The life and afterlife of a twentieth-century French camp: Gurs

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It has become a truism to characterise the twentieth century as the "Century of the Camps" and "the camp" as the "nomos of the modern." Likewise, the "concentration camp" is identified as a "site of modernity."[1] However, this broad perspective tends to simplify a complex and contradictory phenomenon by focusing on its radical end. The political agenda behind the establishment of a camp, its various functions and the fate of the internees often changed significantly over time, and sometimes very rapidly. A camp is, figuratively speaking, an institution that has a life – and an afterlife – of its own; sudden turns and unpredictable developments are the rule rather than the exception. The Gurs internment camp in southern France, which was in operation from early 1939 to late 1945, illustrates this point perfectly. Therefore, firstly, I will present the long prehistory of the "modern camp"; secondly, I will discuss how Gurs fits into this broad picture; and, thirdly, I will address some aspects of the commemoration of Gurs from 1945 to the present.[2]

1 See Zygmunt Bauman, "Das Jahrhundert der Lager," Neue Gesellschaft, Frankfurter Hefte 41 (1994) 1: 28–37; Joël Kotek and Pierre Rigoulot, Le Siècle des camps: Détention, concentration, extermination: Cent Ans de mal radical (Paris: Lattès, 2000); Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Habbo Knoch, "Konzentrationslager", in Orte der Moderne. Erfahrungswelten des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts, edited by Alexa Geisthövel and Habbo Knoch (Frankfurt a. M.: Campus, 2005), 290–99.

2 A plethora of sources is available thanks to numerous local memorial initiatives in Gurs itself and the internees' regions of origin. The website of the Gurs Memorial – <http://www.campgurs.com> – offers a good introduction, although it is only available in French. An exemplary "camp biography" is John C. Guse, "Polo Beyris: A Forgotten Internment Camp in France, 1939–47," Journal of Contemporary History 54 (2019) 2: 368–400.

The "modern camp" – a brief history of a long-standing institution

The twentieth-century internment camp has a long prehistory.[3] In a broad sense, the *castra* of the Roman Empire are the modern camp's most important antecedents for two reasons. Firstly, they not only fulfilled their obvious military functions but also served as bridgeheads of Romanisation and therefore played a key role in transforming "Barbarians" into "Romans." Secondly, they were in many cases the focal points of cities that flourished along the borders of the Empire from Castra Devana (Chester) in northwest England to Noviomagus (Nijmegen), Moguntiacum (Mainz), Castra Regina (Regensburg), Vindobona (Vienna) and Durostorum (Silistra, Bulgaria). Last but not least, from the sixteenth century onwards, Roman camps were rediscovered and used as blueprints for the accommodation of armies during campaigns. Similarly, "ideal cities" concepts often took their cues from Roman town planning, and the ancient camps' rectangular layout was often mirrored in designs for new cities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Institutions of separation and confinement that further contributed to the formation of the modern camp include Jewish ghettos, the early modern workhouses, the tsarist system of forced labour (*Katorga*), the forcible "relocation" of Native Americans to reservations during the nineteenth century and the prisoner-of-war camps established during the US Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71.

The "modern camp" finally took shape at the turn of the twentieth century. The Spanish *campos de reconcentración* during the Cuban War, the British concentration camps in South Africa during the Boer War and the camps established by the United States in the Philippines during the war of 1899–1902 gave birth to this "modern" physical, juridical and political institution. The camp, until then closely linked to the military sphere, increasingly became an institution that also affected millions of civilians. It was used to protect and control refugees, to detain people rounded up for political or other reasons, to monitor and punish, to discipline and "educate," to separate the "wanted" from the "unwanted" and, finally, to transform ordinary people into an ideologically determined "new man." In the age of totalitarianism, most ignominiously embodied in the Nazi concentration camps and the Soviet Gulag, "the camp" eventually became synonymous with absolute terror and genocide.[4]

3 See Christoph Jahr and Jens Thiel, "Prolegomena zu einer Geschichte der Lager. Eine Einführung," in Lager vor Auschwitz. Gewalt und Integration im 20. Jahrhundert, edited by Christoph Jahr and Jens Thiel (Berlin: Metropol, 2013), 7–19; Christoph Jahr and Jens Thiel, "'Das Lager.' Überlegungen zur Geschichte einer Institution zwischen Herrschaft, Recht und Gewalt," Juridikum – Zeitschrift für Recht und Gesellschaft 31 (2020) 1: 79–88.

4 Christoph Jahr, "'Diese Concentrationen sollten die Pflanzstätten für den militärischen Geist des Heeres bilden …' Fragmente einer Begriffsgeschichte des 'Lagers' in europäischen Konversationslexika," in Lager vor Auschwitz. Gewalt und Integration im 20. Jahrhundert, edited by Christoph Jahr and Jens Thiel (Berlin: Metropol, 2013), 20–37.

