

**“FRENCH APOCALYPSE”?
THE INTERNMENT OF ‘ENEMY ALIENS’ IN FRANCE (1939-1940)**

By

Luisa von Richthofen

Submitted to
Central European University
Department of History

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Supervisor: Professor Katalin Straner
Second Reader: Professor Michael L. Miller

Budapest, Hungary

2017

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ABSTRACT

This thesis deals with the internment of “enemy aliens” in France after the declaration of war on Germany in September 1939. It has sometimes been assumed that the camp system established under the Third Republic in the second half of the 1930s paved the way for more restrictive internment policies under the regime of Vichy and eventually to the deportation and extermination of the Jews of France. This thesis’ underlying query is to probe these continuities. It uses new archival material to describe the underlying logic of the internment between September 1939 and June 1940. It also pays special attention to the few, little explored instances of organized resistance against the internment policy. It finds that though the Vichy regime continued to use certain structures, institutions and legal frameworks inherited from the Third Republic, the claim that there is a discernable, straight line between the French internment camps and Auschwitz cannot be substantiated. Rather than the smooth “continuation of a way of life for which the soil had been prepared for years” the thesis argues the path from 1939 to 1942 was tortuous and full of junctures. The camps, in other words, were not an accepted matter of fact up until well into 1941 but rather the object of constant negotiation, even once the democratic Third Republic was but a faint memory.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to those without which working on the thesis would have been an altogether different and less fulfilling experience.

First of all, I would like to thank all the seasoned historians and promising aspiring scholars at CEU who took the time to give me their advice on my thesis. During our numerous seminars the feedback I received from my peers, the History Department's class of 2017, and especially from my friends Christopher Wendt and Frederik Forrai Ørskov, has been a source of steady encouragement. I was lucky enough to benefit from the enthralling, dynamic environment of CEU's History department and I would like to say thank you to my supervisors, Katalin Straner and Michael Miller, who were not only generous with their time and always available, who did not only help me formulate the right questions, but also encouraged me to show the confidence in my project I was lacking at times. My special thanks go to Carsten Wilke, who recommended me to his Parisian colleague Jean Claude Kuperminc and allowed me to consult the Fonds Grumbach, thus providing fundamental archival material for this thesis. Thank you also to all the scholars of the History department and to the teachers of the Leo Baeck Summer University in Berlin who helped me think productively about my research. Another word of thanks also goes to the caring, understanding and helpful administration of the department -Aniko and Agi what would we do without your help, patience and smiles!

This first immersion into the historian's craft would also not have been as enthralling without the friendly support of various archivists in Paris and Berlin. I would like to express my gratitude to the ever-available and helpful Ariel Sion (CDJC), to Kai Gruzd (Leo Baeck Institute Berlin), Laure Fourtage (ORT Paris), and also to Rose Lévi and Jean-Claude Kuperminc, who stood firm and demonstrated great professionalism even in the weeks when the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* was moving out from its historical home in the rue La Bruyère and its archive felt like a make-shift camp strewn with Hebrew manuscripts and leather lined encyclopedias. The work of the people I encountered during this adventure in the archive has continuously filled me with admiration and respect.

To my family and friends who displayed treasures of understanding, humor and patience whenever I was in the doldrums, I owe so much. And to my father, lastly, the man with thousand stories to tell, who supported me, made me laugh and who taught me that even a dwarf who stands on the shoulders of a giant sees a little further. I wrote this thesis with these wise words at the back of my head. The result is also dedicated to him.

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There was, I believe, no particular cruelty in the measure. Our internment may have wrecked the happiness of many of us, it may have cost the lives of many of us and broken all of us in spirit and in body, but those consequences followed not from malicious intent but from pure inconsiderateness. Of a man who was living well we Continentals used to say that he lived "like God in France." The expression conveyed a feeling that God had a good time in France, in view of the slatternly conception of life that prevailed there the Devil did not have a bad time either.

The French have coined a phrase for the slipshod indifference, their way of letting things take care of themselves. They call it "je m'en foutisme," an attitude toward life that may be somewhat inadequately translated as "I don't give a damnism" That is why I do not attribute our misfortune to any deliberate intent. I do not think that the Devil with whom we had to deal in France of 1940 was a particularly truculent devil who enjoyed practical jokes of a sadistic nature. I am inclined to think that he was the Devil of Untidiness, of Unthoughtfulness, of Sloth in good-will, of Convention, of Routine, the very devil to whom the French have given the motto, "je m'en fous".

-- Lion Feuchtwanger, *The Devil in France*, 1941

In the camps, organizational incompetence was coupled with as complete lack of interest in taking any positive action. This lack of interest had its roots deep in the process of spiritual and intellectual Fascization that had affected the police and the military and government authorities. Before these despised aliens behind bars the democratic mask could be dropped. The measures Pétain and Laval are about to put into effect (August 1940) are not the beginning but merely the continuation of a way of life for which the soil had been prepared for years. And the concentration camps were the first witnesses of this fact.

-- Heinz Pol, *Suicide of a Democracy*, 1940

INTRODUCTION

Two days after the invasion of Poland on September 1st 1939, France declared war on Nazi Germany. In the following days, the French authorities proceeded to register all enemy nationals residing in France. Only one week later, around 18,000 German and Austrians male citizens, the alleged “fifth column”, were rounded up and distributed among the country’s sizeable internment camp network. This had been established in the previous year to contain the half million Spanish refugees fleeing from the army of General Franco and into France.¹

That procedure, not unusual for a country that enters into war, though questionable from the point of view of international law, was complicated by the distinctive character of the Central European immigrant community in France. Its overwhelming majority had come to France to flee from Nazi persecution. Among were also the most renowned anti-Fascist activists of the day. Regardless, their internment lasted months and for many refugees, who had placed high hopes in the country of human rights and asylum, this was a “bitter disappointment”:

The suffering that we who were confined in French concentration camps underwent sprang not so much from personal privation as from bitter disappointment. France for which most of us have conceived so deep in love; France, which had received us with such broad minded hospitality friends whose highest ideals seemed to be liberty and justice - this France suddenly revealed a totally different face to us, a grimace that inspired us with horror, for we had seen it once before, when we fled before Hitler.²

¹ During the six years of its existence, the French internment camp system took on a number of different forms and purposes. This fact is attested by the multiple official denominations of the places internment, often changing, during those years. However, all forms of internment in France had one common feature, which Christian Eggers used as minimal definition for his study and which will also be used here. ‘Internment’ refers to the procedure, which allows the authorities of the executive (in France, usually the prefects and their administration) circumvent due process and judicial procedures to deprive people (belonging to specific demographic categories) from their freedom for an indefinite period of time. Another determinant feature of the administrative internment was that it targets people not on account of what they did or are suspected to have done, but on account of their estimated potential to harm in the eyes of the state power.

² Heinz Pol, *Suicide of a Democracy* (Reynal & Hitchcock, 1940), 232–233.

During the ten months between France's entry into war and its surprisingly quick defeat by German troops, the internment policy was also acrimoniously debated in the highest spheres of government. The debates around the treatment of refugees revealed fault lines running through French society and in retrospect, many witnesses of these times claimed that it constituted a somber prelude to what was yet to come.

After France's military debacle in June 1940, the camp system was brought into the fold of the Vichy administration. Between the summer of 1940 and August of 1942, it became one of the instruments of the exclusion policies that Denis Peschanski called "consubstantial with Vichy".³ From a policy of exception and urgency, internment became integrated into a wider policy of exclusion and "national purification" campaign. Significantly, in the administrative jargon the *étrangers indésirables* (undesirable foreigners) were now called *ressortissants étrangers de race juive* (aliens of Jewish race).

Eventually the camps played a fateful role, for they facilitated the work of the organizers of the "Final Solution" in France enormously. Thus, the deportation of Jews from France starting in August 1942 integrated an "indigenous" French camp system into the larger system of the extermination of European Jewry elaborated by Adolf Eichmann and his *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (RSHA). And even after the end of the war and until 1946, the camps were used for the incarceration of prisoners of war.

Between 1938 and 1946, France was a "Land of Camps" (*Terre des camps*, Denis Peschanski). Unlike in many other European countries where the Nazi regime would extend their camp system, the French one was "homegrown" and existed before the war. That and the short outline of its fateful development – from a measure of "exception" under the Third Republic,⁴ to exclusion under Vichy and lastly extermination- indicates that the French camp

³ Denis Peschanski, "1939-1946, Les Camps Français D'internement," *Hommes et Migrations* 1175, no. 1 (1994): 11–19.

⁴ The Third Republic was a republican, democratic regime that lasted from the end of the Second Empire and the French defeat against Prussia in 1870 to the French defeat against Nazi Germany in June 1940, when it was replaced by the Vichy regime.

system is an object of study which requires the attention of the historian. And yet, up until now, there has been a comparatively remarkable lack of historical research into the French concentration camps.

This has to do, first of all, with the hybridity of the subject matter. The French camps are a part of the history of the Spanish Civil War, of the German *Exilforschung*,⁵ French regional history, the history of French law, of German occupation policies, of the institutional history of the Vichy regime and finally they are also a crucial part of the historiography of the Holocaust in France. The camps are everywhere at once and therefore on the margins of all these fields, because their study requires a broad, cross-disciplinary and cross-historiographical treatment.

The camps' historiography reflects this ambivalence. Up until the mid-1990s, most studies were part of the area of *Exilforschung*, a field dominated by specialists of German literature. In this literature, the camp were usually understood as one painful stage in the flight of German-speaking émigrés intellectuals overseas. Additionally, a number of memoirs, interviews, collection documents and regional studies also existed.

A first change of perspective and breakthrough came when in 1991, Anne Grynberg published her doctoral dissertation, *Camps of Disgrace (Les Camps de la Honte)*.⁶ For the first time, the French camps were interpreted as pertinent to the understanding of the Holocaust in France. The author's most significant contribution was her description of the role of Jewish relief organizations. While documentation about the camps had become fairly rich by the end of the 1990s, their interpretation and the wider implication for French historiography remained to be written.

⁵ *Exilforschung* is the domain of German historiography concerned with the study of persecution, expulsion and exile during the Nazi era.

⁶ Published later under the title: Anne Grynberg, *Les camps de la honte: Les internés juifs des camps français (1939-1944)* (La Découverte, 2013).

The other issue with the historiography of the camps was clearly their high political sensitivity. The outcome of seven years of administrative internment had been disastrous. In addition to the many that were murdered in the Holocaust, many thousand Spanish refugees (between 5,000 and 16,000) and at least 4,000 Jewish internees died as a direct result of their internment in the French camps.⁷ In the French historiographical context, the idea of France, “Land of the Camps” had something deeply unsettling. The French “camps de concentration”⁸ were at odds with the narrative developed in the immediate postwar period, which heavily emphasized the idea of “National Reconciliation”. Even in the decades that followed the war, the times of the German Occupation (1940-1945) were interpreted through the triad “Occupation-Collaboration-Resistance”. The camps illustrated in particularly shocking ways how Vichy broke with a 200 years-long tradition of Republicanism in France, but they also revealed that the Vichy regime, the deep-reaching collaboration of the local administration and the influence of German occupation authorities could not account entirely for the high death toll of the camps. Vichy’s internment policy had important roots in the legacy of the demised Republican regime.

For the past four decades, historians have contented with the question of the responsibility of the French administration for the persecution of France’s Jews. This question has been answered affirmatively years ago, in scholarly literature but it has also reached, finally, public memory. Yet the camps have remained on the margins of these arguments. One telling example is the following. It is widely acknowledged among historians, particularly in the circles around the Parisian „Institut d’Études du Temps Présent“ that internment was consubstantial for the Vichy regime. Yet in the monumental work by Pierre Nora, his *Lieux de Mémoire*, in which he catalogued real and imaginary places of „national memory“, the French camps are virtually inexistent. The sociologist Pierre Birnbaum, who wrote the paragraph about

⁷ According to Christian Eggers, “Gurs - und die Anderen: Gedanken zur Erforschung der französischen Internierungslager 1939-1945,” *Francia, Forschungen Zur Westeuropäischen Geschichte*, 1994, 175. The number does not include the deportations.

⁸ N.B: This is the official term used by the French administration after January 1939.

France and its Jews devoted no more than two short sentences to this subject matter.⁹ The camps are still considered foreign bodies in the national consciousness.

In other words, studies of the camps have remained evasive in tendency because they do not pertain to the history of the Vichy regime alone, and because they highlight uncomfortable continuities of structures and institutions between the pre-war, “democratic” period and the evil, “criminal” Vichy regime. As Michael Marrus claimed:

Vichy’s anti-Jewish policy drew directly upon the experience of the 1930’s, notably the last two years of Republican government under Daladier. Indeed Vichy was much less original in her initial attack upon the Jewish minority than is often assumed; Vichy’s ministers had a wealth of Republican precedents before them as they isolated and discriminated against the Jews, accounting in part for the nearly universal acquiescence in the laws when they were first passed in 1940 and 1941. Innovation came later, in the summer of 1942, when the Nazis’ deportation program thrust new dilemmas upon the French government and the police.¹⁰

This thesis then sees itself as part of current historiographical attempts that seek to re-qualify and integrate the “dark years” (Jean Pierre Azéma) into a wider historical framework.¹¹

The question of continuity between the Third Republic and Vichy is its underlying query. Two other important works must be mentioned here, because they have contributed to a broader interpretation of the historical significance of the camps and because they have been very helpful for this thesis: Denis Peschanski’s *La France des camps : L’Internement, 1938-1946* and Christian Eggers’ *Unerwünschte Ausländer: Juden aus Deutschland und Mitteleuropa in Französischen Internierungslagern 1940-1942*.

Despite their excellence it must be noted that the above-mentioned works were written prior to the massive repatriation of archival material from Russia to France in the early 2000s. The present thesis uses such material that has been inaccessible up to now to bring in new perspectives on the first phase of the internment (September 1939-June 1940) and the transition into the hands of Vichy. Among many questions, this thesis sought to qualify the argument

⁹ Pierre Birnaum “Grégoire, Dreyfus, Drancy et Copernic: Les Juifs au coeur de l’Histoire de France” in: Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire: Les France* (Gallimard, 1992), 595–596.

¹⁰ Michael Marrus, “Vichy avant Vichy,” *Histoire*, Nr. 3 (Nov. 1979): Les Juifs en France, pp. 77–82.

¹¹ Jean-Pierre Azéma, *La France des années noires* (Seuil, 1993).

according to which the internment of enemy aliens during the first months of the war anticipated in a way Vichy and the deportation of French and European Jews to Auschwitz. Did it actually pre-figure more radical internment policies? What do the new sources reveal about the transition of the camps from the Third Republic into Vichy's hands?

The four chapters which compose this thesis move on different levels of analysis and they proceed chronologically. Therefore, the method adopted and the appropriate source criticism is included in the body of the thesis. In the following roadmap, I give a short overview of their content.

The first chapter provides a general historical context to the internment. It elucidates the reasons behind a seemingly contra-productive policy of interning anti-Fascist *émigrés* as Nazi spies. It seeks to determine whether the French policy concerning "enemy aliens" was exceptional and in order to do that, it draws a comparison with Great Britain, a country that faced a similar problem but handled differently.

The second chapter then moves to the micro-level, focusing on the camps of Le Vernet (South-Western France) and Meslay du Maine (200 km to the West of Paris) where it examines what life in a French camp actually looked like on an everyday basis. It proposes an alternative account of life in the camp of Meslay du Maine by juxtaposing the inmates' memoirs with the newly discovered diary of one of the camp's officers.

The third chapter unveils a little known and discussed aspect of the French camps. It analyzes the campaign and the activism of the little known but most vocal opponents to the camp, which eventually led to a relative liberalization of the internment regime. In that case, the correspondence of Salomon Grumbach, recently repatriated from Moscow, provides an entirely new perspective on the political resistance to the internment policy.

The final chapter analyzes the period of upheaval between May and August 1940. Particular attention is paid to the transition of the internment camp system into Vichy's hand, the agenda of the German occupants and how the question of the internment camps brought

into light subtle rifts and tensions between those two actors as far as the “Jewish Question” was concerned.

This thesis finds that though the Vichy regime continued to use certain structures, institutions and legal frameworks inherited from the Third Republic, the claim that there is a discernable, straight line between the French internment camps and Auschwitz cannot be substantiated. Rather than the smooth “continuation of a way of life for which the soil had been prepared for years”¹² the thesis argues the path from 1939 to 1942 was tortuous and full of junctures. More precisely, the sources used in the thesis give a greater role to dissent and conflict both *within* French society, which had traditionally been depicted as complacently acquiescent, and *without*, between the French government and the German occupiers after June 1940. The camps, in other words, were not an accepted matter of fact but rather the object of constant negotiation, even once the democratic Third Republic was only a faint memory.

¹² Pol, *Suicide of a Democracy*.

Chapter 1: Internment camps in France?

The following chapter delineates the political context in which the decision to intern certain “suspicious foreigners” was made. It seeks to respond to two basic questions. First: Why did the French government take a decision, which seemed to contradict its interests on several levels? And second: was the French treatment of enemy aliens exceptional?

A) The internment of enemy aliens at the outbreak of the war in September 1939

Two days after the *Wehrmacht* invaded Poland on September 1st 1939, France declared war on Nazi Germany. Even before that, measures had been put in place to discover and neutralize potential members of a fifth column on French soil. Many believed that German nationals had been sent to France to undermine the Republic from within. Therefore, the government issued a decree on September 1st, which declared all Germans “enemy aliens”. Since the decree took the borders of the Greater Germany as of September 1st 1939 as the frame of reference, this measure also affected a large number of former Austrians, German-speaking Czechs and others.

The plan to organize the administrative internment of foreigners was not new. Such a possibility was first discussed under the government of Pierre Laval in 1935, when the threat of an open war with Germany became real. However, the decrees that were drafted in 1935 only came into effect after the war broke out. Two other decree-laws, passed on May 2nd and November 12th 1938 by the first government of Édouard Daladier, however, were already in effect before September 1939. Those texts provided a legal basis for setting up concentration camps. Both pieces of legislation can be read as reactions to the waves of emigration provoked by the *Anschluss* (March 1938) and the occupation of the Sudetenland (October of the same year), but after January 1939 those camps received Spanish refugees primarily. The avowed goal of this legislation was to keep “undesirable aliens” from entering France (on the basis of their alleged unproductivity). In our specific context, the most important piece of legislation

was the decree-law of November 12th. It put in place special centers for foreigners and made possible their internment, even in peacetime. Thus, the legal apparatus that provided the basis for Vichy's internment was already effective during the Third Republic.

On September 5th the government issued an announcement, which was published in many newspapers and displayed on billboards throughout France. It required all male German nationals between the ages of 17 and 50 to report to the authorities at so-called *camps de rassemblement* (assembly centers) created to that effect. Those who failed to comply were arrested in the following days and obliged to spend several days in the Police prefecture before being transported to the assembly centers. In many cases, Polish, Italian, Russian and Hungarian subjects, as well as men from Danzig, were also arrested on the ground that they were politically suspect or *suspect du point de vue national* (suspect from the vantage point of nationality). This is how journalist and novelist Arthur Koestler, who had a Hungarian passport, found himself arrested on October 2nd with the police showing up unexpectedly and dragging him out of a hot bath in his Parisian flat.¹³ Only a few particularly prominent German émigrés, such as Georg Bernhard, Hugo Simon or Walter Benjamin were spared or promptly released.

In 1939 the vast majority of German refugees lived in Paris.¹⁴ After they had reported as ordered to the French authorities, those who resided here were concentrated in the stadiums of Colombes and Roland-Garros, in the Vélodrome d'Hiver,¹⁵ in the stables of Maisons Laffitte, in the stadium Buffalo at Montrouge and in the cells of the prison of La Petite Roquette. The latter institution detained women singled out for their political activity, who were thus suspicious in the eyes of the authorities. Most refugee women, however, remained free. Another center of the German émigré population was the Côte d'Azur, the most famous grouping being the "literary colony" of Sanary-sur-Mer. Three additional large assembly points

¹³ Arthur Koestler, *Scum of the Earth*, New edition (London: Eland Books, 2007), 63.

¹⁴ David H. Weinberg, *A Community on Trial: The Jews of Paris in the 1930s*, 1st edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977).

¹⁵ Also called "Vel d'Hiv", and which in a few years later would be the theater of an infamous deportation of French Jewry to the death camps.

were therefore instituted by the government in Southern France: Fort Carré in Antibes, the military camp La Rhode in Toulon and, largest of all, the camp of Les Milles located in the vicinity of Aix-en-Provence.

Occasionally, the refugees were advised to bring along light luggage and a two days supply of foodstuff. Still, many of them showed up with little more than light clothing (September of 1939 had particularly good weather), little money and a few sandwiches hastily made. One particular account mentions an unsuspecting German sportsman who showed up at the Colombes stadium wearing tennis gear and carrying a racket.¹⁶ Others were more circumspect. Some of the political refugees, seasoned in matters of persecution and prison sojourns, were better prepared for what was to follow. But those who were arrested suddenly, in the middle of the night, did not have a chance to bring anything along for their detention.

