

Gurs – A Second World War internment camp

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The French authorities' internment policy and the Gurs camp

On the eve of the Second World War, the French Third Republic detained thousands of foreigners who had emigrated or fled to France and were considered to be "suspicious" or "undesirable". This internment policy was pursued by the Vichy regime, with exclusionary aims that were now racially motivated. Of the 140 internment camps numbered in June 1940 on French soil, the Gurs camp, located on the border of the Béarn, at the foot of the Pyrenees, about 46 km away from Pau and opened on 2 April 1939, was one of the harshest.

60 000 people in total – with 52 different nationalities – were interned there until the Liberation. This vast camp stretching out over nearly 80 hectares was built in barely six weeks on marshy ground, comprised of 13 "islets" containing 382 wooden barracks in total. Its lifespan, which the authorities thought would be short, would surpass that of all the other French camps (six and a half years).

The first three phases of internment at the Gurs camp

Until its permanent closure on 31 December 1945, the Gurs camp underwent several phases that were identified by historian Claude Laharie, author of groundbreaking work on Gurs. The initial phase is that of the so-called "Spanish" period (5 April 1939 – 31 August 1939): the camp was intended for Spanish civilians and Republican soldiers, vanquished and fleeing during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), as well as for international Brigadistas, fighters of different nationalities who had gone to Spain to fight Franco's regime alongside the Republican army; there were 24 530 internees in total. The second phase (from 1st September 1939 to 30 April 1940) is that of the refugees "in an irregular situation": 2 820 internees. The third began in spring of 1940: those interned were now "undesirable" foreigners and political prisoners (14 795 people). Beginning in July 1940, the camp was under the authority of the Vichy regime, in the so-called "free zone".

The fourth phase: the internment of the Jews

The fourth phase in the history of the camp, from 25 October 1940 to 31 October 1943, is that of the internment of Jews, in the time of anti-Semitic legislation: 6 538 Jews from Baden, Saarland and the Palatinate were deported to Gurs in October 1940 as part of "Operation Bürckel", so named after the instigator of this deportation, Joseph Bürckel, *Gauleiter* of the *Land* of Lorraine-Saarland-Palatinate. In Freiburg-im-Breisgau, on the Old Synagogue Square, a signpost with the inscription "Gurs 1027 km" is a reminder of these deportations, which affected 400 Jews in this city. For the Jews, Gurs, like the other French internment camps, would become the antechamber of the Nazi extermination camps: 3 907 people would be deported from Gurs to Auschwitz-Birkenau between August 1942 and March 1943. During this fourth phase, the camp still "housed" Spanish people and other internees; 18 185 people in total. In November 1943, the camp was disbanded by the Vichy regime, which did not mean that it was closed: it was still used to intern travellers, political opponents or prostitutes (229 people). All of these internees were freed during the Liberation. Gurs was then used to detain German prisoners of war, "collaborators" and Spanish opponents to Franco (3 370 people).

The "hell" of Gurs

All of the eyewitness accounts on Gurs are united in their description of "the hell of Gurs". Along with those of the Vernet-sur-Ariège camp, the internment conditions were among the most horrendous: promiscuity, lack of hygiene, epidemics, cold winters, hot summers,

humidity, mud, hunger, boredom, despair, misery. There were also many women and children interned at Gurs. For this reason, one of them, Gertrud Isolani, named the story of her internment at Gurs "The city without men". The camp, initially presented as a "reception centre", was very quickly considered a "concentration camp" by the internees. The double row of barbed wire surrounding the camp left no doubt as to how "reception" was to be understood; in fact, in October 1940, the camp was renamed a "*camp à caractère semi-répressif*", or a penal camp.

Faced with these extremely harsh and precarious living conditions, the internees organised solidarity and survival strategies amongst themselves as best they could, through artisanal, artistic and cultural activities, the publishing of gazettes and the organising of classes.

From oblivion to remembrance

After the war, Gurs fell into oblivion, as did the rest of the camps that dotted the French landscape in this time period, and was covered by a forest. It was the cemetery where 1067 people were buried that first emerged from this oblivion, being rebuilt in 1962. Today, there is a memorial in Gurs: a column, designed by the Israeli artist Dani Karavan and inaugurated on 14 October 1994, pays tribute to the victims.

Further reading

<https://campgurs.com>

Eggers, Christian, „Unerwünschte Ausländer“. Juden aus Deutschland und Mitteleuropa in französischen Internierungslagern 1940-1942, Berlin 2002.

Gerlach, Stefanie, Weber, Frank, „Es geschah am helllichten Tag ...“ – Die Deportation der badischen, pfälzischen und saarländischen Juden in das Lager Gurs/Pyrenäen Juden, Stuttgart, 2005.

Laharie, Claude, Le Camp de Gurs, 1939-1945. Un aspect méconnu de l'histoire du Béarn, Pau, 1989.

Gertrud Isolani

Das Wort „Gurs“ – Name des größten französischen Konzentrationslagers – ist im Laufe der letzten Kriegsjahre ein Begriff, und zwar ein internationaler Begriff, geworden. Wo in der ganzen Welt das Wort „Gurs“ fällt, da erwachen die Erinnerungen und Vorstellungen von Baracken in einer Schlammwüste, von Leibes- und Seelennot, von nagendem Hunger, Schmutz, Ungeziefer, Epidemien und schleichendem Tod. Wo das Wort „Gurs“ fällt, da tauchen Visionen auf von den jahrelang in Gurs internierten Spaniern des Bürgerkriegs, von fast zwanzigtausend internierten Frauen aller Alter und Nationalitäten im Jahre 1940, und von den nach Gurs deportierten jüdischen Männern und Frauen aus Süddeutschland, Kindern und Greisen (auch über Neunzigjährigen), die in Gurs dahinsiechten und starben oder bis zu den Juden-Deportationen im August 1942 und später dort gesammelt wurden.

[...]

In der vollkommenen Unfreiheit des französischen Lagerlebens von Gurs sprach sich alles Menschliche naturgemäß anders aus, als jemals in früheren Friedenszeiten und in den gleichen Schichten und Klassen, zu denen die Internierten gehörten. Es war eine vollkommene Umwertung der Werte, eine Umwälzung der Klassen, – Deklassierung, wenn man so sagen will – je nachdem in Proletariat, in ein Nomaden- und Zigeunertum, oder auch in eine vordem ungeahnte Zone der inneren Freiheit und Selbständigkeit, der Losgelöstheit und Gleichgültigkeit gegen das irdische Los. Es war ein Stadium, in dem sich die Seele schon von allen Rücksichten und äußeren Formen getrennt hat, in dem ihr nichts

mehr zugefügt werden kann – das Stadium der Märtyrer und Vagabunde, der Fanatiker und Va-Banque-Spieler, der Heiligen und der Mörder.

Gertrud Isolani, *Stadt ohne Männer*, Zürich, Falken, 1945, S. 11-13.