Today, at least in a German-speaking context, "*Lager*" is equated with "*Konzentrationslager*" and even "*Vernichtungslager*" to such an extent that "*Lager*" itself is fearfully avoided. Thus, "*Flüchtlingslager*" often becomes "*Flüchtlingscamp*" in contemporary German. This may be comprehensible with regard to German history, but it distracts attention from the fact that "the camp" is an instrument of domination that has been – and continues to be – used by different political systems for different purposes. Therefore, it would be misleading to view "the camp" as an aberration on the road to modernity; rather, it is intrinsic to that journey.

A camp over time

The French Republic established about 100 internment camps for political refugees – mostly members of the International Brigades and anti-fascists – in southern France from February 1939 onwards, following Franco's victory in the Spanish Civil War. These camps accommodated approximately 300,000 civilian refugees and 200,000 Republican Army soldiers. The makeshift facilities were fenced with barbed wire and hastily set up on various beaches (e.g. Argelès-sur-Mer, Saint-Cyprien and Barcarès), often by the internees themselves. Refugees were also housed in school buildings, disused factories, monasteries and even sports stadiums, so that southern France eventually had a total of about 400 places of detention, including pre-existing prisons. The north of the country had about sixty.[5]

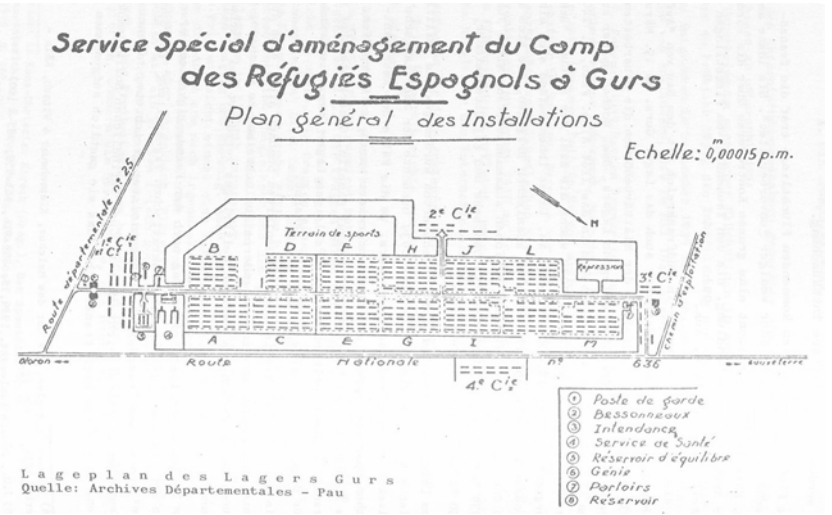
The *Centre d'accueil des réfugiés espagnoles de Gurs* (Reception Centre for Spanish Refugees), as it was euphemistically called, was located in the historical province of Béarn (now the département Pyrénées-Atlantiques, then Basses-Pyrénées), about thirty miles from the Spanish border.[6] During the camp's first phase, from April to November 1939, the French government interned almost 19,000 people in Gurs: Basques, former Spanish Republican soldiers, and some 6,000 International

5 Christian Eggers, "Gurs – und die anderen. Gedanken zur Erforschung der französischen Internierungslager 1939–1945," Francia 21 (1994) 3: 171–80, at 174. Some 160 are listed in Marcel Bervoets-Tragholz, La Liste de Saint-Cyprien. L'Odyssée de plurieurs milliers de Juifs expulsés le 10 mai 1940 par les autorités belges vers des camps d'internement du sud de la France, antichambre des camps d'extermination (Bruxelles: Alice Éd., 2006), 174–7. See also Emmaline Bennett, "Cities of Defeat: Spanish Civil War Refugees and the French Concentration Camps of 1939," undergraduate thesis, Columbia University <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Mb16dM3BvYoeNRRMtkohOYQMroMqc-9X/view?usp=sharing> (10 May 2021).

6 Still the most detailed account of the camp's history is: Claude Laharie, Le Camp de Gurs 1939–1945: Un Aspect méconnu de l'histoire du Béarn (Biarritz: Société Atlantique d'Impression, 1985), 21–72.

Brigade fighters (including 700 Germans), divided into supporters of the Comintern and opponents of Stalinism, who continued to fight factional battles with one another.[7] At this time, the camp was administered by the *Garde Nationale Mobile* (originally a French Army auxiliary force, established in 1866) under the supervision of the War Ministry.

Figure 1: Plan of Gurs



Source: <https://www.wikiwand.com/de/Camp_de_Gurs>.