In consequence, most of the foreigners gathered by the authorities were ill-prepared for what would eventually become an arduous, month- and sometimes year-long period of imprisonment.¹⁷ Already in the *camps de rassemblement*, before they were sent to the actual camps, administrative sloppiness and material dearth made life difficult for the refugees. Food was scarce or inappropriate, consisting e.g. of non-kosher liver *pâté* and dry bread. Water was often rationed.¹⁸ More than once, memoirs mention that the interned were forced to sleep in the open, that spaces were dramatically overcrowded and that elementary sanitary infrastructures were dearly lacking. Epidemics of dysentery promptly erupted across the camps.¹⁹

At the end of September, around 18,000 detainees, counting about 5,000 Austrian nationals had been dispatched to the eighty camps set up throughout France. Some of these camps, like St. Cyprien, Argelès, Bacarès and Gurs had been erected previously, in March, to

¹⁶ Dorothea Bohnekamp, *De Weimar à Vichy: les Juifs d'Allemagne en République : 1918-1940, 1944* (Fayard, 2015), 265.

¹⁷ Hence the title of Sigismond Kolos-Vary's autobiographical account of his two year long internment in Gurs from 1940 to 1942, "*Ce n'est que pour 48 heures*" ("*Just a matter of 48 hours*") CDJC Paris, CMLXVII (1) - 8

¹⁸ Heinz Pol, *Suicide of a Democracy* (Reynal & Hitchcock, 1940), 24-26.

¹⁹ Anne Grynberg, *Les camps de la honte: Les internés juifs des camps français (1939-1944)* (La Découverte, 2013), 68.

detain the half million of Spanish refugees that had crossed the border, fleeing as the Franco's forces advanced into Catalonia. Most of them, however, were set up in all haste a few days before the internees arrived.

In general, it seems that the process of internment was executed in utter confusion and chaos. Among all the official and semi-official documents discussing internment before September 1939, historian Christian Eggers was able to find not one that dealt with or took into consideration the material conditions of the projected internment operation.²⁰ The fact that the authorities used spaces, for instance Parisian stadiums, a disused cinema in the city of Manosque or a dusty brick and tile factory in Les Milles, which were particularly unfit to accommodate the needs of the thousands of internees, demonstrates this lack of foresight dramatically.

In fact, initially the French administration did not intend to detain German nationals at all, let alone for an extended period of time. The authorities were fully aware that many of the German residents were neither sympathetic to Hitler nor dangerous. According to a police report of February 1939, only White-Russian émigrés were suspected of strong pro-Nazi sentiments. Most Germans, on the other hands, were regarded as politically reliable. The record maintained that despite their sense of German identity, the refugees felt they had been “cast out of the ‘German national body.’” They regarded a “European conflagration... (as) a generalized form of Civil War,” in which they chose to stay on the side of Democracy and thus, on the side of France.²¹

Additionally, everything had seemed as if the French authorities intended to treat the refugees with leniency. Many Central European and German refugees even believed that they

²⁰ Christian Eggers, *Unerwünschte Ausländer: Juden aus Deutschland und Mitteleuropa in Französischen Internierungslagern 1940-1942* (Berlin: Metropol-Verlag, 2001), 45.

²¹ Quoted in: Vicki Caron, *Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis, 1933-1942* (Stanford University Press, 1999), 241.

would be allowed to serve in the military.²² This possibility had been enunciated in a series of decrees passed on April 12th of the same year. According to these decrees, foreigners between 18 and 40 years of age who had been in France for more than two months were allowed to contract an engagement in the French Army during peacetime.²³ Already in spring, just after the decree of April 12th was made public, both the police and the press reported thousands of foreigners volunteering. In September this trend reached a *crescendo*. Nothing was done on the part of the French authorities to deter them from this idea, even a few days into the war. Only days after the outbreak of the war French military authorities admitted that they were unable to cope with the situation, and so they turned the registration process over to private associations, such as *Les Amis de la République* and the International League against Antisemitism (LICA). According to the newspaper *Époque*, *Les Amis de la République* registered over 1,000 foreigners a day in September. As journalist and playwright Leo Lania later explained, for these refugees “who had lost... everything... Faith in France was the only barrier between themselves and bottomless despair.”²⁴ For many, the chance, finally, to be on the right side and to fight against the Fascist enemy was an escape from the in-between state of purgatory that exile had plunged them into. Thus, for many of those who had emphatically volunteered to go to the frontlines and die for the ideals of the French Republic the sudden internment was all the more disappointing.

²² Concerning the “Saar refugees”: After the Saar basin had been separated from Germany for 15 years and placed under the administration of the League of Nation, a referendum on its territorial status on 13 January 1935. To many observers’ surprise, including the Nazis themselves, over 90% voters opted for reunification with Germany, 9% voting for the status quo and less than 0.5% for unification with France. In the aftermath, many opponents to the regime and many Jews fled over the border to France.

²³ See: Peter Gaida, “Décret Du 12 Avril 1939 Sur La Création Des Companies de Travailleurs Étrangers,” accessed July 17, 2017, <http://www.petergaida.de/cartes/doc%201.htm>.

²⁴ Leo Lania and Edgar Mowrer, *The Darkest Hour: Adventures and Escapes* (Gollancz, 1942), 9. Lania will be discussed in a subsequent chapter

B) The reasons behind the internment

In retrospect, the French Government's errors of judgement are blatant. It is indeed difficult to understand that Lion Feuchtwanger, Hannah Arendt, Arthur Koestler and several thousand other anti-fascist activists were arrested when they were well-known opponents to the Nazi regime. Not only that, but the French also went out of their way to intern "suspects" who had no intention of inflicting harm on French interests. For instance, German and Austrian male passengers, all Jewish refugees fleeing from Germany, were taken from the neutral ships *St. Louis* and *Flanders* while on their way to the USA and Latin America - although they all carried visa.²⁵ Why did French authorities target German and Central European Jews who were the most conspicuous victims of Nazi persecution?

Furthermore this treatment of alleged enemy aliens did not only imply a heavy financial burden for the state budget, but also that the French deprived themselves of labour source and of a highly motivated military force, precisely at a point when the war effort required it most.²⁶ Thus it is worth asking the following question: Why did a democratic government of the Third Republic implement a policy which was not only blatantly unjust and questionable from the standpoint of international law, but also highly unpractical and counterproductive?

Throughout the 1930s French refugee policy was shaped by public debate. This was also the case in September 1939. Identifying German refugees with the Nazi regime, which used to be a privileged trope of the ultra-right nationalists, now became a mainstream point of view. Just as widespread was the belief that spies (often identified with foreigners) were

²⁵ Caron, *Uneasy Asylum*, 245-246; Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), Fonds Salomon Grumbach, A(rchives) P(rivées) 17 / 105, AP 17 / 110, AP 17 / 123.

²⁶ Eggers, *Unerwünschte Ausländer*, 55-56.

omnipresent, an idea that was largely circulated in popular culture throughout the thirties.²⁷ In the last years before the war, Klaus Mann remarked:

People looked upon us with suspicion. Not because we were German, but because we had left Germany. This is not something one should do, in the opinion of many, because a righteous man stands by his fatherland irrespective of who is in government. Someone who stands up to legitimate power, is automatically suspicious, a quarreller, even a rebel.²⁸

Some suspicions were not completely unsubstantiated. In contrast to Great Britain, where all refugees were screened when they applied for visas, without which it was impossible to enter the country, in France only a few thousand refugees' credentials had been reviewed by the Commission which the Popular Front had instituted to that effect. As Michael B. Miller points out, the proliferation of false passport and visa schemes and the inability of the French police to cope with illegal immigrants made refugees a propitious target.²⁹ Yet, while it is true that some German spies had infiltrated France and in some countries the Fifth Column had in fact undermined morale, their actual number was overestimated. Most refugees were *bona fide* and possibly more than nine tenths of the them were hostile to the Nazi regime.

Still, the fear that saboteurs might be concealed among the refugees ran high even in French administration circles, and especially in the military. Although it had allowed the refugees to sign up *en masse* in the early days of September, the High Command had promptly abandoned the idea of incorporating German, Austrian and Italian refugees into the regular Army. The fear of fifth columnist did not recede until the invasion of 1940. The most influential circles of the political elite were not comfortable with the free movement of German subjects in France either. When pressed to answer questions about the inhumane living

²⁷ Michael Barry Miller, *Shanghai on the Métro: Spies, Intrigue, and the French Between the Wars* (University of California Press, 1994).

²⁸ Klaus Mann *Der Wendepunkt*, München 1969 S. 286.

²⁹ Michael Barry Miller, *Shanghai on the Métro: Spies, Intrigue, and the French Between the Wars* (University of California Press, 1994), 144-172. On the difficulties of the police to cope with illegal emigration see also: Ralph Schor, *L'opinion française et les étrangers en France, 1919-1939* (Publications de la Sorbonne, 1985), 286-287 and André Billy and Moïse Twersky, *Comme Dieu En France*, Plon (Paris, 1927), p.1.

conditions in the *camps de concentration* on December 8th 1939, Minister of the Interior Albert Sarraut made a pronouncement, which captured the general spirit of public opinion, even three months into the war. To the Chamber of Deputies he declared that he knew several outstanding personalities who had lobbied for the release of their German friends who had subsequently been exposed as crypto-Nazis. He then went on to insinuate that the German enemy had made it common practice to send their men to France disguised as Jews and anti-Nazis in order to spy on their fellow countrymen and to retaliate against their relatives in Germany. He maintained that it would therefore be detrimental to public safety to set the refugees free. For that statement, Sarraut received minute-long applause.³⁰

The single most disturbing factor that caused the administration to react in this panic-stricken manner in September was the conclusion of the Ribbentrop-Molotov on August 23rd, only four days before the outbreak of the war. While the government may previously have felt confident in recognizing and distinguishing friends and foes, the signing of the nonaggression pact in Moscow cast a cloud of suspicion on all foreigners in France as well as over all Communist Party members, citizens and foreigners alike. As Eugene Weber notes:

The German-Soviet Pact justified the worst fears of those who had always questioned the national loyalty of the French Communist Party. This suspicion was substantiated when members of the *Parti Communiste Français* (PCF) started circulating stickers, flyers, tracts, underground publications, and other propaganda, all of which called for peace at once and disavowed the imperialist war. Public reaction and that of the state was ferocious. On the right-extreme of the political spectrum, *Gringoire* called for death to the communist traitors, communism was the number one enemy, the Communist party an enemy army camping on French soil.³¹

Anti-Communist hysteria was by no means a privilege of the extreme-right. There was a massive crackdown on Communist party organs by the State as well. On August 26th, Prime Minister Édouard Daladier had numerous Communist publication shut down and one month

³⁰ *Journal Officiel de la République Française: Débats Parlementaires, Chambre des Députés*, n°65, December 8th 1939, p 2121.

³¹ Eugen Joseph Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 269.

later, on September 26th he ordered the dissolution of the PCF. In the months following the pact, the term “Axis Moscow-Berlin” rapidly became a household term. In an interview with a Japanese newspaper, Daladier claimed that the difference between Bolshevism and Nazism amounted to that between “pest and cholera.”³² In such a context, every Communist and every one suspected of communist sympathies became a potential agent of Hitler.

The episode of anti-communist hysteria in August and September of 1939 had direct ramifications for the public view of refugees. Most of the *émigrés* were perceived as leftist, if not communists themselves. Additionally, the French Communist Party (PCF) had actively supported their causes and struggles in the 30s. From there, it was just a short step to prejudging the *émigrés* as such.³³ In an atmosphere in which witch-hunt was the name of the game, German left-wing antifascists were doubly suspect.

As there was little movement on the Front, the crusade against the interior foe seemed all the more important, partly impeding a clear view of what was really at stake in the conflict with Germany. The general mood in France at the outbreak of the war was far gloomier than 25 years prior. Frenchmen resented being violently drawn from somnolent isolation and slumbering pacifism into war and it sought a scapegoat for its rude awakening. The idea that Hitler was at war with them because France had been too lenient towards the *émigrés* and their shenanigans seemed a logical or at least a partial explanation. As Alfred Kantorowicz recalled in his autobiography *Exile in France*:

To this day, good Frenchmen are ashamed of the form that agitation against foreigners took in 1939. It was a sign of weakness, which already prefigured France’s surprising debacle. They would not fight against the exterior enemy and thus they incited the pogrom-like ire of the public towards us foreigners.³⁴

³², Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, *Les Français de l’an 40 (Tome 1) - La guerre oui ou non ?* (Editions Gallimard, 2013), 346 ff.

³³ Eggers, *Unerwünschte Ausländer*, 52.

³⁴ “Die Fremdenhetze in Frankreich nahm Formen an, deren gute Franzosen sich heute noch schämen. Es war ein Zeichen von Schwäche, das die erstaunliche Niederlage schon vorwegnahmen. Da man nicht gegen den äußeren Feind kämpfen wollte, so lenkte man die Öffentlichkeit mit einer Art Pogromhetze gegen die Fremden ab.” In: Alfred Kantorowicz, *Exil*

Few French statesmen were ready to let go of that convenient communist culprit. Even after war broke out, the government failed to define in unambiguous terms who the real enemy was. If for Daladier and his *entourage*, the primary war aim was to stop the advance of Fascism on the European continent, it was believed that this was not a fact that the public should be confronted with. One knew very well that many French families still suffered the traumatic consequences of the First World War, which had brought forth a deeply-felt pacifism. For many, the only legitimate war was a war for the defense of France's territorial integrity. And thus for the longest time the political elite shied away from engaging in the debate of the war's greater aims. Officially, France did not wage war against the advance of Nazism or for the liberation of the German people from tyranny. Rather it was conveniently fighting against the German *Erbfeind*. The Reich was to be destroyed.

Other unanswered questions made a clear positioning more difficult still. There was for instance the fact that, contrary to the Constitution, the French Parliament had not been consulted about the declaration of war. There was no debate and the Daladier government merely asked a vote about supplementary credits in order to confront the "obligations generated by the international situation."³⁵

The improvidence of the government's strategy became clear as war unfolded, with months flying by without a single German attack on French territory.³⁶ The acute sense of being threatened disappeared. A national, simplistic interpretation of the situation became the norm. This meant that the adversary, too, was defined not in ideological but in national terms, in other words *Germans* were the enemy. And since a „boche remains a boche“ the distinction

in *Frankreich. Merkwürdigkeiten Und Denkwürdigkeiten* (Hamburg: Christians, Hbg., 1987), 93.

³⁵ Denis Peschanski, *La France des camps : L'Internement, 1938-1946* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002); Weber, *The Hollow Years*.

³⁶ Between the declaration of war and the invasion of the Low Countries May 1940, there was no fighting on French territory and no military confrontation with the Germans. France was in a "phoney" situation: it was a country at war without any military engagement for at least 9 months. This is why this period is generally referred to as the *drôle de guerre* in French or "phoney war" in English.

of Nazi and anti-Nazi was of secondary importance.³⁷ And so German émigrés found themselves side by side with their former *Reichsdeutsche* compatriots - behind barbed wire.

C) Was France's internment of enemy aliens exceptional? A comparison with the British case

Answering the second question asked in the beginning of this chapter, it can be said that historically speaking, the French treatment of enemy aliens in 1939 was unexceptional in many ways. Nearly every warring party had interned enemy subjects in 1914. Later on, after the attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941, the U.S. government interned their subjects of Japanese descent, mostly American citizens.³⁸ Some subjects of German and Italian origins were also detained after Germany declared war on the United States.³⁹ France and Great Britain found themselves in very similar circumstances in September 1939.⁴⁰ Both countries were now at war with Germany. At the same time, there was a large number of German and Austrian nationals who were present there, either seeking asylum or waiting for the possibility to emigrate overseas. To look at how the British administrations reacted to such a challenge allows us to understand what were realistic or possible courses of action for the French government.

In 1939, 62,000 German and Austrians were living in Britain, far outnumbering the German émigré population in France. At the outbreak of the war the British authorities put them through rigorous screening procedures, which were carried out in 112 courts dispersed throughout the country. There were three basic steps in the British procedure: registration of the

³⁷ Axel Corti, *Welcome in Vienna* (Editions Montparnasse, n.d.). As Georg Stefan Troller, an Jewish émigré who fled Vienna after the *Reichskristallnacht* recalls in an interview : “I kept telling the camp commander that I am an Anti-nazi, he would just reply : ‘I don’t care what kind of Nazi you are!’”

³⁸ Greg Robinson, *By Order of the President: FDR and the Internment of Japanese Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003) and Yoshiko Uchida, *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese-American Family*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984).

³⁹ <https://www.archives.gov/research/immigration/enemy-aliens-overview.html>

⁴⁰ See, also, the interesting case of Switzerland in: Alfred A. Häsler, *Das Boot ist voll: die Schweiz und die Flüchtlinge, 1933- 1945* (Zürich: Diogenes, 1989).

male population, screening, and release.⁴¹ The refugees were classified in three relevant categories (A, B, C). If a refugee was placed in category C, it meant that their loyalty to Britain was not in doubt. This applied for the majority.

In theory, the procedure was not dissimilar in France. As of September 1st the intention of the French authorities had been to gather all suspects in temporary assembly camps and to conduct, like the British, a thorough screening. Should the internee prove to be innocent of harboring Nazi or Bolshevik sympathies, he was to be released promptly. Regional commissions responsible for that procedure, the *Commissions de criblage régionales* (regional screening commission), had been created to that effect. In their essence, the measures that Daladier's France had devised were not particularly unjust or cruel. They fit into the logic of a country which just declared war and had to make sure that potential saboteurs were neutralized.

And yet, the situation unfolded differently on each side of the channel. As previously mentioned, in France suspicion towards the refugees was not confined to right-wing circles. The British authorities did not consider it necessary to put all foreigners in closely watched camps as the screening procedure was unfolding, merely calling refugees up at their place of residence. The French authorities, by contrast, decided, as we have seen, to detain all suspects until further notice. As early as September 17th, in a document circulated to the Prefects, the French Ministry of the Interior recommended not to release the internees from the camps - *even if they had been cleared of suspicion!*⁴²

Secondly, the commissions set up by the French government were highly inefficient compared to the British ones. In Great Britain, for instance, a crucial role was played by Jewish relief agencies in helping refugees through the process. As Tony Kushner notes:

In the months before the fall of the Low Countries in the invasion of France, the Jewish community, and specifically the liberal orientated refugee bodies around Bloomsbury house acted as a crucial buffer between the state and the refugees; the informal mechanisms of the tribunals allowed the refugee organizations to have an important role in the decision-making

⁴¹ AUI AP 17/191

⁴² Caron, *Uneasy Asylum*, 231.

process. As a home office memorandum for the guidance of the tribunal stated with regard to Bloomsbury house:

While care must be taken to check the information supplied by these representatives, full use should be made of such information as they can give us and they should be given facilities to assist the tribunal.⁴³

In France, Jewish relief agencies had no say in the process and in the first months, they were not even allowed to access the camps. To help their protégés and co-religionists, they were obliged to rely on the mediation of selected few politicians, for instance Salomon Grumbach.⁴⁴ In addition, the commission set up by the Ministry worked at an inordinately slow pace. Liberations were arbitrary and the only real resort for a refugee, so it seemed, was to appeal to a French “piston” (influential personal intercessor). Rumors circulated that a commission would come, but mostly this did not happen. Said commission had one meeting a week, in the course of which it dealt with five to ten cases. At that rate, the Austrian journalist Leo Lania calculated, it would have taken four to five years to liberate all the interned refugees.

In consequence, by January 15th 1940, out of 62,000 German nationals and 6,500 Austrians nationals in Great Britain, only 486 were still detained.⁴⁵ By comparison, in France by the end of December 1939, only a few hundred detainees had actually been released. Even by February of the same year, after the general liberalization of the internment regime, 6,428 German and Austrian were still detained in the French camps.

In the end, Britain’s liberal treatment of foreign nationals also ended when Germany invaded the Low Countries. In May of 1940, the British government cracked down on German and Austrian refugees and massively deported them, mostly to the Isle of Man. While it has usually been interpreted as a panic measure, Tony Kushner has argued that ideological factors, specifically the ongoing debate about Englishness, have long been ignored.⁴⁶ In the crisis period, when most of the internments were carried out, Kushner argues, forces whose ideology

⁴³ Tony Kushner: “Clubland, Cricket Tests and Alien Internment, 1939-40” in: David Cesarani and Tony Kushner (eds) *The Internment of Aliens in Twentieth Century Britain* (Psychology Press, 1993), 86.

⁴⁴ I discuss Salomon Grumbach’s activism in chapter 3.

⁴⁵ Denis Peschanski, *La France des camps : L’Internement, 1938-1946* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

was coloured by a limited British nationalist worldview dictated government policy - and led to a refugee policy unsurprisingly similar to what could be observed in France at the same time.

