

Francesc-Marc Álvaro

One 15th August in Mauthausen

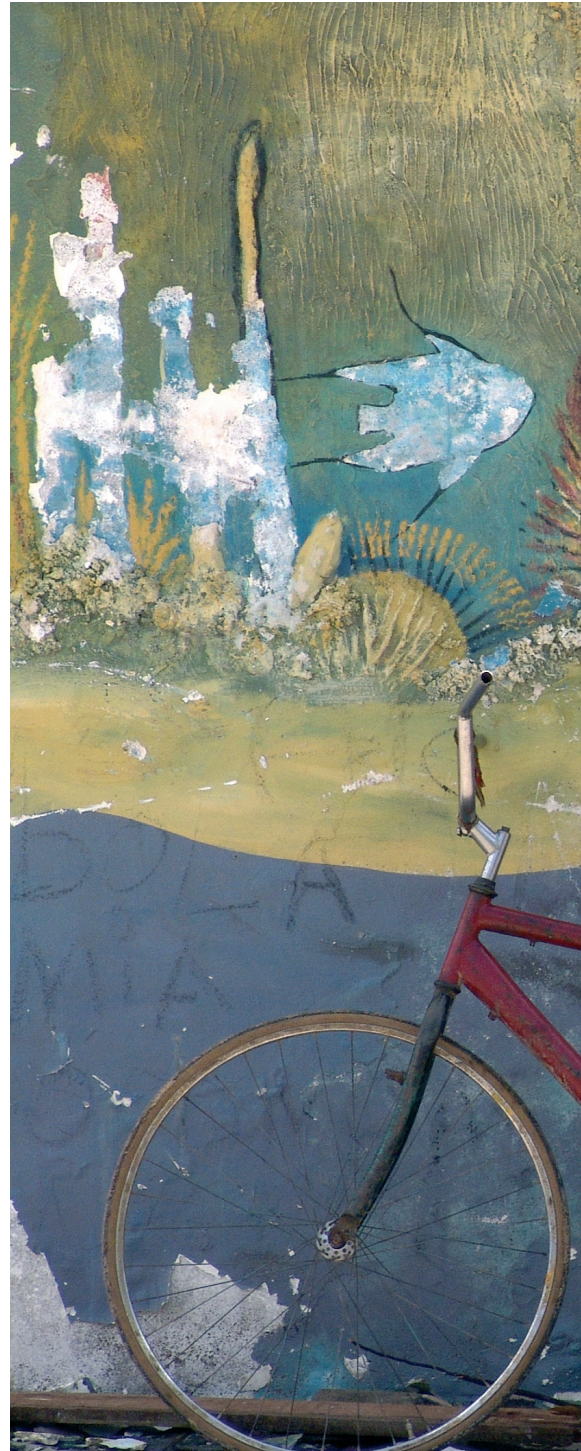
(Notes against disfiguration)

Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, about midday. We are standing in front of the Nazi camp of Mauthausen, near Linz, Austria. We go inside. We've come a long way to get here. We'll be here for more than three hours. I'd like to write that I don't know what we're looking for. I'll know when I come out. Perhaps.

1. This is something less than a theme park and much more than archaeological ruins. The problem is one of imagination. Only part of the original camp is here and one has to fill in the gaps. Doing this isn't as easy as it seems when one is making the preparations to come here. We're seeking traces. It's disappointing to be in a place that's devoted to memory which, paradoxically, isn't well explained. The account recorded in cassettes doesn't work, takes us away from the fact and diminishes everything by wanting to signify it in each adjective. We look for the vestiges in silence, then. My uncle died in Mauthausen, according to the Red Cross, on 1st January 1942. He was one of the many Republicans who went into exile and who, later, joined the Compagnies de Travailleurs Étrangers. Still with the rank of lieutenant, he joined the 115^{ème} Compagnie to go and reinforce the Maginot Line. In May 1940, Hitler's troops easily broke through the French defences, and my uncle was captured by the Germans on 21st June. After passing through the Strasbourg prisoner-of-war camp, he was sent to the Mauthausen camp and, finally, to the sub-camp in Gusen, which he would not leave. He was 29 when he died.