Although Gurs possessed many of the iconic features of a wartime camp, it could not be described as a "typical" concentration camp. For instance, it was rectangular in layout, rather than square: about 2,000 metres long by 500 metres wide, with a paved road down the middle. The whole camp was enclosed by a barbed-wire fence, but this was only two metres high and it was not electrified. So it was an obstacle

7 Dieter Nelles, "Die Unabhängige Antifaschistische Gruppe 9. Kompanie im Lager Gurs. Zur Gruppenspezifischen Interaktion nach dem Spanischen Bürgerkrieg," in Das "andere Deutschland" im Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus. Beiträge zur politischen Überwindung der nationalsozialistischen Diktatur im Exil und im Dritten Reich, edited by Helga Grebing and Christl Wickert (Essen: Klartext, 1994), 56–85. Figures at: <http://www.campgurs.com/le-camp/lhistoire-du-camp/survol-statistique/les-internés-venant-despagne/> (21 April 2021).

for anyone trying to escape, but far from an insurmountable one. Moreover, there were no watchtowers, although the camp was regularly patrolled by armed guards.

Figure 2: Photo of Gurs

Source: <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1057438>.

The barracks in Gurs betrayed the military origins of the "modern camp." Introduced by the French Army during the First World War, they were constructed out of thin wooden planks that offered little protection from the cold, wind and rain. Jeanne Merle D'Aubigné served the internees on behalf of a Protestant aid organisation.[8] When she entered one of the barracks, the "shutters were closed because there were no windows; everything was dark. Here at least the women had beds (elsewhere they lay on the bare floor)."[9] Each building could accommodate up to sixty people at times of peak occupancy, which allowed less than two square metres per

8 Various charities, including the International Committee of the Red Cross, provided humanitarian aid to camp inmates in France. See Christopher R. Browning, "From Humanitarian Relief to Holocaust Rescue: Tracy Strong Jr., Vichy Internment Camps, and the Maison des Roches in Le Chambon," Holocaust and Genocide Studies 30 (2016) 2: 211–46; Luiza Iordache Cârstea, "The Importance of Humanitarian Aid during the Second World War: The Case of the Joint Relief Commission of the International Red Cross in France (1940–1945)," Nação e Defesa 149 (2018): 38–53.

9 Jeanne Merle D'Aubigné, "Lager Gurs," in Befreie, die zum Tode geschleppt werden. Ökumene durch geschlossene Grenzen, 1939–1945, edited by Adolf Freudenberg (München: Kaiser, 1985), 74–110, at 75–6; my translation.

person. The barracks were so primitive because the internees built the whole camp from scratch in just six weeks under the assumption that it would close within the next six months, but it was still operational more than six years later.

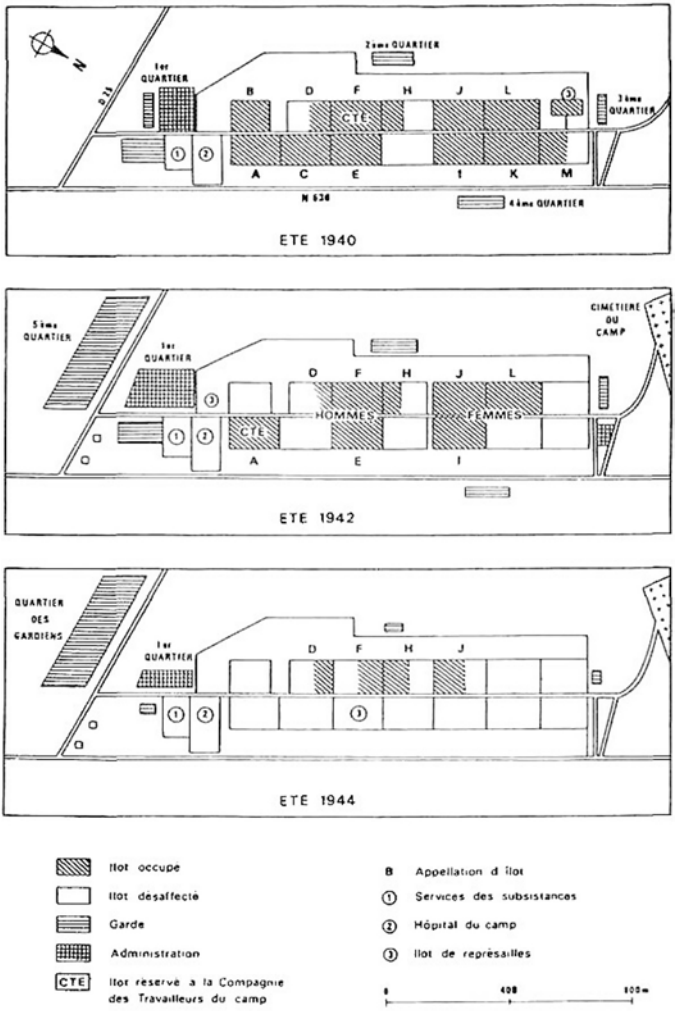
Another feature of the "modern camp" is its adaptability, with changes often made to size and structure according to the needs of the camp authorities. Gurs was designed to accommodate about 20,000 internees, but the number fluctuated between 300 and 27,000 at any given time.[10] There were 382 barracks in total, divided into 13 "*îlots*" (islands), each consisting of about 30 buildings and encircled by its own fence. Number 14 was the "*Îlot de représsailles*" (penalty block). These "camps within a camp" allowed the authorities to segregate the internees at will by nationality, politics, religion, class or gender.