In short, the French decision to detain enemy aliens was not exceptional. Unlike in Great Britain, however, the process of screening and liberation was conducted in an arbitrary and slovenly manner. This had to do with the ineptitude of French bureaucracy, with rampant suspicions towards foreigners, especially in the higher echelons of the military, and with the panic induced by the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact which, so the government believed, required urgent action. Paris' refugee policy was perhaps not exceptionally malicious in character. For many observers, however, and especially for the interned, it seemed like the French had betrayed their legacy as the Land of Human Rights. Some went as far as to claim that in the camps, they had already seen Vichy rearing its ugly head, for instance Heinz Pol in the remark that is the epitaph to this thesis.⁴⁷

The question of the continuities and legacies, transitions is the one this thesis will discuss throughout, but Heinz Pol cuts right to the chase of the matter. What to make of his remark ? The beginning of an answer can be found by examining the specificity of life in a French concentration camp and in particular, the conflicting interests and agendas of émigrés and French authorities on a micro level.

⁴⁷ Pol, *Suicide of a Democracy*, 231.

Chapter 2: Life in the camps

What was life in the camps like? The following chapter shifts focus from governmental policies to the micro-level. It pursues two goals. First, it examines defining features of everyday life in two French camps from the perspective of several internees, who wrote memoirs in the 1940s. Simultaneously, it remains attentive as to how that experience subsequently crystallized into specific narratives. This process stands out in the case of Le Vernet d'Ariège. Memoirs have to be read in the light of their context of production, and they should not be considered as wholly unbiased sources of knowledge about life in the camps. In order to provide an alternative to a view and an approach which has been common in historiographical literature up until now, I propose to take into account information gathered from alternative sources, newly discovered material concerning the camp of Meslay-du-Maine. With this approach a more differentiated, nuanced understanding of the French camps could be achieved. The period under consideration runs from the outbreak of the war to the liberalization of the internment regime around January 1940.

A) Le Vernet according to the Hungarian novelist Arthur Koestler

The camp of Le Vernet, to which author and journalist Arthur Koestler was brought around mid-October, was located southwest of Toulouse, thirty miles north of the Spanish border and in the middle of a flat, featureless plain. It consisted of a series of barracks cordoned off by barbed wire. One year prior to the war, the camp housed refugee combatants from the Spanish Civil war. Now it held foreigners the French authorities had singled as “undesirable aliens”, regardless of nationality. Three distinctive categories co-existed in this camp: Sector A was for aliens with a criminal record, sector B was for political prisoners, including the remaining Communist survivors of the Spanish Civil War, sector C was a catch-all for prisoners with no clear political or criminal record, but who were considered suspicious nonetheless.

Koestler, who was known for his reports from the Spanish front and the book he had published subsequently, *Spanish Testament* (1937), fell into the latter category. True, he had been an active Communist and even sojourned in Moscow for some time, but much of this was unknown to a wider public at the time and in the late 1930s he had gradually severed his ties to the Comintern. As he describes it, the news of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact on August 23rd 1939 was the last straw and made him renounce Communism for good.⁴⁸ The French administration, however, had little patience for these fine distinctions. For them he remained a Communist sympathizer and, by implication, a potential ally of Hitlerite Germany.

A suspicious political background or a criminal record, in fact, were not even necessary preconditions to be sent to Le Vernet, where the internment regime was particularly harsh. Prefects occasionally ordered refugees to be sent to Le Vernet as a punishment for minor offenses. In the report submitted to the *Commission des camps de rassemblement*, for instance, observers complained about the case of an Austrian, Mr. Schyfmann, an older gentleman and formerly influential member of Vienna society:

At the camp he kept putting on these airs. This never failed to annoy camp authorities. Once, when he was at the camp nursery for illness, Mr. Schyfmann ignored a doctor who repeatedly called him: 'Schyfmann!' When the doctor remarked on this, the old man replied: 'I will only answer when I am addressed as Mister Schyfmann.' In a report on the old man's case that was sent to the Ministry of the Interior, that insignificant episode was also mentioned. The answer of the Ministry (...): 'Send Schyfmann to Le Vernet!' And the old man is still there. (...) we would like to express our dismay concerning this affair. We note that the Ministry of the Interior is determined to punish an old man who, after all, did not commit any crime!⁴⁹

Mr. Canioni and Joseph Millner, two members of that same commission which also reported the Schyfmann incident visited Le Vernet on February 16th 1940.⁵⁰ Following that trip, they wrote a short report for their superior Félix Chevrier and the central agency in Paris.

⁴⁸ Arthur Koestler, *Scum of the Earth*, New edition edition (London: Eland Books, 2007), 30-32.

⁴⁹ Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), AP 17/192.26

⁵⁰ AIU AP 17/192. By that date, Arthur Koestler had been freed. The first name of Canioni is not given in the documents under consideration.

Already in Toulouse they were told that Vernet was not a camp like the others.⁵¹ Although Millner and Canioni had accreditation from the highest echelon of the military, they ran into difficulty when it came to accessing the facility. Le Vernet apparently existed in an administrative vacuum, and nobody, neither the military nor the Préfecture, would claim responsibility. Eventually, the two men were granted access to the camp. However, they were not allowed to talk with the inmates and as they left, they had the distinct feeling that the inmates were observing them suspiciously.⁵²

A somber prelude to life in the camp: upon arrival, the inmates' hair was shaven off. This revolted Koestler, who had spent several months in the prison of Sevilla, after he had narrowly escaped execution in Malaga. Even in the Franco prisons, heads had not been shorn. Living conditions were abysmal, Koestler wrote. As the inmates were soon to find out, the barracks were exposed to the icy wind blowing down from the Pyrenees. The wooden structures were poorly insulated, overcrowded and unlit from dawn to dusk. Furniture consisted of bare wooden planks that served as beds and except for the food (less substantial, in Koestler's memory, than the one in Franco's prisons), the French authorities did not provide much: no blankets, no clothes, not even dishes to eat from.

During the day, inmates were forced to perform meaningless tasks, such as removing small stones from the ground of the camp in order "to make it nice and smooth."⁵³ The camp held four roll calls a day. Visits from friends and relatives were strictly forbidden. In the evening, which came ever earlier as fall turned into winter, there was no light in the barracks, so that the inmates, many of whom were intellectuals or educated people, could neither read

⁵¹ AIU AP 17/192: "Vernet c'est un camp qui n'est pas comme les autres."

⁵² AIU AP 17/192 : "Quelles ont été leurs pensées? ... Qui sait peut être à leurs yeux avons nous fait figure de.... Suspects!" // "What did they think? ... Who knows, maybe we were suspects in their eyes...!"

⁵³ Koestler, *Scum of the Earth*, 100.

nor write – they were left to brood, alone in the dark with sombre thoughts. Several inmates died of disease, others killed themselves out of desperation.

In a much-quoted passage, Koestler concluded that:

In Liberal-Centigrade, Vernet was the zero-point of infamy; measured in Dachau-Fahrenheit it was still 32 degrees above zero. In Vernet beating-up was a daily occurrence; in Dachau it was prolonged until death ensued. In Vernet people were killed for lack of medical attention; in Dachau they were killed on purpose. In Vernet half of the prisoners had to sleep without blankets in 20 degrees of frost; in Dachau they were put in irons and exposed to the frost. This sort of comparison, for all tragic irony it contained, had a concrete meaning for most of us. Each of us carried a weight in his memory to put in the past scale of the balance and lift the present scale.⁵⁴

Koestler later estimated that, although the inmates were not deliberately tortured, the sum total of suffering experience was not appreciably different from the German camps.⁵⁵ It was an opinion he shared with many other survivors of the French camps.⁵⁶ The following sub-chapter is devoted to a critical appreciation of the memoirs, which constitute the primary base of our knowledge about everyday life and the detainees' experience in the camps.

B) Towards a critical approach to internees' memoirs

In the chapter of *Neighbours* devoted to the question of the sources in Holocaust studies, Jan Tomasz Gross argues for a general shift from the long-held skepticism concerning the veracity of Holocaust survivors' testimonies to tentative affirmation, unless convincing evidence should prove otherwise. Most Holocaust testimonies are intrinsically distorted. Survivors and their tales are exceptions to the rule. In *Golden Harvest*, Gross further argued that "the Jews who perished had no voice, and those who survived were pushed into a realm of

⁵⁴ Arthur Koestler, *Scum of the Earth*, New edition (London: Eland Books, 2007), 94.

⁵⁵ Caron, *Uneasy Asylum*, 244.

⁵⁶ This opinion is voiced repeatedly in : Pol, *Suicide of a Democracy*; Lania and Mowrer, *The Darkest Hour*; Gustav Regler, *Das Ohr des Malchus*, Neuaufl. (Köln: Kiepenheuer&Witsch, 1989); "Gérard-Gobitz," accessed August 25, 2017, <http://www.ajpn.org/auteur-Gerard-Gobitz-3308.html>.

silence by the singular character of their experience.”⁵⁷ For Gross, this limitation does not imply that survivors’ testimonies should be disregarded altogether. The reverse is the case: it results in the methodological imperative to consider all testimonies as true. He acknowledges that: “(a)bout the heart of darkness that was also the very essence of their experience, about their last betrayal, about the Calvary of 90 percent of the Prewar Polish Jewry – we will never know.”⁵⁸ And thus “the Holocaust can only be more tragic than the existing representation of events based on surviving evidence.”⁵⁹

Should this attitude also apply to survivors of the French concentration camps? The case of Le Vernet makes one attentive to the pitfalls connected with the great body of autobiographical literature pertaining to that period. Scholarly literature uses these accounts abundantly, and sometimes, it seems, without an adequate measure of critical distance. Much of what had been written about everyday life in Le Vernet, for instance, is drawn from Koestler’s autobiographical account *Scum of the Earth*, published in England 1941.

Using these memoirs, to be sure, can be very attractive. They are often extraordinarily quotable first-hand accounts. The penmanship of the *crème de la crème* of refugee German-speaking literati is unmatched both in quality and also it is always readily available.⁶⁰ In fact, the amount of literature produced about the camps, given their relatively brief existence under the Third Republic (little more than nine months) is remarkable. Few experiences of mass incarceration in the first half of the 20th century have been described as vividly and as

⁵⁷ Jan T. Gross and Irena Grudzinska Gross, *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7.

⁵⁸ Gross, *Neighbours*, 94.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁰ Ingolf Schulte and Soma Morgenstern, *Flucht in Frankreich. Ein Romanbericht* (Lüneburg: zu Klampen Verlag - zu Klampen & Johannes GbR, 1998); Alfred Kantorowicz, *Exil in Frankreich: Merkwürdigkeiten und Denkwürdigkeiten*, S. Fischer (Frankfurt am Main, 2007); Lion Feuchtwanger and Marta Feuchtwanger, *Der Teufel in Frankreich. Tagebuch 1940. Briefe*, 1st ed. (Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch, 2000); Koestler, *Scum of the Earth*; Leo Lania and Edgar Mowrer, *The Darkest Hour: Adventures and Escapes* (Gollancz, 1942); Heinz Pol, *Suicide of a Democracy* (Reynal & Hitchcock, 1940).

eloquently. Unlike detainees in most other concentration camp systems throughout the 20th century, those who were incarcerated in 1939 usually survived the experience. All the more so if they were prominent, well-connected writers and intellectuals. This fact already indicates a fundamental difference between German and French camps.

I would argue that the historian should not adopt Grosz's approach towards testimonial sources when it comes to the French camps. First of all, there are plethora of other, little explored documents and accounts, which were neither produced by the "perpetrator" nor by the "victims". Reports from relief agencies, journalism and the correspondence of French opponents to the internment: all of these are documents that are almost inexistent in the case of the Holocaust, but which scholars can use alongside the camp memoirs to examine the French case. Secondly, accounts by survivors seem to be highly edited documents, as the example of Koestler will show. They were often written *a posteriori*, belonged to a specific literary genre with a defined target audience and often they pursued a clear political intent.

In the case of Koestler's *Scum of the Earth*, this was especially true. Arriving penniless in London, and eager to get published Koestler worked hard and conferred regularly with his publisher in order to make the book attractive to an English audience. Like any other product, *Scum of the Earth* responded to specific needs. In this case, it was the need to understand the baffling fact of France's collapse in the summer of 1940 and the advent of Vichy and how the French ally could turn its back on Great Britain so swiftly. That question much engrossed the English public's mind and there are several indications that Koestler adapted his account to that trend.⁶¹

For instance, Koestler's initial title for the book was *French Apocalypse*. For him, his time in France had been a truly shattering one: not only had France rejected him, but it was here that he had lost his revolutionary faith. However, he eventually changed the book's title to

⁶¹ Michael Scammell, *Koestler: The Literary and Political Odyssey of a Twentieth-Century Skeptic*, First Edition edition (New York: Random House, 2009), 501.

Scum of the Earth, a favorite phrase of the French press to describe the foreign refugees swept up by the French police in the autumn of 1939. That was after his editor and his publisher realized that of the two principal narrative lines in his account, the collapse of France and the collapse of Koestler's revolutionary faith, it was the former that would attract most attention from readers. When the book came out, it naturally enjoyed a remarkable commercial success.⁶²

Secondly, here as in every other autobiography he wrote throughout his career (six in total), Koestler exaggerated and took liberty with facts. In his description of the *émigré* life in Paris, for instance, the son of a rich banker from Berlin, Ludwig Coser⁶³ was depicted as a Pole who had spent fifteen years of his life in Polish prisons. The fact was, as his friend Henry Jacoby bemusedly noted, that "Lutz" was barely older than twenty at that time and certainly not Polish either.⁶⁴

Koestler's artistic attitude to historical "truth" was also evident if one compares his written account to his actual experience in Le Vernet as reported in other sources. In Vernet, Koestler writes, rules were immensely malleable, bribery and corruption flourished. *Scum of the Earth* describes the complicated network of hierarchies and favoritism between the guards and certain inmates. Even amongst themselves, interned foreigners were not equal. A plutocratic social hierarchy rapidly crystallized, according to which small privileges were traded: the number of people per bunk, additional foodstuff and cigarette supplies, the right to own a blanket or a straw mattress etc...⁶⁵ Bribery and corruption, however, also opened windows of opportunity - and for Koestler more than for others. With money and food soon arriving from Paris, Koestler soon acquired a makeshift table and five stools. He got shelves installed for food and books. According to the Italian anti-fascist Leo Weitzen/Valiani, a friend

⁶² Ibid., 500–503.

⁶³ Later famous American sociologist Lewis A. Coser

⁶⁴ Gilbert Badia, ed., *Exilés En France: Souvenirs D'antifascistes Allemands émigrés (1933-1945)*, Actes et Mémoires Du Peuple (Paris: F. Maspero, 1982), 135.

⁶⁵ Koestler, *Scum of the Earth*, 90 and ff.

from captivity, Daphne Hardy (Koestler's companion at the time) eventually managed to send him a sleeping bag to place on the straw.⁶⁶ To crown it all, Koestler was granted permission from the commandant to continue writing, sitting outside under a large umbrella when the temperature rose, much to the envy of Gustav Regler and the other prisoners.⁶⁷ In captivity, he was able to resume and almost to finish *The Vicious Circle*. Valiani became his first reader.⁶⁸ Obviously, none of these circumstances are mentioned in *Scum of the Earth*.

Lastly, and most significant, Koestler's goal, clearly, was political. He set out to destroy "the myth of a brave and victimized France crushed by a brutal Germany and reveal the cowardice of a ruling class that had thrown in the towel."⁶⁹ As Michael Scammell put it in his magnificent Koestler biography:

He wanted to tell the story of the German and Central European left-wing refugees caught between the hammer of fascist invasion and the anvil of a weak but vindictive and collaborationist France. Their story was also his story, and he used it to construct a miniature epic, showing a nation in its political death throes, collapsing in the face of German aggression while venting its rage and shame on a defenseless "scum" which had sought refuge in France in the mistaken belief that they would be safe.⁷⁰

All of this does not mean that the Koestler's account is untruthful. Many of the facts and events seem accurately described and coincide with other accounts. Yet Koestler's selective use of facts, his characteristic tendency to dramatic exaggerations and the context in which the memoir was written should discourage scholars from quoting him too uncritically. That is especially true concerning when they quote the allegations that Le Vernet was almost "as bad as Dachau."⁷¹

⁶⁶ The only other one to possess such a bag was Valiani. In that regard, at least, Koestler was truly part of the "aristocracy".

⁶⁷ Gustav Regler, *Das Ohr des Malchus*, Neuaufl. (Köln: Kiepenheuer&Witsch, 1989), 369.

⁶⁸ Michael Scammell, *Koestler: The Literary and Political Odyssey of a Twentieth-Century Skeptic*, First Edition edition (New York: Random House, 2009), 179.

⁶⁹ Scammell, *Koestler*, 502.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Leo Valiani, "Koestler the Militant", *Encounter* July-August 1983 68-72. The umbrella scene was reported in an interview to Eva Auer by Count Schonborn. Michael Scammell's interview with Eva Auer, 9/17/93 in: Scammell, *Koestler*, 179.

Koestler is but one example. Often, one cannot avoid feeling that émigrés tried to settle accounts with their idea of France while penning their memoirs. William Blake's aphorism that "it is easier to forgive an enemy than to forgive a friend" applies to other cases as well. We have already mentioned that in the perception of many liberals and left-wingers, France had been one of the last bastions of democracy on the Continent. While European anti-fascists clung to the heritage of the French Revolution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Jewish refugees, in addition revered first nation to emancipate its Jews. For many, France was a haven and a friend. Beyond all material deprivation in the camps, then, the greatest torment for many refugees was the realization that France had betrayed them. These are precisely the terms in which Hannah Arendt written in one of her rare mentions of her time in the camp of Gurs:

Apparently nobody want to know that contemporary history has created a new kind of human beings – the kind that are put in concentration camps by their foes and in internment camps by their friends.⁷²

Author Lion Feuchtwanger similarly noted that the sole reason he had remained in France, although he had the possibility to immigrate overseas, was to participate in the impending battle against Hitler.⁷³ In vain: "The French not only refused any cooperation from us German anti-Fascists, they locked us up," fumed Koestler.⁷⁴ Anguish, protest and, above all, great disappointment: the idea that France had betrayed them permeates memoirs, letters.

In spite of this emotional bias, however, in general much of the *émigrés'* descriptions of facts are accurate. If possible, they should nevertheless be read critically and compared with other sources. This is difficult in most cases. Official camp records, for example, were usually destroyed systematically during the months of May and June 1940. This, however, was not the case of the camp of Meslay du Maine, which consequently allows us a more differentiated view of life in the camp and the relationship between guards and their prisoners.

⁷² Hannah Arendt "We Refugees" in: Marc Robinson, ed., *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile* (San Diego: Harvest Books, 1996), 111.

⁷³ Caron, *Uneasy Asylum*, 245.

⁷⁴ Koestler, *Scum of the Earth*, 87.

C) The case of Meslay du Maine

In historiographical literature, Meslay is a lesser-known camp. Its existence was relatively short, from the early days of September 1939 to June 17, 1940. What makes it so interesting, however, is that it is one of the few camps for which sources from several different parties are still available. The inmates, the camp commander and the Review Committee (CRC) dispatched from Paris: all of them described Meslay.

First of all there are the memoirs of the detainee Leo Lania.⁷⁵ Lania was born Lazar Herrmann to a Jewish family in 1896 in Kharkov, then still part of the Russian Empire. After the death of his father in 1906, he moved to Vienna with his Austrian mother. During the First World War, he served in the Austro-Hungarian Army. Marked by this experience, he became involved in politics, eventually joining the Austrian Communist Party. In his Viennese days, he was a journalist for the *Rote Fahne*, the organ of the revolutionary *Spartakusbund* and later the KPD. He moved to Berlin in September of 1921, where, among others, he wrote the screenplay for Georg Wilhelm Pabst's *Dreigroschenoper* (1931), and later worked with the celebrated theatre directors Max Reinhardt and Alexey Granowsky. After 1933 Lania fled to France. There, he continued to work as a screenplay writer and as a journalist until the war broke out. As an Austrian citizen, he was sent to Meslay du Maine where he remained for a few months before he was freed in early 1940. After a chaotic escape just ahead of the advancing *Wehrmacht* in May 1940, he finally made his way to the United States by way of Spain and Portugal. His account of that flight, *The Darkest Hour* (1941) was published there. Around sixty pages of this narrative are devoted to his time in Meslay – a testimony to be used with the preceding observations about memoirs in mind.

The second source is the journal of lieutenant Albert Mary Dubuc, who was appointed commander at the *camp de rassemblement* n°4 of Meslay du Maine in late August 1939. Dubuc was not a professional military man. He was initially trained as a teacher, but born in 1898, he

⁷⁵ “Leo Lania - Weltbühne-Autor,” accessed May 12, 2017, <http://www.weltbuehne-lesen.de/lania.html>.

was swept up in the First World War and participated in battles in the Champagne region in 1918. Later he took part in the Occupation of the Rhineland.⁷⁶ In 1939, he was called up again, despite his age.