2. Terminological confusion is moral confusion. Are we to call it concentration camp or extermination camp? It's evident that Mauthausen was both, and it's evident that it never achieved the heights of productivity of the most destructive camp of them all, Auschwitz. In sum, for the Soviet soldiers and the Jews who ended up here, this was only an extermination camp. For our Republicans, it was both and more than 6,000 of them died in this place. In the end, it was a matter of dying more or less quickly. In comparison with the big camp located in Poland, what remains of the installations in Mauthausen looks too inoffensive today. Banally inoffensive, offensively inoffensive. The large quarry, for example, where every day prisoners died of exhaustion, or because the guards obliged them to throw themselves over the edge of the cliff, is camouflaged now with the grass that has sprung up, and it offers a falsely mild image, almost bucolic. A quarry where you can't see the stone. The 186 steps the prisoners climbed several times a day, their backs laden with rocks, are regular and comfortable today, totally practicable for children and the aged too. The whole thing is disturbing and it puts historical truth out of focus. The modified materiality of the camp changes our experience of pain we have not suffered. The risk of disfiguration is huge.

3. Should we take photos inside the gas chambers disguised as showers? Where does tourism begin and where does the right to memory end? Where does the souvenir begin and history end? Can I contemplate the site of the most abominable crime like somebody who is contemplating some relic of the Greeks or the Romans? Within these walls, prosaically, the final ceremony of radical evil took place and I don't know how to observe this space that weighs on one, that offers a density of death that has no equivalent outside of here.





The gas chambers didn't go into operation in Mauthausen until April 1942. I work it out. My uncle must have died in some other way, not because of the gas: hung from gallows, frozen to death, from exhaustion, or a shot. One of the spaces that the visitor finds near the gas chambers is the "neck shot corner" where prisoners were shot in the neck. Here, the guards told the prisoner to stand, back against the wall, so they could take measurements; then, through a slot in the headboard, they fired a shot into the nape of the victim's neck. A rudimentary but efficient system, although too slow for Nazi standards. An SS member, one of the ones who went back to leading a quiet civilian life after the war without answering for any crime, might say it was a compassionate method: the prisoner didn't know anything and didn't suffer. The surprise of the shot in the neck coincided with the explosion of the bullet in the brain. Light and dark, a fleeting fraction of time. A privilege in a place where suffering could be very prolonged.

4. An adolescent comes out crying from one of the areas that has a crematorium oven. He's accompanied by people who seem to be his parents. Where does education for learning about and preventing radical evil begin and end? This is the fundamental question of our times, that which has marked the world since 1945. Will I ever bring my children to such place? When is the time to do it? What will I say to them before the artefacts of crime on such a great scale? There are some young children visiting the camp. A little boy is running around, dashing through the place where prisoners died, as if he was in a garden. Life that is ignorant of horror and agony fills the vacuum. The children touch all the objects of the crime. The adults don't dare to.

5. The pavilion with the flags of the victims' countries is highly instructive. In the space allocated to the Spanish Republicans, there is the flag of the Second Republic and no other. I'm not surprised. It's the only non-official flag in this place. It's the only flag of a country that doesn't exist, of a defeated cause, of people who could have been saved but weren't. This flag denounces all the political and moral wretchedness of Franco, who preferred that Hitler should finish off the dirtiest work for him. This anachronistic flag, all by itself, is a gauge of the measure of the falsity of the label of "reconciliation" that the fathers of the transition stuck on their pacts. This flag, perhaps, might be exchanged for the constitutional flag of Spain the day when, for example, without making any excuses, the Spanish right condemns the Franco regime, which was an accomplice of the Third Reich, and which allowed the country's Republicans to be exterminated in its camps. Until that happens, the official flag of Spain has no place here. Out of respect, out of dignity, out of justice. In other parts of the camp, next to

photographs of some of the victims, there are also Catalan flags or sometimes just a small ribbon with the colours, next to a name. Here, the vanquished country lost, twice. It lost the right, for instance, of having tombs with names. Tombs where you can go to cry.