The French government's policy towards the various groups of refugees and foreign citizens was rather contradictory.[11] At first, efforts were made to force them to contribute to France's economy by turning them into work brigades (*Compagnies de Travailleurs Étrangers*). By the summer of 1939, the plan was to integrate special foreign units within the French Army, while some other internees joined the existing *Légion Étrangère*. As a consequence, the number of internees in Gurs dropped from almost 19,000 in June 1939 to roughly 2,500 by May 1940, more than 80 per cent of them "*internationaux*."

10 All figures at: <http://www.campgurs.com/le-camp/lhistoire-du-camp/survol-statistique/tableau-général/> (21 April 2021).

11 Regina M. Delacor, "From Potential Friends to Potential Enemies: The Internment of 'Hostile Foreigners' in France at the Beginning of the Second World War," Journal of Contemporary History 35 (2000): 361–8; Vicky Caron, "The Missed Opportunity: French Refugee Policy in Wartime, 1939–40," Historical Reflections 22 (1996) 1: 117–58.

Figure 3: Transformation of the camp



Source: <Laharie, Le Camp de Gurs, p. 53 <http://www.campgurs.com/le-camp/lhistoire-du-camp/le-camp-installation/lentretien-du-camp/>.

However, the German–Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of August 1939 and the outbreak of war a month later initiated a dramatic reversal that marked the beginning of the camp's second phase. In an atmosphere of anti-communist hysteria, anti-

Semitism and xenophobia, Prime Minister Édouard Daladier ordered the mass internment of political opponents on 18 November 1939. One of these was the French communist Raoul Nolibos (1890–1985), who was sent to Gurs along with about 100 of his comrades.[12] In contrast to the situation in Gurs, the majority of internees in other camps were not French citizens but immigrants, many of whom – some 15,000 in total – had fled "Greater Germany." This indiscriminate mass internment of "enemy aliens" and domestic communists echoed a policy France had pursued in the First World War and meant the Third Republic squandered an opportunity to harness the fighting spirit of thousands of fierce opponents of National Socialism.[13]

Nevertheless, by May 1940, two-thirds of these internees had been released. Following the German invasion, however, the French government interned as many as 15,000 so-called "*indésirables*" – unwanted foreigners as well as actual or perceived domestic political opponents – in Gurs. This mass exchange of prisoner groups marked the start of the camp's third phase. More than 9,000 of the new internees were German or Austrian refugees, mostly women and children, half of them Jewish. As a result, the camp was housing almost 12,000 people by the end of June. Hannah Arendt was among the lucky ones who exploited a "few days of chaos" before "everything became very regular again, and escape was almost impossible."[14] She knew where to go because some of her friends lived relatively close to the camp. Others who did not have contacts in France were too apprehensive to take advantage of this unexpected opportunity, with one explaining: "Considering the dangers – here in Gurs at least I know my way around. Outside is the unknown."[15] Emma Kann, like Arendt, "left the camp alone," then "walked down the road to Oloron […]. It was a wonderful feeling to leave the barbed wire behind me and walk through this beautiful and fertile French countryside."[16] Arendt reflected on their experiences in her 1943 essay "We Refugees": "Apparently nobody wants to know that contemporary history has created a new kind of human beings – the kind that

12 Nolibos's biography is at: https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article124052; List of detainees in Gurs: https://prisons-cherche-midi-mauzac.com/des-camps/transfert-de-96-internes-administratifs-du-camp-de-gurs-vers-le-camps-de-nexon-12027 (21 April 2021).

13 Christian Eggers, Unerwünschte Ausländer. Juden aus Deutschland und Mitteleuropa in französischen Internierungslagern 1940–1942 (Berlin: Metropol, 2002), 50–5; Jean-Claude Farcy, Les Camps de concentration français de la première guerre mondiale (1914–1920) (Paris: Anthropos-Economica, Historiques, 1995).

14 Arendt in a letter to the journal Midstream in 1962, quoted in Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, Hannah Arendt: For the Love of the World (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 155.

15 Lisa Fittko cited a conversation with a fellow inmate. See Fittko, Mein Weg über die Pyrenäen. Erinnerungen 1940/41 (München: Hanser, 1985), 67; my translation.