Dubuc stayed at Meslay until the evacuation of the camp. During his time there and in the following years, he produced a thorough, 2,779 pages-long description of life at the camp, which he entitled *Mémoires de la Tempête* (Memories from the Storm). He bequeathed the manuscript to the *Archives Départementales de Mayenne* in 1978, where the document lay dormant for almost thirty years.⁷⁷ A truly exceptional text it is the only known document produced by a military camp commander which survived the war. Writing his journal, the author, a man of apparently sound character, was pursuing a precise objective. In the introduction, Dubuc writes that he had a feeling of being on a historical mission. Given the circumstances of the “phoney war”, he writes, not many such accounts would be written. “Armed with a considerable amount of documentation, I wish to produce a significant work, devoid of any fantasy. I will be restraining myself. This account, which might be incomplete in certain respects, will be impartial, and written down at once after the events.”⁷⁸

Dubuc apparently conducted his work meticulously. He drew on testimonies from several of his officers, the physician and, most of all, on the camp’s files. In other camps, commanders had been instructed to destroy the files in May 1940. Disobeying this order at the risk of his life, Dubuc took them with him on his flight from the advancing *Wehrmacht*. The manuscript was completed in 1944.

The account is neutral, or at least there are only rare cues of Dubuc’s political affiliation. He was active in “civil society,” yet hostile to the Popular Front. He considered that

⁷⁶ Peschanski, *La France des camps*; Weber, *The Hollow Years*.

⁷⁷ *Archives départementales de la Mayenne*, 1J 570/1 reproduced in parts in: Dominique Barnéoud (eds) and Albert Mary Dubuc: *Le camp de Meslay-du-Maine: ses internés civils, leur odyssée, leur sort (2 septembre 1939-juin 1940-fin 1942) Quelques souvenirs dans la tourmente : le camp des étrangers de Meslay-du-Maine (Mayenne, 2 septembre 1939-juin 1940)* (Nantes and Laval: Siloë, 2003).

⁷⁸ Barnéoud (ed.) and Dubuc, *Le camp de Meslay du Maine*, 35.

Léon Blum had weakened the French nation and that the debacle was a direct consequence. It is surprising, then, that he was critical of the harsh treatment of German and Austrian refugees in 1939/40. That, at least, he shared with parties from the ex-*Front Populaire* (more specifically SFIO and the Communists), which were the only parties to hold such views. As we will see, Dubuc was also not afraid to criticize the central administration and the corruption prevailing in the *camps de rassemblement*.

Lastly, I also draw on various reports from the *Commission des Camps de Rassemblement* (CCR, which the next chapter will discuss in more detail) and on letters sent to the socialist député Salomon Grumbach.⁷⁹ With the sources described above, this sub-chapter attempts to answer three sets of questions that seem important to answer the questions of continuity and transition. First of all, what were living conditions like in the camp? Secondly, what were the categories of description the administration used? Lastly, how did each party think about the role of such a camp?

1. “The fellow that chose this spot ought to be court-martialed!” (Leo Lania): Preparing the camp⁸⁰

Meslay-du-Maine was thoroughly unprepared for the arrival of 2,000 adult men. The arbitrary, unpractical choice of the camp’s location and its disastrous sanitary conditions clearly resulted from an admixture of corruption and expeditiousness on the part of the French authorities. Paris had requested the head of the gendarmerie of Meslay-du-Maine to find an adequate spot for an internment camp as early as January of 1938. Eventually, in April of 1939, the gendarmerie selected a five-hectares piece of land in the *lieu-dit* Les Rochères. The camp commanders were billeted in the local chateau. The internees, who arrived on the September 18 and 19, however, were herded onto a vast meadow nearby.

⁷⁹ AIU AP/17 (Archives personnelles de Salomon Grumbach, 1884-1952)

⁸⁰ Barnéoud (ed.) and Dubuc, *Le camp de Meslay du Maine*, 39.

The piece of land, Leo Lania heard from the guards, belonged to a man who had good connections to the *Préfecture* and the Mayor of Meslay du Maine. He rented it out to the War Ministry at a handsome price. Dubuc did not record that information.⁸¹ However, he does point out that everyone in the village knew perfectly well that this particular piece of land was useless, especially in the winter and even for cattle. Certain inmates, who had served in the military and remembered specifications for camp-sites, soon recognized the problem. The ground, high in clay content would not drain water and thus the grassland was bound to turn into a sea of mud at the first rain.

Nothing, except for a ditch serving as latrines, had been prepared prior to the inmates' arrival. As the mud eventually reached a depth of twenty centimeters, no construction "in hard" was possible. The men slept in tents, with only a thin layer of straw between them and the bare ground. In addition, there was a severe shortage of drinking water. Daily, each inmate was allowed a quarter of a liter of drinking water and another quarter for washing. Dubuc repeatedly bemoaned these conditions:

Soon the terrain, which had been trampled by two thousand men, had become a sordid swamp. Mud, enemy number one, permeated everything. Mud was omnipresent. The men's straw was like litter. There were rats. To let men live in these conditions... It was truly inhuman!⁸²

All of this added up to create a catastrophic sanitary situation. The Commission (CRC) dispatched from Paris, which was generally careful in their wording, criticized sanitation at Meslay in the harshest terms. In particular, they reported a disturbing incident. An inmate had fallen into the latrine ditch. He was unable to get out on his own because the ground was too soft. When finally he had been extracted from there, there was no water to wash himself.⁸³ And

⁸¹ Leo Lania and Edgar Mowrer, *The Darkest Hour: Adventures and Escapes* (Gollancz, 1942), 37.

⁸² Barnéoud (ed.) and Dubuc, *Le camp de Meslay du Maine*, 44-45.

⁸³ AIU AP 17/192.01

then the cold came. By early November, the Joint Distribution Committee reported that refugees were dying due to the lack of heat and winter clothing.⁸⁴

What mud was to Colombes and Meslay, dust and dirt were to Les Milles and other camps such as Montargis. Soma Morgenstern, a Galician journalist and writer who traversed several camps before making his way to America *in extremis* had gathered some unpleasant experience in that matter. His conclusion: “A French concentration camp worthy of the name stands outside of the laws of nature. It does not consist of four, but three elements: earth, air and straw.”⁸⁵ In the end, the combined pressure of reports from abroad, the visit of the Commission and a violent storm put an end to the “scandal of Les Rochères”. In October, the inmates were transferred into permanent barracks nearby.

2. “A Byzantine arabesque against the grey background of misery” (Arthur Koestler): Sociology of the camp⁸⁶

The camps at Meslay-du-Maine was also called “Camp des Autrichiens”. Meslay was where most of the Austrians (and only a few hundred German) who had formerly lived in Paris were interned. Lieutenant Dubuc provides some camp statistics as of September 19th 1939 in his diary.⁸⁷

Table 1: Number of inmates in the camp of Meslay on September 19th, 1939, according to Lieutenant Dubuc

Nationality	Number of people
German	349
Austrian	1,311
Saarländer	200
German refugees (stateless)	89
Total	1,949

⁸⁴ Caron, *Uneasy Asylum*.

⁸⁵ “Ein richtiges französisches Konzentrationslager steht ausserhalb der Naturgesetze: es setzt sich nicht aus vier, sondern aus drei Elementen zusammen: Erde, Luft und Stroh, zumindest nicht, in den fünf Konzentrationslagern, die ich kennengelernt habe.” Ingolf Schulte and Soma Morgenstern, *Flucht in Frankreich. Ein Romanbericht* (Lüneburg: zu Klampen Verlag - zu Klampen & Johannes GbR, 1998), 55.

⁸⁶ Koestler, *Scum of the Earth*.

⁸⁷ Barnéoud (ed.) and Dubuc, *Le camp de Meslay du Maine*, 41 and 48.

Lieutenant Dubuc remarks that for provincial French officials the categories “German” or “Austrian” were a real headache. Most of the interned were born in the late 19th century. On paper, they were either Austrian, *Saarländer*, German or stateless “ex-Germans”. There were also those born in Amsterdam, Moscow, Budapest, Braila, Ostende, Smolensk, Schaerbeek, Ostrava, London, Krakow, Prague, Trieste, Bucharest, Kiev, Kharkov (like Leo Lania), La Haye, Villerupt, St Brieuc, and Neuilly... in France!⁸⁸ As they were recounting their stories, many inmates bemoaned that their internment could only have been the fruit of some administrative mistake.

Lania, for instance, had always been an active anti-Nazi, spoke perfect French and had connections to the highest level. By rights he ought not to have been interned. But the absurdity of his situation was nothing compared to his neighbour, young Moïse Mordechai, whose father, a Spaniolic Jew from Greece, had opted for the protection of the Austrian Emperor at the turn of the century. Evacuated after the First World War, young Mordechai had grown up at relatives’ in Paris with whom he conversed in Ladino and French. At the time of his internment in 1939, he did not speak a single word of German. Since his repeated application for French citizenship had failed, however, he was still considered an Austrian citizen – and therefore he was sent to Meslay in 1939. Everyone agreed that in the contest for the most outlandish curriculum, Mordechai had won the prize.⁸⁹

Lack of clarity and arbitrariness shrouded the categorization of the French administration. Nationality remained the most relevant criteria in the eyes of authorities and they remained impervious to the stringency of racial categories in the Reich. The absurdity of the ships St. Louis and Flanders mentioned above resulted from this attitude. When they disembarked all male passengers, authorities chose to disregard the fact that these were persecuted Jews fleeing the Nazis. They only noted that they held German passports.

Leo Lania also noted that Germans and Austrians avoided each other almost entirely:

⁸⁸ Barnéoud (ed.) and Dubuc, *Le camp de Meslay du Maine*, 39

⁸⁹ Lania and Mowrer, *The Darkest Hour*, 30-31.

The reason for this was not so much political disagreements as the military discipline of the Germans, which to the Austrians was always a source of amazement and laughter. The German marched, almost goose-stepped to assembly, they clicked their heels and stood at attention when an officer addressed them. Prussian neatness prevailed in their tents. The camp commander favored them for these qualities, though the Germans counted a considerable number of Nazis in their midst, while among the Austrians the overwhelming majority had been anti-Fascists. The officers, perhaps unsurprisingly, were more impressed by the military bearing of the Germans than by the Anti-Nazism of the disorderly Austrians.⁹⁰

That remark might suggest that the camp administration had a penchant for the National-Socialists. Nothing gives that impression in Dubuc's account, however. While the first commandant of Meslay, a war veteran, apparently bullied the internees in the first days of the internment, he was soon dismissed. There is also no report of antisemitic incidents in Meslay, neither in Lania's, nor Dubuc's nor in the CRC reports. Obviously, Dubuc had realized that most of the internees were "Israélites", but that category, again, did not play an administrative role. On the contrary, observant Jews were free to practice their rites.

The only reported problem concerned Orthodox Jews, who rejected the food provided by the camp authorities, since it was not kosher. They fed on potatoes and eggs they prepared themselves with makeshift gas-boilers. Lieutenant Dubuc complained that their improvised and clandestine fires constituted a safety hazard. The refugees, at least secular Jews, generally showed great sympathy and even admiration for the Orthodox Jews.⁹¹ Certainly, life in the camps was not entirely devoid of instances of antisemitism. Zosa Szajkowski and Vicky Caron have noted its prevalence in the Foreign Legion in early 1940.⁹² As far as I have been able to appreciate, however, that remained a peripheral phenomenon. Only after the French defeat and under Vichy did racial categories find their way (albeit very promptly) into the official language of camp administration.

Lastly, it seems that the most important differentiation in the camps was political. Lania writes that most of the internees were viscerally anti-Fascist. To be sure, there were also Nazi

⁹⁰ Lania and Mowrer, *The Darkest Hour*, 39.

⁹¹ Schulte and Morgenstern, *Flucht in Frankreich. Ein Romanbericht.*, 37-44

⁹² Douglas Porch, *The French Foreign Legion: A Complete History of the Legendary Fighting Force* (Skyhorse Publishing, Inc., 2013); Zosa Szajkowski, *Jews and the French Foreign Legion* (New York: Ktav Pub Inc, 1975); Caron, *Uneasy Asylum*.

sympathizers. In the case of Meslay, we know of at least two cases of Nazi spies from the archives. Also, much was reported on Meslay when some of these internees were released in Winter 1939.⁹³ The camps were like a godsend for Nazi propaganda. Especially *Radio Stuttgart*, the French-speaking propaganda organ of the Nazis relished in showing that the West despised the refugees no less than did the Reich.⁹⁴ Dubuc was also aware of the attention given to his camp and reproduced a German article describing Meslay in full at the end of his journal. The situation in the camps was closely followed on an international level, both in Germany but also in the United States, where much was done to pressure the French Government to accelerate releases.

3. “All of them were alike amiable and powerless” (Leo Lania) - Relations with the camp authorities

Lastly, the sources at hand allow us to explore the theme of the relations between camp authorities and prisoners in a more differentiated way. Mud, hunger, sordid latrines and distress in the face of an absurd present and an uncertain future, were the most important features of daily life at the camp of Meslay, as they were in most other camps as well. Relations to the guards, however, were highly variable across the camp system and in the case of Meslay, a certain degree of cooperation between inmates and the camp commandants crystallized over time, a circumstance that Leo Lania, perhaps revealingly, fails to report in his account.

One of the domains in which this cooperation functioned correctly was food supply. Dubuc and other commanders recognized that inmates seeking goods outside the camp might encourage corrupt guards and black marketeers in the vicinity. Subsequently, they set up a system to provide merchandise (such as foodstuff, shoes and tobacco) at a reasonable price. Promises to establish a canteen failed to materialize but a system of regulated purchases was set

⁹³ See in: Eggers, *Unerwünschte Ausländer*, 223-224. Auswärtiges Amt Berlin, Politisches Archiv, R XII Zv, Kult E-Nf, Bd. 192, Rapport von den Hagen.

⁹⁴ Ernst Erich Noth, *Ernst-Erich Noth. L'Allemagne exilée en France, témoignage d'un Allemand proscrit* (Bloud et Gay, 1939), 28.

up. Several days a week, German and Austrian representatives of the different camp sections went down to the village to check that the French officers in charge wrote down the accurate prices. A “tax” of 10% was added to the prices of goods bought this way. That money was allotted to special activities, such as the rental of music instruments, films for projection and so forth.

If, as Dubuc remarked, it was difficult to construct a barrack with those prisoners, there was still enough human potential in Meslay to put together several theater troupes and musical ensembles.⁹⁵ Cultural life in the camps was certainly limited, but not repressed altogether. The most vivid example of cultural achievement despite the limitations of camp life remains the frescoes Max Ernst and other artists painted for the guards’ quarter of Les Milles and which one can still admire today. Sometimes artistic productions were even benevolently encouraged, as in Meslay. The most notable event was the staging of “Meslay lacht wieder” (Meslay laughs again), a revue composed of sixteen acts on December 31st 1939. Karl Farkas was the producer, Egon Neumann conducted it and Heinrich Süssman designed the set. The most spectacular of these tableaux was a group of men in gray and white blazers. The commandant of the camp was tolerant. He pretended not to notice that those blazers were made out of the new coverings for the straw mattresses which the camp had just received. A few days later the physician claimed that they had had to be discarded because they stimulated the propagation of infectious diseases. Sports events, soccer games were also organized. Leo Lania and a few fellow inmates even toured the barracks, delivering a series of lectures on diverse topics, which they called “Radio Meslay”.⁹⁶ Needless to say, such events would have been impossible in a German concentration camp.

The way the refugees perceived their internment has been outlined very often. One might ask, for the first time perhaps, how it was on the other side of the fence. How did the

⁹⁵ Barnéoud (ed.) and Dubuc, *Le camp de Meslay du Maine*, 54-59.

⁹⁶ <http://www.musiques-regenees.fr/GhettosCamps/MusiqueInternementFrance.html>

guards conceive of their duty? Did political discourses and fifth column suspicions present at the top filter down to Meslay?

Dubuc, certainly, did not rebel against the orders coming from above. Nonetheless, he tried to negotiate the situation so as to make everyday life less burdensome for the interned. In his diary, he noted the absurdity of the situation, and occasionally, it appears that he had a realistic picture of the situation:

Why are these survivors from German concentration camps such as Dachau experiencing again the harmful life in concentration camps? Have they not proven to us, with the marks that experience left on their flesh, that they were but the victims of an implacable doctrine?⁹⁷

One level below, there were the guards. From them, many refugees picked up the vocabulary to describe the “phoney war” and, above all, the sense of demoralization and apathy, which the French called “*je m’en foutisme*“. For Feuchtwanger, indifference accounted, more than anything else, for the situation the refugees faced – apathy was the real “Devil in France.” According to Dubuc, a low sense of their duty and alcohol abuse was prevalent amongst the guards:

I have to add that many of our men did not hold their duty in very high esteem. With the same ardor we employed in detecting orthodox Israelites, possible arsonists, we also had to track down men on duty who sneaked away to rest during their service. And I don’t even need to mention cigarettes that were smoked while on duty. In summary the guard battalion of Meslay did not –and could not have –have any high aspirations. It was composed of men who belonged to the military reserve force. It had but few elements that had had proper military training, but there was goodwill and the quality of the non-commissioned officers allowed the battalion to fulfill its modest task. To be truthful, however, I have to say that the prestige of the French Army was not raised in the eyes of the foreigners, who sometimes only barely repressed their scoffing smiles when they noticed the sloppy outfit of our French soldiers or their inelegance while in service.⁹⁸

In the end, the combined effect of traditional management insufficiencies, the slowness of the administration and the profile of the internees only highlighted the absurdity of a situation which lasted for months and demoralized everyone... And, as we have pointed out,

⁹⁷ « Pourquoi certains rescapés des camps de concentration allemands, comme celui de Dachau, connaissent ils de nouveau l’existence insipide des camps d’internement ? N’avaient-ils pas prouvé suffisamment, jusque dans les plaies de leur chair, qu’ils étaient les victimes d’une doctrine implacable ? » Barnéoud (ed.) and Dubuc, *Le camp de Meslay du Maine*, 54-59.

⁹⁸ Barnéoud (ed.) and Dubuc, *Le camp de Meslay du Maine*, 54-59.

not only the refugees. For the French who were in direct contact with the interned, the detainment of men who had already been the object of Nazi persecution only made the stakes of a confrontation more confusing. It contributed to the sense of fatigue amongst the French population as the “war without a war”, the phoney war, unfolded. As for the internees, the procedure “had but one visible result: in three months, thousands of enthusiastic French patriots and potential soldiers had been transformed into embittered defeatists, skeptical of the Government’s desire to carry on serious war against Hitler.”⁹⁹

But as we find out in the next chapter the picture of the struggle in the center is more complex than has previously been assumed. This is why our gaze shifts again to Paris.

⁹⁹ Vicki Caron, *Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis, 1933-1942* (Stanford University Press, 1999).

Chapter 3: Struggle in Paris

The refugees' plight did not go unnoticed or even uncommented. The United States government and public opinion were highly critical of the measures. It condemned the seizures of refugees from neutral ships and several times, it called on France and Britain to allow Jewish refugees to emigrate from Germany without complications. After a shocking incident in December, when it was reported that a French submarine commander had demanded the disembarkation of Jews *specifically* from an Italian liner, the French ambassador in Washington DC, René de Saint-Quentin, wired the Foreign Ministry at the Quai d'Orsay that: "American opinion does not easily comprehend that Jews fleeing Nazi persecution are being prevented from utilizing an immigration visa they applied for up to 18 months or even two years ago."¹⁰⁰

The foreign press, again especially in the United States, was also critical. In January, for instance, the *New Republic* published an article entitled: "France copies Hitler." "France," read, "is supposed to be fighting this war for democracy. Some people in America would be more willing to accept this point of view if it were not for the shocking treatment the French are now giving to foreign Jews." To staunch such criticism, Saint-Quentin launched his own publicity campaign. He attributed the negative publicity surrounding the camps to an alleged Communist conspiracy against the image of France in the world.¹⁰¹

A) The socialist campaign against the internment

Little did René de Saint Quentin know that there was a groundswell of criticism at home as well, and that it was by no means limited to communist circles. In particular, two parliamentarians, both members of the SFIO (*Section française de l'internationale ouvrière*, the French social-democratic party) relentlessly alerted the public to the situation in the camps: Marius Moutet and Salomon Grumbach. The significance of their advocacy is only scarcely

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in: Caron, *Uneasy Asylum*, 249.

¹⁰¹ Caron, *Uneasy Asylum*.

acknowledged in historiography, unjustly so. In this chapter I argue that their absence is not due to their lack of efficiency. Rather it was due to their particular, multifaceted *modus operandi*. In fact, people like Grumbach and Moutet actually contributed in a significant way to the increase in liberations from early 1940 on. This transition towards a more pragmatic and liberal internment regime is analyzed in the second part of this chapter.

Marius Moutet was born in 1876 in Nîmes and received training as a lawyer. He gained a certain celebrity when, together with Marcel Cachin, he was sent to St. Petersburg to convince Alexander Kerensky's Provisional Government of April 1917 to remain at war on the side of the French. After 1919 he became a *député* for the SFIO, and he was consistently re-elected to the Chamber until 1940. During the Popular Front era, he was Minister of the Colonies. In that position he developed one of the most reform-oriented colonial agendas France had ever had. During the Spanish Civil War, he advocated a more active support of the Republican side.

