Poignant, Heartbreaking Story But A Choppy Narrative

They were teachers, students, chemists, writers, and housewives; a singer at the Paris Opera, a midwife, a dental surgeon. They distributed anti-Nazi leaflets, printed subversive newspapers, hid resisters, secreted Jews to safety, transported weapons, and conveyed clandestine messages. The youngest was a schoolgirl of fifteen who scrawled V for victory on the walls of her lycée; the eldest, a farmers wife in her sixties who harbored escaped Allied airmen. Strangers to each other, hailing from villages and cities from across France, these brave women were united in hatred and defiance of their Nazi occupiers.

Eventually, the Gestapo hunted down 230 of these women and imprisoned them in a fort outside Paris. Separated from home and loved ones, these disparate individuals turned to one another, their common experience conquering divisions of age, education, profession, and class, as they found solace and strength in their deep affection and camaraderie.

In January 1943, they were sent to their final destination: Auschwitz. Only forty-nine would return to France.

A Train in Winter draws on interviews with these women and their families; German, French, and Polish archives; and documents held by World War II resistance organizations to uncover a dark chapter of history that offers an inspiring portrait of ordinary people, of bravery and survival—and of the remarkable, enduring power of female friendship.

My Personal Review:
The horrors of the Holocaust have been documented with minute details. The Nazi domination of Europe required the killing of all lesser peoples, those who would pollute the Master Race. The Jews and the Roma of Europe were two of the first groups to be hounded and rounded up by the Gestapo and the SS. The Jews were to be destroyed because they were Jewish, the Roma and the people of the countries of eastern Europe were to be killed or were to become slaves in order to provide Lebensraum for the spread of the Master Race. With both groups, the Nazi machine was successful.

Far less has been written about the people of western Europe, the people of the occupied countries who also had much to fear from the various branches of the Nazi propaganda machine. *A Train in Winter* is the extraordinary story of a group of French women who were imprisoned and then transferred to Auschwitz because they published leaflets encouraging Parisians not to cooperate with the occupiers.

Europe was not a peaceful place from 1918 until the invasion of Poland in 1939, the event that began World War II. A brutal civil war was fought in Spain from July 1936 and April, 1939. The Nationalists were led by General Francisco Franco and its adherents were referred to as Francoists or Fascists. They were vehemently anti-communist. Francos Fascists won the support of the Italians and the Germans who adopted the term fascism to denote a form of government in which country was more important than any individual, group, or guaranteed liberty. Millions of Spaniards were killed on each side and as Franco and the Fascists emerged as the victors, Spanish communists went to France to get support for their group. By 1940, when the Germans invaded, there were many French who considered themselves communists although their form of communism was not connected to what was happening in the Soviet Union.

In the first part of *A Train in Winter*, the author introduces an enormous cast of characters whose names are difficult to remember because there are so many but which must be remembered because it is the telling of their story that is the purpose of the book. Many young people, including some who were still children, became propagandists, carrying anti-German flyers and newsletters encouraging quiet rebellion against the occupying forces. When Germany invaded Russia, French communists joined the resistance and were very effective in thwarting German plans. Most of the women in *A Train in Winter* identified themselves as communists. Others joined in an attempt to protect French Jews from being transported to Germany. The Resistance, which acquired mythic status during and after the war, began with small acts of retaliation for indignities imposed on the family next door. Moorehead brings the term resistance down from the term with an upper-case R to resistant, impeding the motion of an opposing force. The women who were resistsants did it one day, one act at a time.
Girls as young as fifteen and women in their sixties did what they could to resist the laws imposed on them by the Germans. Some of the women hid guns in their laundry, some escorted Jews out of the occupied zone, some took in downed Allied airmen; all knew the risks they ran but their hatred of the Nazis and their determination to defy the SS, the Gestapo, and the police of Paris who collaborated with the occupying forces made them willing to take the risk. Many were women with young children whose husbands were already dead or were in the hands of the Germans. They gave their children to relatives and took the chance they would survive to return to their children.

The Germans decided to make an example of the women resisters. There was a belief that the women would not be treated like the men, that they would not have to fear facing firing squads. The Germans wanted to let the people of Paris know that gender didn’t play a role in determining punishment. Two hundred and thirty women were arrested for their activities in the Resistance. They represented all strata of life in France. They were teachers, students, chemists, writers, housewives, musicians and professional singers, a midwife, and a dentist. They were strangers to each other. They came from cities, towns, and villages all over France. They were ordinary women who were extraordinary. As a group they realized that their only hope of surviving was in their solidarity. No woman could ever be alone; each must know, must feel the support of the others. Each woman brought something unique to the group that would keep the group grounded in the reality of their individuality. They gave each other lessons in foreign languages, in mathematics, in cooking. They put on plays for themselves and the other prisoners and the jailers were invited too. They recited poetry and the learned how to pass information from one cell to another. They learned that their men when there as well and they figured a way to make contact with them. And as each of the women learned she was a widow, the others understood and bolstered them. They had a rule for the survival of the group: everything had to be shared equally. In their intuitive understanding of the things upon which their survival depended, they survived. None died despite the cold, the hunger, the illnesses.

Then in January 1943, the Germans loaded the 230 women on to a cattle car and sent them to Poland. There own particular skills as women, caring for others and being practical, made them, they told themselves, less vulnerable than men to harsh conditions and despair. Adaptibility was crucial, resignation fatal. The inability to undo a vision of life as it should be and not cope with what it was, led, as they had observed, to apathy and the condition of musulmans, those more dead than alive. They did their best to stay clean, to wash their faces in the snow or icy brooks, believing that it made them both healthier and more dignified. And they wanted, passionately, to live, to survive the war, and to describe to the world exactly what they had been through and what they had witnessed.
A TRAIN IN WINTER is not an easy book to read. It is not a book one can read from cover to cover in one sitting. There are places in the narrative where one has to stop, not because of vivid descriptions of the atrocities committed by the Germans but to think about and appreciate the women, the strength born out of the will to live. This is a book that should be read so that we, who can’t really imagine what they went through, can glimpse in ourselves some of their resourcefulness in the lives we live.

The train took 230 women to Auschwitz in January, 1943. When the camp was liberated in April, 1945, 49 were still alive. Their goal was keeping alive, remaining me. Remembering to remain me is a goal we all should try to meet.

For More 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price:
A Train in Winter: An Extraordinary Story of Women, Friendship, and Resistance in Occupied France by Caroline Moorehead - 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price!