16 Ottmar Ette, "Von der Normalität des Ausnahmezustands. Lagererfahrung und Über-Lebenswissen in Texten von Emma Kann, Hannah Arendt und Max Aub," in Juden und Judentum in der deutschsprachigen Literatur, edited by Willi Jasper et al. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006), 87–114, at 93; my translation.

are put in concentration camps by their foes and in internment camps by their friends."[17]

After the collapse of the Third Republic, the northern part of France, as well as the entire Atlantic coast, fell under German military administration. Meanwhile, in the unoccupied south, the collaborationist *État Français* established itself in the spa town of Vichy under the leadership of France's greatest First World War hero, Marshal Philippe Pétain. A Foreign Office commission headed by Ernst Kundt was sent to Gurs and other camps at the end of July to weed out any internees who might be sympathetic to the National Socialist regime – a necessary step, given the French authorities' previous lack of interest in the political views of interned foreigners. As a result, 700 inmates were released from Gurs and sent back to Germany. By late October 1940, the camp was home to just 1,920 Spanish refugees, about 700 Germans or Austrians and 600 "*politiques français*" – some 3,500 internees in total. However, the composition changed abruptly following Germany's unexpected decision to use Vichy France as "a convenient dumping ground for at least some of Germany's remaining Jews."[18] On Sukkot (22 October) 1940, some 6,540 Jews were loaded onto trains and deported from Baden and the Palatinate in southwest Germany, with Gurs chosen as their destination point solely because it had enough space to accommodate them.

In addition, Vichy was interning even more "undesirable elements," including nearly 4,000 German Jews who had been granted asylum in Belgium prior to the outbreak of hostilities but had then fled again to escape the invasion and subsequent occupation.[19] Rabbi Yehudah Leo Ansbacher (1907–98), for example, left Germany for Belgium in 1933 but was then captured in Brussels on 10 May 1940 and held "along with a large group of German citizens. The fact that I had left Germany […] out of fear of the Nazis, and had immigrated to Belgium, did not matter one iota. To the Belgians, I and those like me were collaborating with Hitler's army."[20] After an exhausting train journey, he finally reached Saint-Cyprien in southern France. However, in October 1940, he was rounded up again and transferred to Gurs, where he joined almost 11,000 of his fellow German Jews. Of these, 1,710 were eventually released and allowed to return home, 755 escaped, 1,940 emigrated, 2,820 were drafted into French labour battalions and the remainder stayed in the camp.

In the autumn of 1940, a civilian management team – the *Direction Générale de la Sûreté Nationale* – replaced the camp's original military administration. However,

17 Quoted in Young-Bruehl, Hannah Arendt, 152.

18 Charlotte Bonelli, Exit Berlin: How One Woman Saved her Family from Nazi Germany (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 211.

19 See Bervoets-Tragholz, La Liste de Saint-Cyprien.

20 Belah Guṭerman and Noʿomi Morgenshṭern, The Gurs Haggadah: Passover in Perdition (Jerusalem: Devora, 2003), 15.

living conditions for the 12,000 internees remained very poor. The National Socialists had murdered Elizabeth Marum Lunau's father, Ludwig Marum, a Social Democratic member of the German Reichstag of Jewish descent. Although she had emigrated to France as early as 1936, Elizabeth was interned in Gurs shortly after the German invasion. Fifty years later, she recalled:

> The camp was a desolate place, a vast treeless plain with no grass. […] There was a latrine. One walked up wooden steps to a row of holes; far below were large metal pots. […] When it rained, which was often, the ground turned into a sea of mud. One had to walk with feet in mud up to the ankles. Often the mud sucked the shoes off our feet, and we had to fish for the precious shoes.

Moreover, food was scarce and mundane: "One person was given a large pot filled with dark liquid. Bread was distributed at 11:00 A.M. – one pound of French bread for twenty-four hours."[21]

Nevertheless, before long, Gurs had become a vibrant centre of intellectual and artistic activity. Schools, a library, a theatre group and even an orchestra were all established within the confines of the camp;[22] and the inmates were not entirely segregated from the outside world. There were, of course, the residents of the surrounding villages, who interacted with the inmates in many ways. For instance, a thriving black market developed across the camp's barbed-wire fences.[23] Oskar Althausen, who had been deported from Mannheim to Gurs in October 1940, recalled after the war that "a newspaper vendor came every day […]. So we knew what was going on outside" and although the press was subject to censorship, the internees "were not completely cut off from all information."[24] In fact, Gurs became a postal hub, with between 5,000 and 8,000 mail items leaving or arriving in the camp each

21 Elisabeth Marum-Lunau, "Arrival at Camp de Gurs: An Eyewitness Report," in Between Sorrow and Strength: Women Refugees of the Nazi Period, edited by Sibylle Quack (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 63–8, at 65.

22 Due to limited space, I cannot elaborate on these developments here. For further details, see Claudia Nickel, "Kulturbaracken. Kreative Räume in südfranzösischen Lagern," in Die Transformation der Lager. Annäherungen an die Orte nationalsozialistischer Verbrechen, edited by Alexandra Klei et al. (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011), 119–37; Claude Laharie, Gurs: L'art derrière les barbelés (1939–1944): Les Activités artistiques (sculpture, peinture, musique, artisanat) des internés au camp de Gurs (Biarritz: Atlantica, 2008); <http://www.campgurs.com/le-camp/lhistoire-du-camp/période-vichy-40-44-survivre-à-gurs-sous-vichy/les-activités-artistiques-1940-1943/> (21 May 2021).