Ever since he had witnessed the internment of enemy aliens in the First World War, which he regarded with great disapproval, Moutet insisted that the protection of refugees' rights should be one of France's priorities. He was not only a member of the central Committee of the *Ligue des Droits de l'Homme* (Human Rights League), he also presided over the board of the association *Les Amis des travailleurs étrangers, Comité français pour le statut et la défense des travailleurs étrangers* ("Friends of the Workers" - French Committee for the Status and the Defense of Foreign Workers). The organization was one of the few in which trade-unionists and non-communist socialists worked hand in hand to further the rights of refugees in France. Quite naturally Marius Moutet, just like Salomon Grumbach, was called to participate in the

immigration commission of the SFIO that was created in the aftermath of Hitler's accession to power.¹⁰²

The relevant archival material concerning this commission was destroyed, which was another reason that its work has not been appreciated properly. Fearing that the Gestapo might seize the compromising files, the president of the commission Raoul Évrard had them reduced to ashes in 1942. According to the testimony of Daniel Mayer, Moutet had already urged that all documents pertaining to the assistance of the refugees be destroyed as early as October 1940.¹⁰³ Moutet suspected, probably rightly so, that the documents, often containing incriminating material, might end up in the wrong hands.¹⁰⁴ Fortunately for us, some crucial documentation was preserved thanks to one of the twists so typical of European archival history in the 20th century. Which leads us to the second aforementioned advocate of refugee rights, Salomon Grumbach, the traces of whose activity and engagement was not only documented in his papers and correspondence but also survived the vagaries of war, occupation and removal.

The “Fonds Grumbach”, located today at the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* in Paris, contains the personal papers of the *député* and commission member Salomon Grumbach. The bulk of it was produced between October 1939 and March 1940. Shortly after Paris was occupied in Summer 1940 the Germans seized these items when they ransacked Grumbach's home in Ville D'Avray, near Paris. His papers were taken to Berlin. In 1945, however, the Red Army transferred the archive to Moscow where it remained for almost half a century. It was

¹⁰² Marcel Livian, *Le Parti socialiste et l'immigration: le gouvernement Léon Blum, la main-d'oeuvre immigrée et les réfugiés politiques (1920-1940): russes, géorgiens, arméniens, italiens, espagnols, allemands, sarrois, autrichiens, allemands des Sudètes* (Éditions Anthropos, 1982); Gilbert Badia, *Les Bannis de Hitler: accueil et luttes des exilés allemands en France (1933-1939)* (Editions de l'Atelier, 1984).

¹⁰³ Quoted in: Denis Peschanski. *Les camps français d'internement (1938-1946)* - Doctorat d'État. Histoire. Université Panthéon-Sorbonne - Paris I, 2000. <tel-00362523>, 113.

¹⁰⁴ Livian, *Le Parti socialiste et l'immigration*; and Anne Grynberg, *Les camps de la honte: Les internés juifs des camps français (1939-1944)* (La Découverte, 2013).

only in January 2001 that the Fonds Grumbach was returned to France. His heirs donated it to the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*. His earlier correspondence from the 1920s can be found in the Archives Nationales.¹⁰⁵

That meta-history of the documents is not insignificant. First, the fact that they remained in Moscow for so long means that only a handful of people have had a chance to look at them. One short article was published on the collection, but apart from that it has received very little attention.¹⁰⁶ The second implication is more chilling. Moutet was correct in his assumptions. Based on the intelligence collected by the German embassy throughout the 1930s, the Gestapo knew of Salomon Grumbach's activity on behalf of many vocal opponents to the Nazi regime, the left-wing German and Austrians émigré community in Paris. Once they got a hold of them the Gestapo probably scrutinized Grumbach's lists and letters in the early days of the occupation. There are indications that this happened with Moutet's personal correspondence which were apparently seized and then scrutinized for information.¹⁰⁷ For the Gestapo, which was embroiled in a power struggle with the *Wehrmacht* authorities (de facto the power in the land), the persecution of German dissidents, Jews and Freemasons was the means to establish an operational base in France.¹⁰⁸ Thus, there can be little doubt that in the Parisian bureau of the Gestapo (Amt IV), Grumbach's files were carefully sifted through and evaluated. It would be a rewarding, if painful undertaking, to discover more about the possible

¹⁰⁵ It was probably seized by the Sûreté Nationale, Vichy's political police, in 1940-1941: Archives Nationales, Fonds Panthéon, Salomon Grumbach : F/7/15961

¹⁰⁶ M. L. Scott-Weaver, "Networks and Refugees: Salomon Grumbach's Activism in Late Third Republic France," *French History* 28, no. 4 (December 1, 2014): 520–40, doi:10.1093/fh/cru081.

¹⁰⁷ The Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris (CDJC - Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine) holds scattered documents emanating from the Gestapo in Paris. CDJC XLIX – 63 is a report dated 10.06.1942 and entitled "Auswertung der bei dem ehemaligen Minister Moutet Marius, 19 Bv. de Courselles (sic) in Paris wohnhaft gewesen - Notiz über die Kolonisation der französischen kolonialen Besitzungen durch die polnischen Juden."

¹⁰⁸ See "The Gestapo in France" in: Jacques Delarue, *The Gestapo: History of Horror* (Frontline Books, 2008), 200–212 and Paul Sander "Helmut Knochen et la police nazie en France 1940-1944" Master's thesis University of Paris-Sorbonne, 1995.

consequences which German possession of Grumbach's sensitive papers entailed. This, however, is beyond the scope of my thesis.

Who was Grumbach, how did he fit into the 1930s political landscape in France and what exactly was his role in the world of the political refugees? In 1932 publicist Edmond Wellhoff published a thin volume which he entitled “Tribuns et Hauts-Parleurs” (Tribunes and Great Public Speakers) and which contained humoristic pastiches of the most popular public figures of the day. Grumbach was one of them. Grumbach, read the short little article, was also “L’Homme des Conférences”.¹⁰⁹ As an early proponent of the European idea, Grumbach had indeed been an enthusiastic and vocal participant in almost every international conference of the League of Nations after 1918.

Salomon Grumbach is small, yet broad; he is bald, but the hair that remains is long; his profile is that of a Roman Emperor but his charming smile is that of the village chap. His physiognomy is changing and his facial expression changes with incredible ease. (...) Grumbach is a walking encyclopedia: he seems to have seen, read and learnt everything. He wrote books on the socialist doctrine, on Dostoyevsky and on the politics and foreign policies of France and Germany. With that, he could pose himself as a technician (read ‘far from the people’), but no, he is always like a joker. It seems that even when dealing the grave issues that shake our continent, Grumbach still dances and spins.¹¹⁰

Grumbach was born in Hattstatt on January 6, 1884, in Alsace, which had been annexed to the German Reich fourteen years earlier. He grew up in a traditional, lower middle-class Jewish household; his father was a cheese-merchant and his mother a dressmaker. Although they lived frugally, the Grumbachs valued education. Young Salomon was not only an assiduous student, he also grew up in a bilingual environment and absorbed French and German high culture alike. These basic elements of his identity were not necessarily advantageous in an age of growing nationalism and did not necessarily presage success. As a fellow Alsatian journalist later remarked, Grumbach “combined all the handicaps [of the era]:

¹⁰⁹ Edmond Wellhoff, *Tribuns et haut parleurs*, (Fasquelle : Paris, 1933), 35 – 38.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

not only was he Alsatian and Jewish, but also a socialist.”¹¹¹

When he was eighteen, Grumbach joined the German socialist party, the SPD (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*). At the turn of the century, the SPD party leaders still considered World Revolution the party’s primary political mission. In 1908, Grumbach moved to Paris where he became the foreign editor of the SPD party organ *Vorwärts*. He also became a specialist for international issues at its French counterpart of *l’Humanité*, where he met the famous French socialist Jean Jaurès (1859-1914). As a mentor to young Grumbach, Jaurès led him away from the more orthodox revolutionary influences of his party. Grumbach was not yet a notable politician, but many considered him a promising journalist. According to Toni Sender, Grumbach was soon writing from Paris as a correspondent for a dozen leftist publications. In his writings he advocated French-German reconciliation, not exactly a mainstream position at a time of generalized, vicious Germanophobia (*Boulangisme/Revanchisme*) in France. In August 1914 when the war broke out, Grumbach, a German national, had to leave Paris. In 1914, *she* was the “enemy alien” of the day. Refusing to take arms against his French comrades, he fled to Switzerland where he worked as the foreign editor of *l’Humanité*.

After the war, Alsace-Lorraine was returned to France. Grumbach opted for French citizenship in 1918. Two years later, Grumbach represented the department of Haut-Rhin at the congress of Tours, which consecrated the schism between the socialist and the workers’ movement in France. To many, he was a most captivating public speaker. At one memorable point he declared that “the Party is strongly opposed to an adherence to the Third Communist International. We will not become slaves to Moscow!”¹¹² In the remaining debates, contemporary accounts tell us, the Leninists were desperate to keep Grumbach away from the microphone...

Grumbach was elected *député* of Mulhouse in 1928 and later the representative of

¹¹¹ Edouard Boeglin, ‘Salomon Grumbach’, *L’Alsace*, August 2nd 1992 (<http://judaisme.sdv.fr/perso/grumbach/grumbach.htm>)

¹¹² Ibid.

Castres (Tarn). After 1936 he also became one of the leaders of the Socialist Party. He was a friend many renowned socialists of the day: Jules Guesde, Marcel Sembat, Renaudel and a close friend to Léon Blum. As the war drew closer and though he was an advocate of the pacifism promoted by the doctrines of both SPD and SFIO, Grumbach challenged his pacifist colleagues by arguing that France needed to brace itself for confrontation with aggressive revisionist powers, specifically Germany. His insistent demands grew louder after the Rhineland was remilitarized. Meanwhile, in the Chamber, he urged for renewed dedication to the Franco-Soviet Pact of 1935 to help ensure peace and security for France. The Munich Agreement of 1938 for him was “capitulation of the democratic powers”. In many of his pronouncements, thus, Grumbach went against the grain of the French political establishment, which was desperate to preserve peace at all costs. He drew strong criticism from across the political and social spectrum, even being censored by his own party.¹¹³

All this time Grumbach was Vice-President of the National Assembly's Committee of Foreign Affairs. In that position Grumbach uninterruptedly advocated for a liberalization of the asylum regime. This is also where his high-ranking career in international affairs began. As mentioned above, he participated in most international conferences from 1918 onwards. Like Moutet, Grumbach was also a member of the SFIO's commission of immigration and an active member of the French Human Rights League (*Ligue Française pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* - LDH). From 1926 he was representative of the SFIO at the Matteoti Committee, which was in charge of helping antifascist refugees from Italy to accommodate to their new life in France. Quite naturally then he became a precious help for German socialists and others seeking refuge in France.

Salomon Grumbach and Marius Moutet found valuable allies in each other. Together, they repeatedly pressed the question of the refugees' internment into the debate at the National Assembly. Their advocacy also found periodic support from prominent conservatives as well,

¹¹³ Scott-Weaver, “Networks and Refugees.”

such as Émile Buré of *L'Ordre* (independent) and Wladimir D'Ormesson of *Le Figaro* (conservative).¹¹⁴ Moutet published a series of discussions of the question in the newspaper *La Lumière*. On November 17, 1939 for instance, he wrote:

Let us not be one war late. Let us shun bureaucratic apathy, xenophobic prejudices, misunderstandings of principled lesser effort which could make us lose the benefit of hospitality we granted to the outcast and put those to shame who sacrificed their well-being and families to the defense of fundamental rights!¹¹⁵

Pressures came to a head on December 8th of the same year. Moutet ended a particularly vindictive speech with a denunciation of the internment:

We must not allow public opinion abroad to perceive France as more cruel than Hitler himself. We cannot permit those who have escaped Hitler's concentration camps to remain interned in French camps. That would be too unjust and too cruel!¹¹⁶

Later still, during the parliamentary session of March 1, 1940, Moutet complained that a huge number of cases had not been settled yet. He and Grumbach were advocating for a more pragmatic use of refugee labor force. Though certain precautions had been necessary in the first days of the war, as they were ready to concede, it was also justified to insist that those who had received asylum should contribute to the national defense. As both deputies pointed out in numerous instances, to defend France was something most anti-fascist internees were eager to do. Yet the liberation from the camps and the refugees' incorporation into the Foreign Legion and in non-military auxiliary services (*prestataires*), they felt, was still proceeding too slowly.

Moutet and Grumbach recognized that mass internment went against national interest because it let a huge reservoir of badly needed manpower go to waste. It was also grist to the mills of enemy propaganda. Ultimately, Moutet suggested that the treatment of refugees in France made its allies wonder whether France was earnestly committed to fighting for democracy. He repeatedly compared France's treatment of the issue with the British case.

¹¹⁴ Caron, *Uneasy Asylum*, 249.

¹¹⁵ Quoted in: Peschanski, *La France des camps*, 81.

¹¹⁶ Caron, *Uneasy Asylum*. 249.

There, the question was by and large settled the Spring of 1940. Why not in France? asked Moutet.

As for the “Man of Conferences”, Grumbach pursued a diverse strategy in which he mobilized his connections national and international to influence French public opinion. To devise a more lenient alternative to the French practices of internment, Grumbach made contact with British parliamentarians and especially Philipp Noel Baker, whom he knew from his days in the “*Rassemblement Universel pour la Paix*”. Baker helped him to collect necessary documentation on the British methods.¹¹⁷ Grumbach also repeatedly warned the Chamber about the nefarious consequences of the French policy on opinion abroad.¹¹⁸ In France, Grumbach mobilized the media and wrote a number of articles to raise awareness in the general public.

One of these articles is frequently mentioned in his correspondence with the refugees. In *Match* magazine, an article reported Grumbach’s proposition that the refugees who had fled Hitler should not automatically be considered enemy aliens, but that they should be given a special status. It was only a short note and Grumbach’s proposition found as much room in the article as humorous remarks about his physical appearance. Yet his proposals were widely shared among those already detained in the camps.¹¹⁹ In mid-November, for instance, Mrs. Schickelé, the daughter of René Schickelé, whose husband Walter Barth was interned in Nevers, wrote to Grumbach’s wife:

Tell Sacha¹²⁰ that everywhere (that means in every camp) people have heard of his intervention, about which they read in the *Match* (it’s funny, but they have really all heard of it!) and they

¹¹⁷ Rachel Mazuy, “Le Rassemblement Universel pour la Paix (1931-1939) : une organisation de masse ?,” *Matériaux pour l’histoire de notre temps* 30, no. 1 (1993): 40–44, doi:10.3406/mat.1993.404091; AIU AP 17 / 026.

¹¹⁸ “Quelle figure fait la France, pays du droit de l’homme, devant les autres pays en répudiant sa parole. J’attire spécialement votre attention sur les effets fâcheux sur les milieu américains.” AIU AP 17/194

¹¹⁹ “Les trois idées de Grumbach”, *Le Match*, 26 Oct. 1939 “Enfin il demande que soit institué au plus tôt le statut de guerre des réfugiés. La commission l’a approuvé à l’unanimité. On ne peut maintenir dans les camps de concentration et traiter en ennemi ceux qui furent chassés de l’Allemagne par la crainte ou l’horreur du régime nazi. Injustice et mauvais calcul. L’Allemagne exploite la chose, en fait grand état en Amérique.” AIU AP 17/152.11, Josef Laug to Grumbach, 10/11/1939.

¹²⁰ Salomon Grumbach’s nickname

are all thankful. In Nevers, where I visited Walter, Sacha's intervention was the first thing mentioned in the discussion and it gives them all the courage not to feel completely abandoned. More than anything else, it is the feeling of *Rechtlosigkeit* which depresses them.¹²¹

Most importantly, Grumbach's activism began to reach further than Parisian inner sanctums of government. Even before October, he had occasionally corresponded with individual refugees. After the publication of the *Match* article, Grumbach intervened with increased urgency - as the situation in the camps was deteriorating with the coming of winter. Between October and May, he stood in direct correspondence with hundreds of detained refugees. His only official mandate, though he was still on the Council on Foreign Affairs, was that of a *député* for what was by then a minority party (SFIO). In other words, from a strictly formal point of view, Grumbach was in no measure to intervene or to make decisions about the liberation of detainees. Refugees nevertheless still believed that reaching out to him would be helpful and accelerate their release, and it was a correct assumption. He was the right man at the right place.

Grumbach was one of the few French politicians who spoke and wrote fluent German. As did his wife, the German socialist Valerie Grumbach, who actually handled the bulk of her husband's correspondence (an average of 15 to 20 inquiries and applications per day) despite a grave illness setting in at the beginning of 1940.¹²² She is seldom credited for her role and yet, judging from the letters, one discerns that her help was indispensable.

Also, Grumbach had a solid knowledge of the intricacies of the French political system. He helped the refugees gather the paperwork they needed, kept them updated about the latest changes in rules and regulations, and, once the *dossiers* were completed, he forwarded them to the relevant authorities with his recommendation. One example is the case of Arthur Feder.¹²³ Feder's file is complete, it allows us to follow the steps of a typical liberation procedure. Arthur

¹²¹ AIU AP 17/152.11 Schickelé to Valerie (Wally/Mumey) Grumbach concerning the liberation of husband Walter Barth 15/11/1939

¹²² Wally was Toni Sender's good friend and their time together in pre-World War One in Paris is described at length in: Toni Sender, *Autobiographie einer deutschen Rebellin* (S. Fischer Verlag, 2015).

¹²³ AIU AP 17 / 152.01 Dossier of Arthur Feder

Feder was the brother of Ernst Feder, in the Weimar period a well-known journalist at the *Berliner Tageblatt* and, after 1933, at the *Pariser Tageszeitung*.¹²⁴ Ernst's diary concerning this period is preserved at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York and enables us to follow the procedure from the other side as well.¹²⁵

It was the émigré millionaire and patron Hugo Simon who suggested that Ernst Feder contact Grumbach. Feder, desperate to save his sick brother from imprisonment in the notorious camp of Damigny promptly complied and wrote to Grumbach. As an intellectual who had lived in France for six years and spoke fluent French, Ernst Feder provided a clearly structured case for liberation. It echoes many of the arguments brought forth by the refugees in almost every letter addressed to Grumbach in the winter of 1939.¹²⁶

Although Ernst Feder did not address Grumbach as did some members of the SPD who greeted him with an emphatic “Werter Genosse!”, he did refer to an encounter in happier days. They had had the occasion to meet years ago in Berlin. He referred to their mutual acquaintance, Hugo Simon.¹²⁷ Feder then proceeded to explain that his brother, a businessman in import-export, had impeccable credentials. He mentioned several Frenchmen who could attest to his brother's loyalty to France and also claimed that the French government itself had previously recognized Arthur as a “political refugee”. Ernst Feder then went on to criticize the dire living conditions in camp, described the improvised barrack and the sleeping on wet hay, arguing that this had contributed to the aggravation of Arthur's bad health. Lastly, Feder indicated that his nephew now lived in England, where he had immediately been recognized as a “friendly foreigner” (*étranger ami*). The comparison put France in an unflattering light.

¹²⁴ Ernst Feder, *Heute Sprach Ich Mit. Tagebücher Eines Berliner Publizisten 1926-1932* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1982); Walter F. Peterson, *Berlin Liberal Press in Exile: History of the “Pariser-Tageblatt-Pariser Tageszeitung”, 1933-1940* (Niemeyer Max Verlag GmbH, 1987).

¹²⁵ Leo Baeck Institute New York: Feder Diary 1939/1941

¹²⁶ Leo Baeck Institute New York: Feder Diary 1939/1941

¹²⁷ About Hugo Simon, see his great grandson's touching biography: Rafael Cardoso, *Das Vermächtnis der Seidenraupen: Geschichte einer Familie*, trans. Luis Ruby, 1st ed. (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2016).

Grumbach set himself to work and he managed the task at hand with success. Within a few days, the Ministry of the Interior informed Grumbach that Arthur Feder would be released. Judging from the letters, most of the requests Grumbach put to the *Commission de criblage* were crowned with success. Grumbach was not only a successful mediator, but most of all, he gave less prominent refugees a chance to make their case for liberation as well. Indeed, he was not solely concerned with demands from the refugee intelligentsia or prominent party comrades. His correspondence attests to the relative social diversity of the German émigré population. Historiography tends to focus on émigré “stars” such as Lion Feuchtwanger, Thomas Mann, Arthur Koestler, Hannah Arendt... While their writings present a vivid picture of what life was like in exile, these personalities present only a small facette of the 30,000 refugees living in France in 1939. Of course, many German Jewish refugees hailed from intellectual professions, but there were thousands of others, and these have tended to escape the historian’s attention. Grumbach’s papers give us an idea of the diversity of the émigré population.

In one representative record from the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* (AP 17/175) with around 37 applications Grumbach dealt with requests from one painter, one seminary student, twelve tradesmen, one statistician, two farmers, three ex-lawyers, one chief accountant, one architect (also “expert in rubber” and inventor), one musician, one chemist, one worker, two journalists (one chief editor), one dermatologist, one landowner, one “theater director now arboriculturist”, one engineer and one ex-banker.

