, published in Catalán in 1980 and later translated to Castilian Spanish. The first tells of her experiences in the prison in Madrid, and the second, her time in the concentration camps. These are followed by a glossary of terms and a biography of the author.

The two books are written in different styles, with different pacing. Cárcel de Ventas takes the form of a series of vignettes, each a page and a half or two pages long, describing different scenes, people, or phenomena in the Madrid prison. Each chapter could stand alone, but taken together, they paint a compelling picture of her three years as a prisoner in Spain. El Carretó dels gossos is made up of longer chapters and has a distinct narrative arc, from her initial transport from Paris to the concentration camps to the liberation of the camps by allied troops. Despite the different styles and the several years between the events narrated in the two books, or perhaps because of these things, the two come together to form a coherent and engrossing whole.

In her introduction, the author is clear on her intent: "this is not about making a literary work, but telling the truth. And that is what I will do." As she tells her story, she does so in a conversational style, using the language (and the languages) that were used in the prison and the camps. And what she tells is shocking. The brutality of the Franco regime against its enemies is surpassed perhaps only by the atrocities of the Nazis. The author does not shy away from the ugliest aspects of her experiences, even candidly writing of her own failings, such as when she helps save a fellow inmates life, then instantly regrets it because it could mean her own doom: "I am disgusted with myself."

This is an examination of what happens to people who are subjected to the most inhumane forms of treatment. But not all is dark. Profound friendships and loyalties are forged in the fires of torture and brutality, and somehow, some way, the spirit of resistance remains alive in many. Prisoners

perform acts of defiance and sabotage both small and large at the peril of the gas chamber. Others break under the pressure and sell out their fellow prisoners for a few scant privileges.

These stories are important and valuable for US readers. The Franco coup and dictatorship are often overshadowed by the greater conflagration of World War II, but they shaped Spanish history for decades and were inextricably linked to the broader war against fascism. And as is the case for all wars, the role of women is largely forgotten in our retellings. Núñez Targa tells these stories, in all their humanity, in all their horror, in all their courage. She tells them in captivating, honest, and thought-provoking fashion.

The Spanish word valor can be translated to English as either “courage” or “value.” The memorias of Mercedes Núñez Targa are indeed of great valor.