23 Sandra Ott, Living with the Enemy: German Occupation, Collaboration, and Justice in the Western Pyrenees, 1940–1948 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

24 Stefanie Virginia Gerlach et al., "… es geschah am helllichten Tag!" Die Deportation der badischen, pfälzer und saarländischen Juden in das Lager Gurs/Pyrenäen. 20. Tishri 5701, Sukkoth, 22. Oktober 1940, Laubhüttenfest (Stuttgart: Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2003), 29; my translation.

day.[25] Letters from the inmates were subject to strict censorship, but since thousands of them were sent illegally as well as legally, information about living conditions within the camp soon reached the outside world.

Gurs, like every other camp in southern France, benefited from the activities of a variety of humanitarian aid organisations, including the Quakers, the YMCA, the Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit, which was led by the so-called "Angel of Gurs," Elsbeth Kasser,[26] and the *Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants*. The latter organisation was credited with saving 409 of the 560 children and juveniles deported to Gurs. News of the deportation of Baden's Jews to Gurs reached Washington via the US Embassy in Berlin as early as 25 October 1940, and an American delegation visited the camp on 28 November.[27] Two months later, *Argentinisches Tageblatt*, a distinctly anti-fascist newspaper of the German diaspora, published a report of the American Friends Service Committee. Under the headline "Misery in the French Concentration Camps" the paper informed its readers that "for three years people have been dragged from one concentration camp to another" and that "14000 people" – including "500 children and 1200 people over 70 years of age" – were now living "in a breathtaking atmosphere in Gurs" and dying at a rate of "15 to 25 deaths per day."[28]

Shortly after his deportation to Gurs in October 1940, Alfred Levi informed his son Richard (who had managed to make his way to England) that the French officials were often rude, but in general "the treatment we are enjoying in Le Camp de Gurs is much better than the treatment accorded us in Dachau two years ago."[29] Moreover, some of the internees managed to leave the camp by legal means. For example, although Frieda Strauss was a German citizen through marriage by the time of her deportation from Mannheim, she had been born in Switzerland and was finally al-

25 Laharie, Le Camp de Gurs, 64.

26 See Ohne Wenn und Aber dem Gewissen verpflichtet. Flüchtlingspfarrer Paul Vogt, 1900–1984. Rotkreuzschwester Elsbeth Kasser, 1910–1992, edited by Philippe Dätwyler, 3rd ed. (Zürich: Kid, 2000).

27 Michael Dobbs, The Unwanted: America, Auschwitz, and a Village Caught in between (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 160–8.

28 Reprint of Argentinisches Tageblatt, 9 February 1941 in Peter Selg, Maria Krehbiel-Darmstädter. Von Gurs nach Auschwitz. Der innere Weg (Arlesheim: Ita-Wegman-Inst. für anthroposophische Grundlagenforschung, 2010), 105; my translation. See also Sebastian Schoepp, Das Argentinische Tageblatt 1933 bis 1945. Ein Forum der antinationalsozialistischen Emigration (Berlin: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1996).

29 98 Briefe ins englische Exil. Die gewaltsame Trennung der jüdischen Familie Levi aus Friesenheim. Zum Gedenken an die Deportation Alfred und Brunhilde Levis nach Gurs, Rivesaltes und Auschwitz, edited by Heidi Beck-Braach and Rosita Dienst-Demuth (Konstanz: Hartung-Gorre, 2010), 161.

lowed to return there in April 1942, after eighteen months in Gurs.[30] Dora Hecht was not so fortunate. Her niece, Luzie Hecht, who had emigrated to the United States in 1938, managed to rescue many of her European relatives, but Dora died of malnutrition in Gurs in November 1941.[31]

The final catastrophe unfolded during the camp's fourth phase, between 6 August 1942 and 3 March 1943, when 3,907 Jewish prisoners were handed over to the Germans. The majority of them were then transported to the death camps, mainly Auschwitz, via the Drancy transit camp, near Paris. So, in the space of just three and a half years, Gurs was transformed from a refugee camp into a "waiting room" for Auschwitz. With most of its prisoners gone, the camp was closed in November 1943 before briefly reopening six months later to intern fewer than 300 political prisoners and members of the French Resistance.

After the Allies liberated France in August 1944, Charles de Gaulle's new provisional government arrested tens of thousands of actual and alleged collaborators, criminals, Italian and German civilians as well as a handful of prisoners-of-war. It seemed only logical to house them in the country's recently evacuated detention centres and internment camps, so Gurs was reopened and duly received 300 German prisoners-of-war, 1,600 French collaborators and 1,500 Spanish anti-fascists. Once again, the level of hygiene was deplorable so there was a constant risk of disease, and both food and basic equipment were lacking.[32] Raoul Nolibos, the communist who had been interned in Gurs in November 1939, was now head of the *Commission d'Épuration* of the *Comité Départemental de Liberation*, which meant he was responsible for condemning some of his fellow-countrymen to a similarly miserable fate.[33]

It goes without saying that the camp's fifth and final phase should not be equated with the years 1940 to 1943; nevertheless, the camp was once again a place of profound human suffering and disenfranchisement. At the end of 1945, it was finally closed for good, but its history did not end there.