One the most moving testimonies was the plea Georg Munsterberger addressed to Grumbach on November 6th 1939 on behalf of this son in law Max Fraenkel. Fraenkel was a German Jew who had previously established himself as a farmer with his wife and two young children in St Laurent de Ceris. He had acquired “4 cows and a horse and lived there happily and in peaceful friendship with all our neighbours.” Now, Fraenkel was in the camp, Munsterberger complained in his broken French, his wife and children on their own and everything was lost. “I left my fortune (in Germany) and the little that remained I cannot access.

We cannot pay the rent... the first time in my life.... With all my love for France, I don't understand." The last line reads: "I read about your speech in the Match, and this gave me the courage to write to you."¹²⁸

Members of the intellectual classes might rely on a number of prominent connections. Feder for example wrote to many other officials aside from Grumbach, including Léon Blum himself. Blum also received a plea from Arthur Koestler. For Koestler, PEN-Club President Edgar Mowrer's support proved to be decisive. Another friend of Mowrer's was Leo Lania, who noted that in his camp they "had letters from all the best names in France; autograph hunters would have been in seventh heaven."¹²⁹ The odds for liberation were generally in favor of these émigré intellectuals. Even in the papers of Grumbach, one can discern such social differentiation. The procedure was the same for all, but the more educated the applicant, the better documented his application tended to be. That meant more certificates, eloquent letters and more Frenchmen testifying to the applicant's loyalty towards France. Class, it appears, continued to matter even if one was locked up in an internment camp.

For the less fortunate ones, correspondence with Grumbach represented a unique opportunity. Welfare organizations were pivotal in forwarding the demands to Grumbach. In his papers there are complaints addressed by the World ORT (*Organisation Reconstruction Travail*) concerning the critical situation of agricultural colonies established for German Jews in Southeastern France in 1934. Women, such as Madame Fraenkel, were left to their own devices while their husbands were interned. Many times, the farms were on the brink of ruin.¹³⁰

Grumbach's refugee relief advocacy put him in contact with Jewish organizations, such as the *Œuvre de Secours aux Enfants* (OSE), *Organisation Reconstruction Travail* (ORT), the World Jewish Congress, the *Société d'Émigration et Colonisation Juive* (EMCOL) etc. He was also in constant contact with émigré organizations, such as the *Fédération des Émigrés*

¹²⁸ AIU AP 17/152

¹²⁹ Lania and Mowrer, *The Darkest Hour*, 54.

¹³⁰ AIU AP 17/183.02

provenant d'Autriche or the *Fédération des Émigrés d'Allemagne*, *Oeuvre d'Assistance aux Réfugiés*, the *Comité des Réfugiés*, the Nansen International Office for Refugees and the League of Nations. It should be noted that most of these organization were not directly affiliated to any party. In these months Salomon Grumbach continuously mobilized the networks he had established during his long political life in order to help his protégés. His contacts reached in all directions: from émigré friends like the prominent German Jews Georg Bernhard and Hugo Simon, French intellectuals like Robert D'Harcourt and Louise Weiss to fellow French government officials and welfare organizations. As we have noted, most of the applications he treated were successful.

Why then did this question matter to Grumbach? It is tempting to read Grumbach's activism in favor of refugees (most of whom were, after all, Jewish) in the light of his own religious affiliation. A part of his papers are after all collected in the *Alliance Israélite* in Paris. And Meredith Scott-Weaver attempted to use Grumbach's example to draw conclusions on the activism of French Jewry in the 1930s.¹³¹ She wrote:

Grumbach's activities during the refugee crisis reveal new angles on the nature of Jewish activism. His work showed a pattern of behavior that contrasted with traditional portrayals of dissension or uncertainty among French Jews during the crisis—these too often highlight misguided adherence to conservative politics or overall ineptitude. Grumbach's actions highlight the utility of networking in refugee relief. He, like other French Jews, was attuned to the plight of persecuted foreigners, many of whom were Jewish.¹³²

In my view, however, overemphasizing Grumbach's Jewish motives is simplistic. While it is true that Grumbach never made a secret of his Jewish origins (neither did his detractors), little or nothing in his letters suggests that this is a feature of his identity he wanted to emphasize. His biography indicates that Grumbach's identity was less defined by religious belief or practice than by secularism and socialism and, most of all, an adamant attachment to the values of the French Republic. It is also true that many of the people he was assisting were Jewish refugees, but again, many were also not. Grumbach, in any case, did not discriminate

¹³¹ Scott-Weaver, "Networks and Refugees."

¹³² Ibid.

between them.

Rather than “Jewishness”, his socialization in “borderland” Alsace, a region that had been swinging back and forth between France and Germany for centuries, seems more relevant to understand his later activism. Most of all, there was his life-long, unshaken attachment to Social democracy. *This* is what he chose to mention only a few weeks before his death on July 13, 1952, when he wrote to his friend Robert Verdier: “next year I will be celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of my membership to the Socialist Party; this has been an uninterrupted presence, loyal and joyous despite the disappointment and the defeats, both collective and personal ones.”¹³³

I would argue that his *modus operandi* and his use of networks does not inform us about a very heterogeneous French Jewry. His mode of action and use of networks are rather very similar to those of the non-Jewish socialists Marius Moutet, Victor Basch and others. Ultimately, that is the perspective from which we should view Grumbach’s work.¹³⁴

Lastly, unlike the *Parti Communiste Français*, which had a centralized structure and upheld rigorous party discipline, the socialists tended to intervene in the political and social debate “through the backdoor”, that is by way of the intermission of highly specialized militant groups or organizations. Party members of the SFIO, thus, were often active within multi-partisan or non-partisan structures such as the aforementioned *Ligue des Droits de l’Homme*, charity organization or the masonic Lodges. These organizations had a significant impact, but were not directly affiliated to the SFIO, even if many of the participants were.

In the political landscape of September 1939, the socialists played an important role in providing assistance to German and Austrian internees. They were the only party left to fulfill this role. French Communists had lost most powers to intervene. For émigré Communist activists, the situation, obviously, was not much better. Most exiled Communist cadres, for

¹³³ Quoted in: Ibidem

¹³⁴ G. Badia, ‘Salomon Grumbach – ein anonymer Interpret französisch- deutscher Politik’, in *Rechts und links der Seine: Pariser Tageblatt und Pariser Tageszeitung, 1933– 1940*, ed. H. Roussel and L. Winckler (Tübingen, 2002).

instance German Communist Party (KPD) leaders Franz Dahlem and Paul Merker, had already been incarcerated in Southwestern France after the defeat of the Spanish Republic in early 1938. The situation worsened for the Communists altogether when they fell under the effects of the laws of 12 of November 1938. It allowed the administrative internment of every foreigner who might be suspicious of endangering “national safety”¹³⁵ and then, with the decree of September 26, 1939, which outlawed every organization with links to the Third International. Thus, if existent at all, the relationship between internees and the communist parties remain clandestine at best. In that context the activism of the Socialists was all the more important.¹³⁶

Formerly, there was insufficient archival material to reach a full understanding of socialists’ activism during the period under consideration.¹³⁷ Because their influence did not show, scholars have tended to assume that the SFIO was unable - or even unwilling to affect government’s policies. Many have concluded that the internment was broadly accepted policy across the political spectrum. By looking closer at Grumbach’s example, one begins to see that this view was incorrect and to get a more nuanced idea about the singular modes of operation of the socialist party.

B) The liberalization of the internment regime

By November of 1939, pressures on the French government to act on the problem of the camps increased markedly. With their diverse campaigns, socialist politicians such as Moutet and Grumbach played a significant role in affecting a change of policy. Urgent requests also came from Jewish relief organizations. They repeatedly pressured the administration into granting them access to the camps and facilitate emigration overseas. It was also, lastly, the

¹³⁵ Étranger suspect de porter atteinte à la Défense nationale.

¹³⁶ Denis Peschanski, *La France des camps : L’Internement, 1938-1946* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002) 82-83.

¹³⁷ Sophie Cœuré and Frédéric Monier, “De L’ombre à La Lumière. Les Archives Françaises de Retour de Moscou (1940-2002),” in *Archives « Secrètes », Secrets D’archives ? : Historiens et Archivistes Face Aux Archives Sensibles*, ed. Sébastien Laurent, Histoire (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2013), 133–48, <http://books.openedition.org/editions-cnrs/1510>.

army's incessant demands for more able-bodied men that forced the government's hand. In the end, the administration realized that urgent action was necessary to expedite the criblage process, even if a few Nazis went free.

1) The Commission des Camps de Rassemblement

First of all, action had to be taken to combat the harmful insinuations that French camps were worse than the German ones. In mid-November, the military authorities in charge of the camps agreed to the creation of a new refugee committee, the *Commission des Camps de Rassemblement* (CCR). It was financed partly by the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), partly by the *Groupeement de coordination*, a coalition of French refugee organizations created in 1938. Albert Lévy, director of the Jewish relief committee *Comité d'Assistance aux Réfugiés* (CAR), became the head of CCR and Robert de Rothschild served as its honorary chairman. Félix Chevrier from the Ministry of Public Health was appointed Secretary-General. Chevrier's assistants were M. Canioni and Joseph Millner. Noticeably, all of the members of the board were previously active in refugee relief organizations.¹³⁸ Unavoidably, they also came in periodical contact with Salomon Grumbach.¹³⁹

Between November 1939 and June 1940 Chevrier and his associates Canioni and Millner visited almost every internment camp in France. For each of these visits, they compiled a lengthy report, which was then dispatched to Paris.¹⁴⁰ The reports described general living

¹³⁸ CDJC, Fonds Chevrier, CCCLXXIII - 13: Letter of Minister of Public Health Marc Rucart to Général Ménard. List of members of the Committee.

¹³⁹ Joseph Millner (1887-1963) has an interesting biography. Millner was born in Chelm, then in the Russian Empire, now in Poland and settled in France in 1909. Millner settled in France, where he studied chemical engineering at the University of Toulouse. In the interwar years he worked for the *Œuvre de Secours aux Enfants* while also researching the history of Jews of France and writing as a journalist for the Polish Jewish press (*Der Moment*). He was naturalized with the help of Grumbach (Archives Nationales, Fonds Panthéon, Salomon Grumbach: F/7/15961). He toured the internment camps. During the Second World War he went to the Southern Zone and engaged in underground relief work for the OSE. After the liberation, he continued to work for the organization in Paris, as well as for the CDJC. (<http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/chelm/che319.html>)

¹⁴⁰ The reports are kept at the Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine, Fonds Chevrier, CCCLXXIII - 5 and also in Grumbach's correspondence in : AIU AP 17 / 192

conditions and summarized the needs expressed by interns and the camp administration. Significantly, Grumbach also received a copy of each of these reports. Additionally, in an effort to counteract the negative press campaign about France abroad, Chevrier also wrote to a number of charity organizations abroad, advertising the CCR's work.¹⁴¹

The reports are surprisingly heterogeneous, both in tone and in style. This seems to suggest that officers of CCR had to balance hugely divergent agendas. On the one hand, their access to the camps hinged on the military authorities' goodwill, and any critique in this direction put the work of the commission at risk. On the other hand, the officers' primary goal remained humanitarian relief. As they worked on the ground, Chevrier and the others unavoidably noticed the misery and absurdity of the internees' situation.

Several reports thus lauded the efforts and humanity of camp commandants, while almost none blamed them for the shortcomings of the camps.¹⁴² In one curious case, Grumbach received what seems to have been the draft for a description of Le Meslay. The document mentions some abuse by the camp commandant, a predecessor to Lieutenant Dubuc, who was acting "more harshly than seems justified". However, it seems that this remark did not make it to the final, official version.¹⁴³ Sometimes, the CRC officers describe the camps in inadequately lyrical terms. After Felix Chevrier visited Rieucros, the "female" equivalent to Le Vernet, where politically suspect women were interned, he wrote:

Situated in Lozère, such a picturesque and hilly region of France, Rieucros is right at the gates of Mende. Located on a hillside, the camp consists of two buildings and 16 barracks in a 42 hectare park. From above, we discover a charming a peaceful and splendid panorama. Behind a green meadow, a quick stream (...) The small rustic pathway runs through a chestnut forest and

¹⁴¹ CDJC, Fonds Chevrier, CCCLXXIII-28 : Between 21/02/40 and 27/02/1940 Chevrier sends a template letter describing the commission's work and requesting financial aid to the following organizations : British Anti-Nazi Council, Central Council for Jewish Refugees, Council for German Jewry, Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, Jewish Worker's Circle, National Christian Appeal for Refugees from Germany, National Free Church Council, Open Door International, South American Settlement for Refugees, St Joan's Social and Political Alliance, « The Jewish Chronicle »

¹⁴² Fonds Chevrier, CCCLXXIII - 5 and AIU AP 17 / 192

¹⁴³ AIU AP 17/192 and CDJC, Fonds Chevrier, CCCLXXIII – 5.

as the noise of our car climbing the slope becomes more audible, light patches on the meadow become lively and move. These patches, as we draw closer... are women who were sunbathing and now coming to greet us.¹⁴⁴

Chevrier's report possibly intended to paint a positive picture of an internment situation that was in reality far from pleasant or idyllic. He himself could hardly have been unaware of that. Around the same time he visited the camp, he also filed requests from Rieucros, in which women were complaining that they were missing basic clothing items such as dresses and shoes. In a letter concerning a request to provide the camp with Matzah for the high holidays, an woman from Rieucros complained that: "In this period of holiday, your help would make our lives, which are currently so difficult and so distressing, somewhat less tedious."¹⁴⁵

Another time, Millner visited to the camp in Sables D'Olonnes. What is remarkable is that he went there after receiving an anonymous letter prompting him to investigate the circumstances of the suicide of a man called Oscar Levy. Allegedly, during Levy's funeral, the camp commanders had failed to display adequate respect for the dead. In the report, Millner wrote that the account "was not truthful, but rather a product of the sickly phantasies of some internees, now released." Further, he noted, that "in comparison with other camps, that of Sables is like a "petit hotel particulier" (a little Bed and Breakfast) where the inhabitants are well-fed and wear joyous faces." Millner claimed that in a note he wrote before committing suicide, Levy said his wife was the reason for his suicide... "But certainly not life in the camp!"¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ "Dans cette region accidentée et réputée pittoresque qu'est la Lozère, aux portes même de Mende, Rieucros étale à flanc de couteau ses deux bâtiments et 16 baraquements dans un parc de 42 hectares, avec ses chemins rustiques, cette terrasse dont on découvre un panorama reposant et splendide. Au fond d'une verte prairie, un ruisseau rapide murmure à ses pieds et le soleil fait sentir ses cascadelles. Le petit sentier s'égare dans les tailles de châtaignier et des tâches claires, au bruit de nos voitures qui grimpe la pente, s'animent et se déplacent. Ces tâches... Ce sont les femmes qui se rôtissent déjà au soleil."

¹⁴⁵ CDJC CCCLXXIII-3 . "En ces jours de fête nous voudrions bien adoucir un peu notre vie si dure et si pénible actuellement."

¹⁴⁶ Vicki Caron, *Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis, 1933-1942* (Stanford University Press, 1999), 251.

Despite these caveats, the reports were generally thorough, often critical of the living conditions in the camp and dutifully reporting on what was lacking. Already by the end of November, it was clear that the work of the commission had a significant impact. In December, it was reported that it had allocated 600,000 francs (\$222,000) to the camps, money spent on blankets, shoes, clothing, medicine and even heating and furniture. In general, the CCR did not bear these costs.¹⁴⁷ It merely forwarded the demands it collected from the internees to the relief organizations and then it made sure that the donations reached their destination. In general, the military authorities viewed this initiative with benevolence. Général Ménard, the supervisor of the camps, was well-aware of the humanitarian deficits of the camps. He proved cooperative and even welcomed this opportunity to improve the lot of the refugees without adding a financial strain on the military's budget.

Beyond providing material help, the officers from the CCR also issued a series of recommendations. In Gurs, Millner and Canioni suggested that the camp authorities allow interned doctors to assist the camp physician. This counsel was welcomed by the administration. Cooperation between French and foreign interned physicians proved very successful.¹⁴⁸ Chevrier also forwarded numerous cases to the commission set up after November 29th to regulate cases of abusive and unjustified internments. In conclusion, despite undeniable ambivalences it can be said that CRC had a real humanitarian impact on life in the camps.

2) The reforms of the *criblage* procedure

The next item on the list was the reform of the *criblage* process in order to render it more fair and efficient. Already in September, Sarraut had set up regional *criblage* commissions that were planned to function on the British model. By all accounts these tribunals were highly inefficient. They worked at an inordinately slow pace, liberations seemed

¹⁴⁷ Except for medication - it even constituted a template list of the necessary medicine for every camp

¹⁴⁸ Grynberg, *Les camps de la honte*, 65.

completely arbitrary and the only resort for a refugee, so it seemed, was to try to find an influential intercessor. As already mentioned, these commissions dealt with five to ten cases a week.

In early November, the Central Interministerial Criblage Commission decided to free entire categories of refugees at once, with the notable exceptions of those interned in Le Vernet and Rieucros, including:

- Refugees over the age of 40 who either were married to French citizens or had French children;
- Former combatants in the Foreign Legion
- Internees who had applied for French citizenship before the war with favourable recommendations;
- Recipients of the Legion of Honor or the *Médaille Militaire*;
- Refugees whose sons currently served in the army;
- Internees not medically fit;
- Internees who had acquired some citizenship other than German prior to the mobilization;
- Saar refugees who had completed military service.¹⁴⁹

In December 1939, these lists were expanded to include all refugees in possession of visas to emigrate overseas. As several refugees correctly pointed out, the idea of releasing whole categories of refugees contradicted the administration's rationale for having interned them in the first place. The mere fact of having a French wife or child did not, of course, preclude one's being a Nazi agent.

In a governmental decree issued on January 13, 1940 the administration finally made the decision to make use of the internees in the war effort. Copying military service for Frenchmen, the text introduced compulsory service for foreigners. Thus, refugees remaining in the camps after mass-criblage were to choose between several options. Men between the ages of 17 and 48 judged physically fit were actively encouraged, sometimes even forced to join the Foreign Legion.¹⁵⁰ Refugees over 48 years of age, or those who refused to join the Legion,

¹⁴⁹ Caron, *Uneasy Asylum*.

¹⁵⁰ Heinz Pol, *Suicide of a Democracy* (Reynal & Hitchcock, 1940), Chapter 7: *Lies and Threats*, 241-243.

were to sign up for *prestation*, i.e. non-combattant labor service. If he had an opportunity to emigrate overseas while interned, the refugee was let go.

In theory, the French administration had killed two birds with one stone with its new piece of legislation. On the one hand, it had set clear criteria to differentiate between suspects and non-suspect and made a huge step towards the liquidation of the camps. At the end of the process, all internees were to have been either released, recruited into the Legion or drafted into *prestataire* service, in which case they were supposed to be transferred to other camps set up specifically for this purpose, the *Compagnie de Travail Étranger* (CTE). On the other hand, the administration believed to have found a way to compensate for the labor force shortage that resulted from the mobilization of French workers into the armed forces.

In practice, however, bureaucratic hindrances and inefficiencies, one of the underlying themes of this thesis, still prevailed. From 1938 on, the military lacked a concept for the utilization of German and Italian foreigner. When it finally it decided to use them, it was only for service in the notorious Foreign Legion. The capacities of the Foreign Legion to provide training were in fact limited to 1,500 men per month. Incongruously, great pressure was exercised on the refugees to sign up for the Legion. The result was that many of those who signed up were only integrated once the fighting was already over in June 1940. Lastly, the military staff categorically refused to use former internees against the *Wehrmacht*. Refugees who enrolled in the Foreign Legion were promptly sent to North Africa and the Levant. In the end, it is difficult to evaluate the number of German émigrés who actually fought in the *Légion Étrangère*. In any case, the fears of the military seem to have been inflated, since their number could not have been superior to 2,000 men. Practically all of them were transferred to North Africa or Syria after their basic training. Only in very exceptional cases were they set against the German Army.

Once the new criblage regulation went into effect, the pace at which internees were released accelerated. By February, only 6,428 were left in the camps, and of eighty only 29

camps remained in existence. For the first time since the beginning of the war, Jewish relief organizations saw their expenditures drop. In April, the military terminated the sifting process for *prestataire* service. However, this was not the success it appeared to be. Due to the general chaos of French administrative procedure, a positive verdict and an authorization to take part in the *prestation* did not necessarily mean that you were allowed to leave the camp. By the end of March 1940, of the 15,000 people who had been interned as enemy aliens, 7,000 had been released. By May 1st 1940, only a few days before the offensive of the *Wehrmacht*, only 5,300 Germans who had been brought to the camps in September 1939 were still interned.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ Caron, *Uneasy Asylum*, 251.

Chapter 4: The military debacle and the thorny question of the camps

On May 10th 1940, Germany launched its attack on the Low Countries and France. The latter's complete military collapse within only six weeks came as a surprise to everyone, led to the ending of the Third Republic and brought about dramatic changes in all aspects of life in France.¹⁵² The internment system was no exception. Here too, major changes occurred. After a period of chaos and disarray, the new political order began to take an interest in the camps and, gradually, a new logic to the internment was put in place.

The first part of this chapter examines the implications of the military confrontation for the camp system and its inmates. In the second part, the chapter analyses the political stakes associated with the camps as they became an object of contention between the Vichy regime and the German occupants (June 1940-September 1940).