6. I am beset by one idea: my uncle, when he came in here, didn't know where he was going. I mean he didn't know that the Nazi camps were

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Nazi camps and nor did he know that radical evil would be fully consummated here, with the most precise modern technology. He didn't know that he was coming in here to die, that his body would disappear and that we'd never find it. "I am a prisoner of war", must have been his first consideration. Today, we know much more than my uncle ever knew about the machinery that murdered him. What we shall never know is the texture of the pain, that which

binds fear to despair and suffering to dreaming. What did the deportees dream about in these wooden bunks in the barracks? A few of the bunks are on display so that the visitor can get an idea of how the prisoners lived. But can we get an idea of it? No, even trying to is a ridiculous pretension, an absurd intention. Did the prisoners have nightmares? What did they do when they discovered that existence was worse than the nightmare? And over every moment hung the cold of the Austrian winter, there to break their skin, their breath, and their last efforts.

7. From the camp you can see houses and farms. It's a perfect postcard picture, a milk chocolate ad. The little village of Mauthausen is only six kilometres away. After leaving the camp, shattered, we stop for something to eat in the centre of the village. Among the adults we can see, there must be people who were children in 1941. Some of them are dressed up in local costume because Austria is a Catholic country and today, here too, they celebrate the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. I look at them and try to divine what it would be like living your whole life next to an extermination camp. And I'd also like to know what you think when you've been part, perhaps only passively, of a criminal system, the evidence of which could be seen, felt and smelt from your house while you put your child to bed, or got dinner, telling jokes while doing so. I remember now some documentary films of the allied troops who, in 1945, when they liberated the Nazi camps, obliged the local authorities in the surrounding towns to bury the piled-up, half-burnt bodies, which the SS hadn't had time to dispose of before fleeing. The faces of those German and Austrian civilians didn't express anything: not surprise, not fear, not fright, not affliction. If anything, something like disgust. I confess it and feel bad about it: I only see disgust and indifference in the visages and eyes of the older people who are having a beer at the neighbouring table, today, 15th August 2006, in Mauthausen.

8. The Austrian government has set up an exhibition inside the camp to demonstrate that there was also internal resistance against the Nazis and that not everyone was prepared to collaborate with the huge-scale crime. You can see the official effort to present an image to compensate for the collective shame. Beyond this part, in the Gusen sub-camp, almost nothing of the installations remains. Housing zones have been constructed and nobody would relate these high-income-family surroundings with the last gaze of many Catalan and Spanish republicans who were reduced to skin and bone. The ghosts of the deportees are not like the spirits of a profaned Indian cemetery who go around frightening the residents. The ghosts of the prisoners are us, the tourists in the camp, who are on the trail of death to find out something about the last days of uncles and grandparents and parents and cousins whom we are not resigned to forgetting. We go to where death still grunts, to listen to the echo of life. We go to death to bring them back, a little, to life.

9. On 12th October 2004, it occurred to the then Spanish Minister of Defence, José Bono, to get an old Republican combatant of the Leclerc Division and a former Falangist volunteer of Franco's Blue Division to march side by side in the military parade on what is known as Hispanic Day, Spain's national holiday. The Blue Division troops fought alongside Hitler's troops against the Russians. In the summer of 1941, some 45,000 Spanish volunteers joined the campaign to invade Russia, which turned out to be so disastrous for Nazi plans. While the Spanish victors of the Civil War were looking for a new victorious crusade, my uncle spent the last months of his life in Mauthausen, with the vanquished. The future of Europe and the world was at stake then. On 5th May 1945, American troops under the command of Lt. Col. Milton W. Keach liberated the camp of Mauthausen. The Blue Division had to return to Spain at the beginning of 1944 after losing approximately half its men. My uncle won the Second World War but died without knowing it.

10. Jorge Semprún, who was a prisoner in the Nazi camp of Buchenwald and was saved because, as he has written, he passed through death, has reminded us that in ten years' time, there will be no living witness to that infamy. Not my uncle, nor any other man. In ten years' time, we won't have voices or gestures to fill the enormous spaces and then the struggle against the last death, against the last erasure, against the siege of dust, will really begin. We shall go back to Mauthausen when they can no longer return and we shall go back as many times as necessary. And we shall tell our children to come too. To remember the horror and the darkness. To celebrate freedom and life II