30 Gretl Drexler, Briefe aus Mannheim, Gurs und Grenoble (1939–1942). Das Schicksal einer jüdischen Frau aus Landau in der Pfalz, edited by Roland Paul (Kaiserslautern: Institut für pfälzische Geschichte und Volkskunde, 2014), 309, n. 772.

31 Bonelli, Exit Berlin, 206–35.

32 On the Marseilles region, see: Laurent Duguet, Incarcérer les collaborateur: Dans Les Camps de la Libération 1944–1945 (Paris: Vendémiaire, 2015).

33 See José-Ramón Cubero, Sortir de la guerre. Tumultes, chaos et mises en cause. Les Hautes-Pyrénées (1944–1952) (Morlaàs: Cairn éditions, 2018), 55–6.

Commemoration

Immediately after the war, the *Association des Communautés Juives des Basses-Pyrénées* erected the first memorial to Gurs to highlight the fact that the camp's Jewish inmates, although not the most numerous, suffered the most. Thereafter, though, Gurs soon faded into local, national and international oblivion. Even the cemetery fell into a state of disrepair. However, following the publication of a German newspaper article headlined "Are the Jews of Baden forgotten?" in August 1957,[34] the mayor of Karlsruhe and the leader of the Jewish community in Baden ensured that the answer would be "no" by initiating the cemetery's restoration. They completed the task six years later, and since then the communities of Baden and the Palatinate have continued to care for the site. In addition, delegations from Baden always make the trip to Gurs to participate in the French national *Journée de la Déportation* remembrance day on the last Sunday in April each year and the *Commémoration des Persécutions Racistes et Antisémites* on the third Sunday each July.[35] Finally, many communities in southwestern Germany, including Freiburg, Rastatt, Mannheim, Bruchsal, Neustadt a.d.W. and Saarbrücken, have commemorated their deported Jews with a series of simple but emotive street signs that indicate the distance to Gurs and other camps.

On the French side, the *Amicale du Camp de Gurs*, an association of former prisoners founded in 1979, played a key role in anchoring the camp in French collective memory.[36] In 1994, the Israeli artist Dani Karavan designed a double row of stelae to commemorate the different groups of victims and a large wood and concrete memorial that mirrors the contours of the barracks.[37] A permanent exhibition, opened in 2004, displays documents alongside recollections of life inside the camp. School parties visit on a regular basis.[38]

34 Badische Volkszeitung, 10 August 1957, quoted in Stefanie Virginia Gerlach et al., "… es geschah am helllichten Tag!," 80.

35 Ibid., 36–7.

36 See: <http://www.campgurs.com/lamicale/lhistoire-de-lamicale/création-de-lamicale-du-camp-de-gurs/> (3 June 2021).

37 See: <https://www.danikaravan.com/portfolio-item/france-homage-to-the-prisoners-of-gurs/> (3 June 2021).

38 See: <http://www.campgurs.com/offre-p%C3%A9dagogique/commission-%C3%A9ducation/> (3 June 2021). Two educational videos are available at: <http://www.campgurs.com/offre-p%C3%A9dagogique/vid%C3%A9os/> (3 June 2021).

Figure 4: Signpost to Gurs, Freiburg im Breisgau

Source:<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wegweiser_am_Freiburger_Platz_der_alten_Synagoge_für_die_durch_die_sog._Wagner-Bürckel-Aktion.jpg>.

The camp's first occupants, refugees from the Spanish Civil War, have recently received the recognition they deserve after years of obscurity. Known in National Socialist jargon as "*Rotspanier*" (Red Spaniards), they were pressed into forced labour

first by the Vichy regime, then by the German occupiers. Later, thousands of them were deported to concentration camps, especially Mauthausen, where they were forced to work for *Organisation Todt*. Their suffering was belatedly commemorated in an exhibition in Berlin in 2021.[39]

Figure 5: Mickey Mouse in Gurs

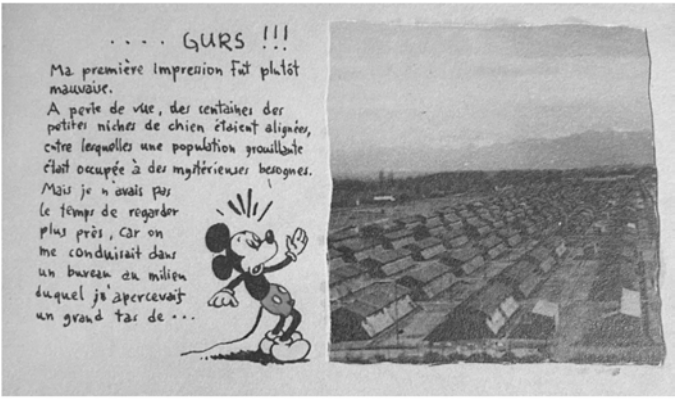


Fig. 1. *Mickey au camp de Gurs*, panel 4.
© *Mémorial de la Shoah*, used with permission.