A) The camp system in the Battle of France (May-June 1940)

The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
William Butler Yeats, *The Second Coming*, 1919

The literature on France's unexpected and sudden defeat is rich.¹⁵³ As I indicated above, in the first years or so following the *débâcle*, the question about the causes was a matter of intense debate and seemed to many an inexplicable mystery.¹⁵⁴ Why had the French military,

¹⁵² Hanna Diamond, *Fleeing Hitler: France 1940* (OUP Oxford, 2008).

¹⁵³ Not until fifty years after the events did Jean Louis Crémieux-Brilhac manage to write a comprehensive scholarly authoritative monograph on what he termed "modern France's greatest trauma." It was a touchy subject Jean Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, Jean-Louis. *Les Français de l'an 40 (Tome 1) - La guerre oui ou non ?* Editions Gallimard, 2013.

¹⁵⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *War Diaries: Notebooks from a Phoney War, November 1939-March 1940* (Verso, 1984); Marc Bloch, *L'Étrange défaite: témoignage écrit en 1940. Avant-propos de Georges Altman* (Ed. Albin Michel, 1957); Alistair Horne, *To Lose a Battle: France 1940* (Pan Macmillan, 2012); Koestler, *Scum of the Earth*; Pol, *Suicide of a Democracy*.

whose *poilus* ¹⁵⁵ had so valiantly resisted the hated invaders on the Marne a quarter of a century before and then fought heroically for four long years, lacked all fighting spirit in 1940? Why had France, the country of human rights and liberty and equality, given in to the Fascist occupiers so quickly and so abjectly? Former internees of the camps who had been able to flee to England or America had their own explanations, their own story to tell. And the story was not flattering to the Republic.

Simultaneously, vitriolic criticism was voiced by the propaganda machine of Hitler's new puppet state, which appropriated that question for its own purposes. Vichy France subsequently used the incredible victory of the Germans to justify taking action against the inner enemy, an alleged fifth column that had undermined France and was responsible for its moral and physical downfall. Vichy's task, as its leaders understood it, was to purge the national body of all traces of the redoubtable "Anti-France" (Jews, Socialists, foreigners, Communists and Freemasons).

As a matter of fact, historians have reached the conclusion that Germany's military victory was neither preordained nor even won by a large margin. A brief glance at the numbers seems sufficient to corroborate that argument. ¹⁵⁶ What constituted the difference, eventually, was not defeatism or other forms of treason by the Popular Front, contrary to Vichy's later claims, but the political and military leadership's mistakes, as well as a lack of motivation on the part of the common soldiers.

In May 1940, French morale had reached a low point. French troops, after ten long and boring months of mobilisation and inaction, generally desired nothing more than a rapid end to

¹⁵⁵ Nickname given to the French soldiers who fought in the trenches in World War One. "Poilu" means "hairy" in French.

¹⁵⁶ Together with the British, the French had some 3,000 tanks at their disposal while on the German side there were only 2,440. Around 5,000,000 French soldiers and 1,500,000 British were mobilized against some 3,500,000 Germans. Germany's aviation, however, was superior: the German Air Force, the *Luftwaffe* had 2,590 planes, including 340 Stukas (Dive bombers) - the French only half as many. In general, and despite the clichés, there had been real efforts even by the Popular Front to rearm France.

the war. They wanted to go home.¹⁵⁷ The low fighting spirit was worsened by the ineptness of a general staff that gave strategic primacy to the protection France's territorial integrity. This was the whole point of the famous Maginot Line, stretching from Switzerland up to the Ardennes, which, it was believed would keep at bay the enemy while holding human losses at a minimum. The bloodshed of 1914-1918 was to be avoided at all costs.

France's defensive strategy was flawed and outmoded. Its generals harked back to tactics and strategies from the victorious Great War (1914-1918). They were fighting a bygone fight. In one of the last pieces he wrote, *Strange Defeat*, Marc Bloch argued that the French elite had not fully realized that they were fighting a new war, and were confronted with a radically different type of warfare.¹⁵⁸ Sticking to the traditional ways, for example, tanks functioned as infantry support and were dispersed evenly in various units. Had they been concentrated in specific units and operated in bulks, as the German Panzers did, and as Colonel De Gaulle had proposed, it might have made all the difference. Fatally, the Maginot Line left a significant part of the Ardennes border, exceptionally difficult terrain it is true, unprotected. Mountains, ravines and rivers seemed to offer natural protection, to present unsurmountable barriers to any invader. It was here that the Germans (full of trepidation at first) struck. They managed to cross these mountainous areas and cut deeply into the unprotected heartland of France.

The German Army, humiliated by defeat in 1914 and victorious in Poland in 1939 employed new and aggressive tactics. The successes enthralled German public opinion and many spoke of an unexpected "miracle". But the rumoured, almost mythically successful *Blitzkrieg* was actually constituted to a large extent of improvisation and daringly risky offensives. The Germans did not even coin the term "*Blitzkrieg*" themselves, but picked it up from an article in *Time Magazine* of September 1939. The high command actually opposed

¹⁵⁷ As George Orwell noted : "The quickest way of ending a war is to lose it." George Orwell in: *Polemic*, May 1946, "Second Thoughts on James Burnham".

¹⁵⁸ Bloch, *L'Étrange défaite*, 130.

hazardous military strategies and was daunted by the French, whom it associated with the staunch defenders of 1914/18. The *Wehrmacht's* surprising advance owed much to the boldness of unconventional young generals like Heinz Guderian and Erwin Rommel who placed their bets on the 10% of mechanized German forces. The fact that it was after all a dangerous and incalculable operation was submerged by the jubilations of victory over the archenemy. German victory in France was not preordained¹⁵⁹. At the time, however, it did appear as such.

In step with the military crisis, the political order of Third Republic also crumbled. By the 14th of June, when German troops entered Paris, which had been declared an “open city,” the French government had left the capital to establish itself in Bordeaux. It was now headed by Paul Reynaud, vice president of the Democratic Republican Alliance of the center-right and, as it would happen, the penultimate Prime Minister of the Republic. It was Reynaud who decided to involve Marshall Philippe Pétain in the Government as Deputy Prime Minister. Pétain, by then in his mid 80s was the celebrated hero of the Battle of Verdun and Reynaud believed that his presence would boost the military’s morale. Little did he suspect that Pétain would soon become the face of capitulation, of collaboration with the enemy, of the *Révolution Nationale* and of Vichy France.

On June 18, in view of the rapidly advancing *Wehrmacht*, Paul Reynaud decided to transfer the government and Parliament to Algiers. The most outspoken opponents of an armistice, those who wanted to fight on, were the first to take up the offer and left France two days later aboard the French liner *Massilia*. The group included Édouard Daladier, Georges Mandel, Pierre Mendès-France. Marius Moutet and Salomon Grumbach were also on board.¹⁶⁰ Under Pierre Laval’s pressure, however, the government itself decided finally to remain in France. The passengers of the *Massilia* were subsequently kept from returning, while the

¹⁵⁹ One need hardly mention, that the only time a major *Blitzkrieg* was effectively planned, which was in June 1941, it failed miserably.

¹⁶⁰ April 1940 is when Grumbach’s correspondence with the refugees ceased.

French press now denigrated them as *fuyards* (runaways) and *déserteurs*. Some were detained in Morocco when, on July 10, Marshall Pétain was voted full-powers, the event which marked the birth of Vichy France. The men of the *Massilia* were later engaged in Résistance activities (Mendès-France), some spent years in hiding (Grumbach), others were arrested and sometimes shot (Mandel).

Beside the military and the political debacle, there were the countless human tragedies being played out during the months of France's spectacular defeat. In May and June 1940 millions of panic-stricken civilians fled the approaching *Wehrmacht*. They headed towards the West and especially to the South. It was a mass-exodus, a huge movement of fear and misery. After his release from the camp Vernet, Koestler and his then partner Daphne Hardy had left Paris and were staying in Limoges. From a café, Koestler recalled, they watched the stream of refugees go by. Daphne Hardy “was as unsentimental as an Anglo-Saxon female of twenty-two might be, and watched that never-ending procession of misery with a look of reproachful disgust, but the sight of the soaked mattresses finally broke her heart. ‘Now they are spoilt for ever,’ she remarked. ‘Think how fussy Frenchwomen are about their mattresses and pillows and plumeaux. They’ll never get over it. What a revolting war.’”¹⁶¹ Koestler put the words on what, for many who had fled from home, felt like the end of the world: “And what cars. Good Lord! As if every specimen of the mechanical fauna, everything that could creep and stink on four wheels, was hurrying away from the deluge.”¹⁶²

For most of these refugees, the flight southwards was a deeply traumatic experience, which had profound political consequences. Everything was falling apart, Hannah Diamond argues, the social order collapsed and Frenchmen experienced chaos, the absence of the state

¹⁶¹ Koestler, *Scum of the Earth*, 189.

¹⁶² Koestler, *Scum of the Earth*.

and of any certainty, in a way they had not done since the Revolution of 1789.¹⁶³ The result was not only total chaos with an enormous price to pay in terms of human misery and suffering. Many lost their lives as the vast caravan of predominantly women, children, and the elderly wound its way south, facing truly harsh conditions, air attacks and hunger and deprivation.¹⁶⁴ When, after the German offer of peace, the traumatized populace finally returned home, preoccupied by the desire for safety and bewildered by the unexpected turn of events, it was not surprising that they put their faith in the patriarchal, grand-fatherly Marshall Pétain who promised them order and stability. It has been said that there were forty million Pétainistes after the Armistice. Perhaps this was an exaggeration, but it is certain that the old marshall was able to establish his collaborative regime with much popular support.

Diamond might be said to be pushing her argument somewhat. But certainly did the seemingly incomprehensible collapse of France's political and social order left many Frenchmen desperate for an explanation - and a scapegoat. In these two fateful months, the myth of the omnipresent fifth column was not only re-activated, but also reached grotesque proportions. Traitors were blamed for nearly everything: for the collapse of Belgium and Holland, for the military defeat and for unleashing the panic-stricken exodus of hundreds of thousands of civilians southwards. As in September, the fifth column was thought to encompass especially communists and members of the International Brigades. It was, of course, once again a chimera. After the war, German documents and records indicated that in 1940 the attacking forces had not made use of agitators or fifth columnist whatsoever. In the end, the fear of spies - "Espionite" - and of parachutists - "Parachutite" - actually backlashed. Reports of

¹⁶³ See the accounts that Hannah Diamond collected for her website:
<http://www.fleeinghitler.org/>

¹⁶⁴ The manuscript of *Suite Française*, the last novel written by Irène Némirovsky (1903-1942) was recently published and provides a fascinating account of the débâcle. See in Particular the first part, "Tempête en juin" (Storm in June): Irène Némirovsky, *Suite française* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2013).

collective hysteria and of lynching only increased the pre-existing disorder in the military and administration and had thus weakened France even more.¹⁶⁵

From September 1939 on it had been one of the administrative internment's main purposes to combat, somehow, the phantom inner enemy. After the initial months, as we have seen, many internees had been released. But now, in May 1940, as the *Wehrmacht* was finally on the move, the authorities proceeded to new internments, carrying them out yet more arbitrarily and indiscriminately than before. Lacking a real fifth column, it was the refugees who, once more, were obliged to play the role of the easy scapegoat. On May 12th 1940 the French Ministry of the Interior ordered the internment of Germans, Austrians, *Saarländer* and any foreigners of undetermined nationality between the ages of 17 and 56. Arrests were carried out irrespective of former assessments of the *commission de criblage*. For the first time, the Prefectures ordered the arrest of German and Austrian women as well. Children were not excepted, since otherwise many would have been on their own. 464 women and children were in the first convoy transported to the camp of Gurs in the Pyrenees, which from then on became the main assembly center for women.¹⁶⁶

In consequence to the *Wehrmacht*'s advances, an order came to transfer internees from the camps in northern France to the South. Detained enemy aliens of the Ile-de-France region, for instance, were systematically transferred from Paris to camps in the South and South-West. The number of internees in the camp of Les Milles near Aix-en-Provence had almost quadrupled from 800 in mid-May to 3,000 by mid-June - living conditions becoming respectively difficult. Between June 7 and 12, the French administration accommodated, if that is the word, detainees from almost seven other camps: Lorient (Drôme), Villemard bei Blois

¹⁶⁵ The correspondent of the *New York Times*, Percy Philips, was confronted with a maddening crowd on the Place de l'Alma. People presumed he was one of the „sales parachutistes“ and Philips narrowly escaped being lynched. When English pilots parachuted themselves out of shot down planes and landed in the Northern French countryside, they were shot at. Peasants presumed they had to do with German spies. See for instance the incident recounted in: <http://www.livresdeguerre.net/forum/contribution.php?index=8335>

¹⁶⁶ Eggers, *Unerwünschte Ausländer*.

(Loir et Cher), Nevers (Nièvre), Marmagne (Côte d'Or), Montargis, Cepoy und Orléans (Loiret).

As German troops drew ever closer and as the chain of command was further falling apart, the transfers of detainees began to resemble more an improvised flight, rather than coolly calculated military operations. The situation of the internees was uncertain, fraught apprehension and fear, with questions. And yet it also required immediate decisions to be made. Some of the detainees were *Reichsfeinde*, enemies of Nazi Germany and had reason to fear being handed over to German authorities. Most of them had emigrated and had been happy to leave a country that no longer wanted them that was no longer “Heimat”. What to do? Accounts of flight and survival make gripping reading. Some used the general chaos to escape.¹⁶⁷ The camp of Chambaran between Lyon and Valence was evacuated mid June, as the Germans were approaching Dijon and the Loire. During the 120 km march that led them to the camp of Le Cheylard (Ardèche), half of the 250 internees were able to take to their heels.¹⁶⁸ On the other hand, numerous internees decided to stay in spite of possible dangers. Camp commanders had confiscated their papers upon arrival, and without these, many refugees believed that leaving the country was impossible. Others still chose to destroy their papers when it became clear that the Germans had gained the upper hand. That way, they believed, it would take longer to identify them. Alfred Kantorowicz chose that venue - and survived. Others like Carl Einstein, Rudolf Hilferding and Walter Benjamin despaired and committed suicide.

The decision to transfer the camps southwards and away from the approaching enemy was hardly a sign of sympathy for endangered émigrés. German prisoners of war, for instance, were also transferred. It was rather another symptom of the fear of spies and visceral lack of trust towards the refugees. The general staff merely desired to withdraw suspicious foreigners

¹⁶⁷ Cardoso, *Das Vermächtnis der Seidenraupen*.

¹⁶⁸ *Jubitz Tagebuch* Bd. I, S. 11.

from the front's hinterland. Since in the camps there were some *Reichsdeutsche*, German citizens living in France caught up by the war, this *modus operandi* also had its justification.

Here again, officers in charge of the camp, in daily contact with the internees, often showed more understanding for the situation of political and „racial“ refugees. As the old hierarchies and structures of command crumbled, decisions whether to release internees or not increasingly depended on these individual camp commanders. The First Lieutenant who led a convoy of two hundred interned from a camp in central France to Les Milles, for instance, announced that he had with him, if push came to shove, pre-stamped release documents that merely needed to be filled out and that he would distribute should the Germans reach the convoy too quickly.¹⁶⁹

In Bassens, in the vicinity to Bordeaux, the emigrants managed to convince, but only just, the camp commander, a textile industrial manager, that their lives were at stake. On June 18th, a delegation lead by the former editor in chief of the *Berliner Tageblatt* and friend of Grumbach's Georg Bernhard presented a request to free all those who felt immediately threatened by the advancing *Wehrmacht*. The lieutenant answered: "Gentlemen, as a Frenchman I am not afraid of the German Army, why should you be as Germans?" Twenty-four hours later, the commander announced that all of those who had families in France or who were persecuted Germany for political reasons were to be released on condition that they would continue to proceed southwards.¹⁷⁰ Such a confusion reigned, that by the evening practically everyone was able to obtain a release document, even real Nazis.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Lion Feuchtwanger and Marta Feuchtwanger, *Der Teufel in Frankreich. Tagebuch 1940. Briefe*, 1st ed. (Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch, 2000), 94.

¹⁷⁰ Henry Jacoby in an interview conducted by Gilbert Badia "Du Bagne de Hitler en passant par Montauban" in: Gilbert Badia, ed., *Exilés En France: Souvenirs D'antifascistes Allemands émigrés (1933-1945)*, Actes et Mémoires Du Peuple (Paris: F. Maspero, 1982), 154-155.

Jacoby, just like some of his fellow inmates (Paul Fröhlich and Heinrich Brandler, both early members of the KPD who were excluded from the party in the early thirties for "right wing deviationism") who were considered "politically dangerous" were first not allowed to leave, but then managed to escape anyways.

¹⁷¹ Eggers, *Unerwünschte Ausländer*, 68.

One of the most dramatic attempts to bring internees to safety was the tragic-comical episode of the “phantom train” (*Gespensterzug*, Alfred Kantorowicz) of Les Milles. On June 19, the Germans had taken Lyons and they were advancing down the Rhone Valley. As Alfred Kantorowicz recalled, the camp commander promised to bring 2,010 internees to safety.¹⁷² On the 22nd the general staff put a train at his disposal. It left Les Milles in the morning, made its way slowly via Marseilles, Arles and Sète, Toulouse towards Bayonne, a city on the Atlantic. It was terribly hot and awful sanitary conditions prevailed. Two days later the train had almost reached its destination in the Basque country. The plan was eventually to evacuate the internees to North Africa. Shortly before arriving in Bayonne, however, the train suddenly halted and after a while backtracked, proceeding in the opposite direction. The train driver had just received word that the arrival of the Germans was imminent. After making its way back eastwards, it halted close to Nîmes on June 27th. The worn out internees disembarked and staying now in an improvised tent camp in Saint Nicolas. Later the truth was unravelled. The German army had in fact still been far away from Bayonne on the 24th of June. The day before the train conductor had called the station of Bayonne from Toulouse, announcing his arrival next day along with 2,000 “Boches”. He wanted the authorities to organise a meal at their arrival. However, the rumour now spread in Bayonne that the Germans, *Wehrmacht* formations in other words, were in close proximity. The train conductor was in turn contacted the next day with the news that the occupation of Bayonne was imminent. The passengers from les Milles had in fact been “fleeing from their own shadow.”¹⁷³

Beyond its tragi-grotesque side, this episode illustrates the level of disorganization and chaos reigning in the French administration and military at this point in time. A stringent policy vis-à-vis the refugees in the camps no longer existed. The general staff of the 15th region (Marseilles) had obviously not been informed about the Armistice negotiations that were taking

¹⁷² Alfred Kantorowicz (1899-1979), a left-wing writer and essayist, is not to be mistaken for his homonym, the famous historian Ernst Kantorowicz.

¹⁷³ Feuchtwanger and Feuchtwanger, *Der Teufel in Frankreich. Tagebuch 1940. Briefe*.

place simultaneously at Réthondes when it put the train at disposal. In its attempt to save the internees from the Germans, the authorities effectively ordered the transport of the refugees (on the very day of the signing of the Armistice) from a “safe” region into an occupied one, a region in which the internees were almost certain to fall into German hands. For Bayonne was located in the zone which was to be occupied by the Germans - whereas Les Milles was to be in the Free Zone. Even at their arrival in Bayonne on June 22nd the military administration there was not yet aware of the armistice arrangement due to enter into force that same day at midnight concerning zones and demarcation lines. As we learn from Kantorowicz, Jacoby and Feuchtwanger, the officers accompanying the train learnt about these arrangements only from the newspaper the same moment as the internees, on June 25th.

B) The camp system as an object of contention between Vichy and the German occupation authorities (June 1940 – August 1940)

On the 22th of June the Armistice was signed. The signing took place in the very same location, a salon-car wagon in which the Germans been obliged to agree to the humiliating Armistice of 1918 in the wood of Compiègne, near Paris. One of the articles immediately gained notoriety and concerned the Germans who had been gathered in French internment camps. It was the infamous article 19, which read:

All German war and civil prisoners in French custody, including those under arrest and convicted who were seized and sentenced because of acts in favor of the German Reich, shall be surrendered immediately to German troops.

The French Government is obliged to surrender upon demand all Germans named by the German Government in France as well as in French possessions, colonies, protectorate territories, and mandates.

General Hutzinger, who led the French delegation, declared that the second paragraph was irreconcilable with French honour and asylum laws. General Wilhelm Keitel, head of the German delegation answered by pointing out that there was a corresponding clause in the Armistice of 1918. Furthermore the German Government considered that some of the émigrés

were war-mongers and responsible for the outbreak of the war. He said, however, that the Germans would restrict themselves to the principal culprits.¹⁷⁴

The Armistice also instituted a commission, the *Waffenstillstandkommission* (WAKO), with its seat in Wiesbaden, Germany. It was responsible for controlling whether the parties respected the clauses of the agreement. That institution also accommodated the French *Direction des Services de l'Armistice*, which took its orders directly from the War Ministry in Vichy. Within WAKO, there was a sub-commission responsible especially for article 19, the so-called “*Unterkommission für Kriegsgefangene und Zivilinternierte*”. Ernst Kundt, a Second Secretary at the German embassy who had already dealt with similar questions concerning civil internees during the First World War, was put on charge of that commission.