Source: ©Mémorial de la Shoah, used with permission <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Remediating-the-Documentary%3A-Photography-and-Drawn-Werbe/25e9bf4955c5cc0586b5ab39a72ac0eeafdc2074/figure/0>.

No less significant has been the "Europeanisation" of Holocaust remembrance, epitomised by Jorge Semprún's 2004 play *Gurs: A European Tragedy*. Unlike Semprún, who survived Buchenwald, the aforementioned Emma Kann had personal experience of Gurs, which she later rendered into several poems.[40] The camp also features prominently in Ken Krimstein's 2018 graphic novel *The Three Escapes of Hannah*

39 See: <http://www.campgurs.com/le-camp/lhistoire-du-camp/période-espagnole-1939-les-activités/ (19 April 2021); <http://rotspanier.com/english/> (2 August 2022); Antonio Muñoz Sánchez, "'Rotspanier' vs. Bundesrepublik. Der Kampf der spanischen Zwangsarbeiter der Organisation Todt um ihre Anerkennung als Opfer des Nationalsozialismus (1956–1972), " Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft 69 (2021) 3: 240–259.

40 Ottmar Ette, "Lager Leben Literatur. Emma Kann und Jorge Semprún in Gurs. Im Spannungsfeld von Erleben und Erfinden," in Raum und Gefühl. Der Spatial Turn und die neue Emotionsforschung, edited by Gertrud Lehnert (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011), 229–58.

Arendt: A Tyranny of Truth.[41] Finally, Horst Rosenthal's *Mickey au Camp de Gurs* could be seen as a precursor to another graphic novel, Art Spiegelman's phenomenally successful *Maus*.[42]

Figure 6: Memorial plaque, 1980

Source: <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camp_de_Gurs#/media/Datei:Camp_de_Gurs_panneau_mémoriel_1980.jpg>.

There are still blind spots, though. The commemorative plaque at Gurs indicates that it was operational between April 1939 and the end of August 1944, when it was liberated by Allied forces. Therefore, there is no mention of the fact that it subsequently housed prisoners-of-war as well as actual and alleged French collaborators. Should these final inmates be commemorated, or would that be disrespectful to the memory of the earlier internees – the victims of terror, racism and anti-Semitism?

41 Ken Krimstein, The Three Escapes of Hannah Arendt: A Tyranny of Truth (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 112–13.

42 Philip Smith, "'Un Livre pour enfants': Mickey au Camp de Gurs as Picture Book," Children's Literature 47 (2019) 1: 104–19; Pnina Rosenberg, "Mickey Mouse in Gurs – Humor, Irony and Criticism in Works of Art Produced in the Gurs Internment Camp," Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice 6 (2002) 3: 273–92.

Whatever the answer may be, there is no doubt that the camp has become a European – and possibly even a global – *lieux de mémoire*.

Conclusion

As the French historian Denis Peschanski wrote in his groundbreaking study *La France des camps*: "Six hundred thousand internees in some two hundred camps: these figures alone say enough about the importance of internment in France during the dark years."[43] For six and a half years, Gurs fulfilled a variety of functions under three very different political regimes, just as countless other internment camps have been repurposed throughout history. By 1945, nearly 65,000 people had been housed in Gurs, and nearly 1,100 of them had died and been buried in the camp cemetery. It was a grimly "cosmopolitan" place, with internees from Spain, France, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Poland and Czechoslovakia who often shared nothing save for their common fate of incarceration.

To a large extent, France's internal struggles were fought on the backs of the unfortunate internees of Gurs and the other detention centres. Accordingly, a variety of designations were used for these institutions: "*centre d'accueil*," "*centre de rassemblement*," "*centre à caractère répressif*," "*camp d'hébergés*," "*camp d'internés*" and even "*camp de concentration*."[44] These were crucial staging posts on the path from Daladier's immigration policies to Vichy's deportation of non-French citizens to the death camps. Moreover, the fact that many of them were established during the democratic Third Republic should finally quash the notion that "the camp" is an exclusively authoritarian phenomenon. On the contrary, "the camp", understood as a "state of exception" that has become a space, "is not least […] a marginal district within democracy."[45]

The twentieth-century camp was a place of hardship, terror and persecution, but also a hub of humanitarian aid, caring, solidarity and creativity. And, today, it is a place of shared commemoration.

43 Denis Peschanski, La France des camps. L'Internement, 1938–1946 (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 15; my translation.

44 Eggers, "Gurs – und die anderen," 176–7.

45 Cf. Giorgio Agamben, State of exception (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2005); Quote: Ralf Rother, "Lager in Demokratien," in Auszug aus dem Lager. Zur Überwindung des modernen Raumparadigmas in der politischen Philosophie, edited by Ludger Schwarte (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007), 144–61, at 147; my translation.