While authority concerning the camps lay in the sole hands of the WAKO, other political and military organisations were also interested in the question of the French camps, although for varying reasons: the *Auswärtige Amt* (AA), the *Abwehr* (military secret service); the German Red Cross, the Foreign organisation of the NSDAP (NSDAP/AO, *Auslandsorganisation*) and the RSHA (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*) *Abteil-IV* (Gestapo).

While the institutional apparatus thus was quickly set up, at least in theory, political awareness and interest in the camps in Southern France was at first negligible. In fact, up until September 1940 Kundt was the only government official in charge of explaining the German position on that question. His position within the administration, that of a middle ranking civil servant – shows just how little importance the German side attributed to the question at first. This had paradoxical effects.

Between June and July of 1940, the German administration of occupied France was still nascent. Its actual activity in the domain of the camps was fairly restricted up until the autumn. The possible exception was the Kundt Commission, which we will come to talk about in a

¹⁷⁴ Jacques Grandjonc and Theresia Grundtner, *Zone d'ombres, 1933-1944: exil et internement d'Allemands et d'Autrichiens dans le sud-est de la France* (Alinéa, 1990), 189 ff.

moment – and even this was not too significant. Often reports from that initial period give the impression so typical of national socialist administrative structures: rival and overlapping domains of competences, negligible information flow between government organisms and mistrust between the individual organisations. We have already mentioned the struggle between the Heinrich Himmler's Gestapo and the Military in the early days of the occupation. Clarity was sorely lacking and the sense of uncertainty strong. These are typical features of what some historians have argued was the “polycratic chaos” of the NS regime.¹⁷⁵

The situation of the camps in the summer of 1940 was in any event also fraught with uncertainty and contradictions. Normally, the release of interned nationals and prisoners of war after the end of a conflict would have been carried out within a reasonable time-span. That seemingly clear German position, which had been voiced with article 19, however, proved more complicated to implement. It gradually became obvious that no one in the German administration really wanted the generalized repatriation of those men and women the French authorities had interned as enemy aliens. The reason was simple: they were in general the very people the Germans themselves had deemed undesirable and had wanted to get rid of in the first place (émigrés and Jews). Therefore, German authorities gradually increased restrictions to the return to Germany and other occupied territories by former internees and on July 2nd, Kundt's office (Referat Kult E at the German Foreign Ministry, *Auswärtige Amt*) released a statement which read:

In principle, the German government is not interested in the return of émigrés and Jews who are still German citizens. Therefore, only those émigrés and Jews will be transferred to Germany who wish so themselves. The German government, however, will require the identification of those remaining in France.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ See for instance : Hans Mommsen: *Nationalsozialismus oder Hitlerismus?* in: Michael Bosch (ed.) *Persönlichkeit und Struktur in der Geschichte* (Düsseldorf : Pädagogischer Verlag Schwann, 1977) pp. 62–71.

¹⁷⁶ “Die deutsche Regierung habe an der Rückkehr von Emigranten und Juden, die noch im Besitz der deutschen Staatsangehörigkeit seien, grundsätzlich kein Interesse. Deshalb wären nur solche Emigranten und Juden nach Deutschland zu transportieren, die dies selbst wünschen. Die deutsche Regierung müsse aber verlangen, auch von den in Frankreich verbleibenden Juden und Emigranten die Personalien zu erhalten (Vorlage einer Liste)” quoted in: Eggers, *Unerwünschte Ausländer*, 338.

In turn, the new Vichy regime wanted to be rid of the suspicious foreigners, and more than willing to facilitate their departure from the camps. Repatriation would help to “cleanse” the land of the masses of foreign Socialists and Jews who had allegedly worked to France’s detriment in recent years. This was the reason Vichy authorities had braved international criticism and agreed to the article 19, which amounted to no less than a direct violation of asylum laws and traditions. Already in June Vichy authorities had started handing over hundreds of internees to the German Army, eager to relieve themselves of “a considerable burden for the economy and a danger from the point of view of political security...” By mid-August 1940, more than 7,000 people had been repatriated from the Southern zone – both by the German troops at the front who saw themselves as “liberators” and by the French authorities.¹⁷⁷ Later that year, Kundt noted that “the French government is grateful to us for every man we relieve them of.”

Rapidly, however, the rather haphazard nature of the repatriation developed into a problem for the inexperienced occupation authorities. Eager to divest himself of the responsibility, Kundt urged his superiors to respond to a situation, which was getting out of his control:

Referat Kult E draws the attention of the WAKO in Wiesbaden to the danger that further haphazard evacuations (*Abtransporte*) would constitute. In the opinion of Referat Kult E, it is inadequate to hasten the return of civil prisoners from France right now. An orderly and planned repatriation (*Heimschaffung*) with special attention paid to security screening should be implemented.¹⁷⁸

In that document, Kundt further noted that he was working on a solution, together with the NSDAP *Auslandsorganisation* and *Wehrmacht* authorities. By the beginning of July, two repatriation camps were set up in the border area. One was in Metz, the other in Strasbourg.

¹⁷⁷ Eggers, *Unerwünschte Ausländer*, 339.

¹⁷⁸ “Das Referat Kult E regt an, die Waffenstillstandskommission in Wiesbaden dringend auf die Gefahr eines weiteren planlosen Abtransports, hinzuweisen. Es kommt nach Auffassung des Referats Kult E zur Zeit nicht darauf an, die Rückführung der Zivilgefangenen aus Frankreich zu überstürzen, sondern unter Beachtung der für die Sicherheit des Reiches erforderlichen Maßnahmen eine geordnete und planmäßige Heimschaffung zu ermöglichen.”

There, the returnees were subjected to careful interrogation and screening. “Undesirable elements” would be handed over to the Gestapo and transferred to concentration camps. This, however, did not specifically target Jewish detainees but rather political opponents of the regime. As Christian Eggers notes, German authorities in France in fact only sent German Jews to Strasburg and Metz on very rare occasions, since at that time the party line concerning the “Jewish question” was still to encourage emigration.¹⁷⁹

By mid-July, thus, the Germans and the French found themselves in the curious situation where the German side tried to hinder the French from conforming to the conditions they had themselves dictated in the Armistice.

In order to clarify the situation and control growing tensions between Berlin and Vichy regarding the issue of the internment camps, the WAKO commissioned Kundt and a handful of delegates from the aforementioned German party-, government- and military organisations to tour the camps in the Free zone. This informational expedition was the highpoint of dealing with French internment camps. The *Kundt Kommission* toured 93 internment camps (including prisons) between July 27rd and September 3rd 1940.¹⁸⁰

What did the Germans hope to achieve? A French delegation was sent from Vichy to accompany Kundt and his men. Lieutenant Ducloux, general controller at the *Sûreté Nationale* (civil police force) was at its head. His report is to be found in the *Archives Nationales* in Paris.¹⁸¹ From it we learn that the Kundt commission, approximately eleven men in all, represented the diverging interests of five different groups.

The commission was constituted, first, of representatives of the German Foreign Ministry. That group included *Legationsrat* Kundt and two other men. Secondly, there were three men introduced as delegates of the Ministry of the Interior: *Obersturmführer (Referent)*

¹⁷⁹ Eggers, *Unerwünschte Ausländer*, 339.

¹⁸⁰ As a matter of fact, the Kundt commission was only the second to visit the Free Zone camps, a military commission having previously repatriated POWs.

¹⁸¹ Archives Nationales, Fonds de la Commission Kundt: AJ/41/507

Schneider, *Oberscharführer (Oberassistent)* Kistner, *Scharführer (Assistent)* Müller. As their titles and ranks suggested, Ducloux realized, these men were in fact no simple functionaries of the Ministry of the Interior, but Gestapo agents. Ducloux also noted that Schneider from the Gestapo seemed to be on an equal footing with Kundt, despite difference in age and in position.¹⁸² The diplomats and the Gestapo officers were the principal actors, and they were pursuing the two primary objectives of the commission.

Kundt and his colleagues from the *Auswärtige Amt* had been sent to Southern France to look for prisoners and *prestataires* of “German citizenship and race”, the so-called *Auslandsdeutsche*, and to help them in their repatriation to the Reich.¹⁸³ Only those who volunteered to return, Ducloux noted, were repatriated and the only condition for that return was that they complied with the racial laws.¹⁸⁴

At every stop on the way, the Kundt commission reached out to German nationals as well as, notes Ducloux, to *Reichsdeutsche* of Polish or Czech nationality and to White Russians. Antecedent political activity was of little importance, as long as the internees were not among the prominent opponents to the regime. Among those who eventually returned to Germany via Strasbourg or Metz, there were several non-Jewish members of the International Brigades as well as Austrian opponents to the *Anschluss*. In general, and not surprisingly, it appears that internees who desired to return to the Reich were few in number. Jewish candidates were automatically turned down since the commission did not consider them to be German citizens at all. They had to remain, thus, in the French camps, with a possibility to emigrate overseas. Up until January of 1941 Nazi policy concerning the Jews was still, as we have seen, emigration and the Kundt commission actually encouraged the French to facilitate this option,

¹⁸² Archives Nationales, Fonds de la Commission Kundt: AJ/41/507

¹⁸³ Ducloux specified race, proving he had already acquired a basic understanding of the Nazi ideology concerning the belonging or not to *Deutschtum*. AN AJ/41/507

¹⁸⁴ “Aucune pression excessive n’a été faite sur les internés et les prestataires de nationalité ou de race allemande ; chacun est resté libre de demander ou non son rapatriement en Allemagne.” (AN AJ/41/507)

i.e. the departure of the Jews to some faraway country. The French delegation to the Armistice Commission at Wiesbaden reminded the French Minister of the Interior that everything should be done “to accord the maximum of exit visas requesting departure to the United States,” since Germany too had no interest in keeping these Jews on French soil.¹⁸⁵ Ducloux himself noted with appreciation: “To sum it up and with the exception of some individuals destined to the ire of the Gestapo, the German commission seems liberal.”

Numerous Jewish internees, after two months of intense anguish, actually felt immensely relieved when they realized that the Germans not interested in them. Leopold Schwarzschild, the editor of the exile literary review *Das Neue Tage-Buch*, witnessed the visit of the Kundt commission. After he managed to emigrate to the United States, he reported to the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) in September 1940:

Shortly after the armistice, German officers visited the camps and separated the interned people into Jews and non-Jews. They did not bother about the Jews at all; they told them they were not Germans and therefore, they had nothing to do with them. The first officers who came made no investigation whether these Jews were enemies of the Nazis or not. The German non-Jews, however, were again separated into those who were in France before 1933 and those who came later. Those who were in France before 1933 were immediately liberated and could go back to Germany or occupied France wherever they had been in France. Those who came after 1933 remained in camp and the officers had to check each case and find out why they had come to France and under what circumstance they had left Germany.¹⁸⁶

In the women’s camp of Rieucros, Czech-born writer Lenka Reinerová later recalled an incident that occurred in the presence of the Kundt commission:

There were about 800 of us women in this camp, which was far away from everything, in the mountains of Central France. One day, the German occupants came in for the first control: they were red-faced, their leather belts were soaked in sweat and their tongues pasty from heavy French red wine which they were not used to drink. We were told to assemble on the square in front of the Kommandantur. “*Juives à gauche, toutes les autres à droite!*” Czech women, Italian, Spanish and Polish women: all of them look around with a questioning look. I translated in a low voice: “Jewish women left, the other ones on the right”. A cold hand grabbed my own cold hand. A woman’s voice, as clear as the song of a bird’s in the sunny

¹⁸⁵ Vicki Caron, *Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis, 1933-1942* (Stanford University Press, 1999), 331.

¹⁸⁶ Schwarzschild to Joseph C. Hyman, JDC September 23 1940, JDC n°618 quoted in Vicki Caron, *Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis, 1933-1942* (Stanford University Press, 1999), 332.

spring morning echoed: “To the left, girls, all to the left!” Like a drumroll, like the *Marseillaise*, the wooden clogs slammed the stone pavement.¹⁸⁷

Apparently, none of the women retained the interest of the Kundt commission. The incident is also left unreported in the testimony of the former internees and Nazi spy Ernst Jubitz (see below), who simply wrote down information about living conditions in the camp and notes appreciatively that all women looked healthy and sun-tanned. If it really happened, then that spontaneous gesture of solidarity with the Jewish inmates might incongruously have made the women appear uninteresting in the eyes of the commission.

The men from the Gestapo, on the other hand, were searching the camps for real enemies of the *Reichsfeinde* (enemies of the Reich), prominent and active exiles, opposition leaders, mostly politicians of the Social-Democratic (SPD) and Communist parties (KPD). They had a list of which they carried with them. In accordance with the second clause of article 19, individuals which the German secret police was interested in would have to be handed over by the French authorities to the Germans. Ducloux noticed that the Gestapo men seemed disappointed with the meager results of their manhunt. Indeed, most of the political refugees that the Gestapo-commissioners had searched for had either emigrated or gone into hiding. In the end the Kundt Commission, diplomats and Gestapo, repatriated only about 800 refugees altogether, although among these were at least some prominent political personalities such as Rudolf Breitscheid, Rudolf Hilferding and Rudolf Leonhard.¹⁸⁸

Furthermore, Ducloux mentions three representatives of the Army (most likely members of the *Abwehr*, the secret service of the military) and three representatives of the German Red Cross (checking on living conditions in the camps). Lastly, an ex-inmate called

¹⁸⁷ Lenka Reinerová, *Promenade au lac des cygnes: Suivi de Chez moi à Prague, et parfois aussi ailleurs, et de Café de rêve d'une Pragoise* (L'Esprit des péninsules, 2004).

¹⁸⁸ “Anti-Nazis Herded Back into Germany,” NYT, 21 August 1940, p. 3

Jubitz was also present. Jubitz played the role of an interpreter and expert in internment camps.¹⁸⁹

In his concluding remarks, Ducloux noted that:

Lastly, the Committee might have tried to establish the first bases of a German intelligence organization in France, such as the Nazi regime has done in almost all countries of the world. This organization, initially of inoffensive appearance will later become large network of intelligence agents informing the Government in Berlin about all events in France both political and military.¹⁹⁰

In reality, this does not appear to have been the role of the commission at all. Rather Ducloux's speculative statement demonstrates how vivid fifth column fears still were.

Jubitz also kept a journal. It was reprinted in full after it was discovered in the archives of the Foreign Office in Bonn by Christian Eggers.¹⁹¹ Aside from the insights gained about the state of the camps and living conditions there, the journal reveals the difficulties the commission had to cope with during its voyage and the unclarities left unmentioned or unnoticed in the French report. In general, relations between the Kundt commission and the French were cordial. Only the Gestapo men, and especially Müller seem to have been the behaved towards the French delegates "like conquerors". But mostly the collaboration was respectful. Both parties noted that in their reports. Still, the German commission had to face occasional reluctances and resistance from the side of the camp commanders. In the camp of Gurs, for instance, the commander granted vacation forms to the internees who felt threatened, so that they were absent when the commission came in. Their dossiers were removed from the

¹⁸⁹ Jubitz, the "expert in internment camps" lived in Brussels until 1940, where he represented a major German company. Officially, he was also commissioned as one of the many German spies abroad. During the war he was evacuated to Southern France as "enemy aliens" (and ironically in his case that was accurate) and within a few weeks he transited via half a dozen camps before ending up in Le Vernet, from which he was released on July 23rd. Apparently, this experience had not worn him out completely since, he was present in the early morning of July 27th, when the commission left from Wiesbaden heading to Southern France. (Eggers, *Unerwünschte Ausländer*, 346 ff.

¹⁹⁰ AN AJ/41/507 – concluding remarks

¹⁹¹ It is reproduced in full in Christian Eggers: "Unter den hohen Bäumen". Jubitz' Reise durch die Internierungslager im Süden Frankreichs Juli-August 1940 in: " *Cahiers d'études germaniques* (Université de Provence, Centre d'Aix, U.E.R. d'études germaniques, 1989), 31–91.

work file of the camp. Outraged Jubitz also noted that in St. Nicolas the internees were allowed to create their own lists which were then handed over to the commission.

Lastly, in St. Antoine, 112 men were present during the visit. Jubitz notes, in the dry, technical style so typical of low-ranking Nazi officials:

Camp occupants:	112 men
Among them:	26 Aryans
	86 Jews
Absent:	Red Spaniards: 15
	Diverse: 15

The prestataires were not presented to us. Six companies had left the camp at 1:30 PM.

The headcount of the camp, was supposed to be 548 several days ago.

Impression: They want to cover up for something.¹⁹²

Most importantly, Jubitz' diary confirms the impression that the Kundt commission did not bring about a substantial change in the camp system. It lays bare the uncertainty of the German administration about how to deal with the internees when they were not among the handful opposition leaders that were handed over.

In the end, the Kundt commission nominally released 800 or so internees, who had successfully applied for repatriation.¹⁹³ Most of them were sent to Germany by the end of September. Even though repatriation was repeatedly presented as an act on a voluntary, individual basis, choosing was not free of duress. The alternative of staying in French camps for an indefinite period of time was not tempting, while on the other hand there was the promise that a return to Germany via Strasbourg would suffice for their "Reintegration into the *Volksgemeinschaft*". It did not always work out that easily, however. There was a surprisingly important number of former Republican volunteers from the Spanish Civil War. These, however, were often transferred from Strasbourg to the German concentration camps where their fate was more than uncertain. Thus even the non-Gestapo activity of the Kundt commission may well have contributed to the misery and death of several people in that way.

¹⁹² Eggers and Jubitz, "Unter der Hohen Bäumen" *Cahiers d'études germaniques*. Or, as Jubitz put it in his diary: „Man will etwas verdecken“.

¹⁹³ Eggers, *Unerwünschte Ausländer*, 352.

This being said, after an investigation of the different reports of the members of the commission and in view of their “disappointingly” meagre results the claim in the analysis of Marrus and Paxton that the Kundt commission was a sinister precursor to later deportation procedures seems exaggerated to say the least.¹⁹⁴

Marrus’ and Paxton’s claims seems especially exaggerated in appreciation of the fact that far from repatriating most or all of the internees, the Germans actually expelled unwanted Jews from German-occupied territory and even from Germany itself into the unoccupied zone, where many ended up in exactly those camps which the Vichy authorities had wanted to clear from foreign Jews (in accordance with antisemitic policies laid down by the *Statut des Juifs* in October 1940). In July 1940, the Germans expelled into unoccupied France approximately 4,000 Jews who had remained in Alsace-Lorraine after the German invasion. Then, on October 22nd and 23rd of the same year, they sent yet another 6,538 Jews from Baden-Württemberg and 1,125 from the Palatinate and the Saarland over the border. Although the French police attempted to stop these trains from crossing the demarcation line, the Germans, by tricking Vichy police into believing that the refugees on board were from Alsace and Lorraine, convinced them to allow the trains to proceed to Lyons, from where they were distributed to various internment camps in the South.

Berlin and Vichy, this much was clear, were pursuing completely different agendas - or rather, identical policies: they wanted to rid themselves of “their” Jews. Their agendas only coincided when Nazi leaders decided on the Final Solution in 1942. And it is only at that time, after a long and tortuous road, that the camps were solidly and definitively integrated into the greater project of annihilation of Europe’s Jewry.

¹⁹⁴ “When Kundt’s victims were handed over to him, most of them at the end of September 1940, a new, sombre precedent had been created. The German services had gathered information on the inhabitants of the non-occupied zone and already deported some to Germany.” In: Robert O. Paxton and Michael R. Marrus, *Vichy et les juifs (Nouvelle édition)* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2015), 108–109.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I sought to demonstrate that an interpretation the camps of the Third Republic as the “Antechambers to Auschwitz” was not entirely accurate.¹⁹⁵ Throughout, the evidence that I found seemed to argue against this view, an opinion that was not only common amongst the *émigrés* who experienced the camps firsthand but also in the historiography of the camps. Elements of continuity with the Vichy regime are, of course, undeniable. The Vichy administration swiftly took over structures, campsites and the administrative practices from its predecessor. In addition, the decrees promulgated under the Republic in 1938 and which were discussed in chapter one provided the basis for much of Vichy’s restrictive subsequent internment policy. Yet, as I hope has appeared in the thesis, another logic than Vichy’s exclusion of “foreign elements” dominated the internment policies between September 1939 and June 1940. I have tried to nuance the “thesis of continuity” by showing, first, that at the outset, the setting up of internment camps in France was a measure of exception and panic. Neither was it particularly malicious in intent nor exceptional for a country entering into war. Contrary to what has been supposed until now, it did not necessarily receive enthusiastic support on the local level. The policy was not unanimously welcomed in the highest spheres of power either. Pressures to liberalize the internment following the “British model” would have been successful, eventually. They came from France’s allies abroad, but there was also internal dissent. The fact that agents with limited political power such like Salomon Grumbach were able to agitate successfully for liberation seems to signify that, for a time at least, internment was no stable, definitive possibility. Lastly, even after the crushing defeat of 1940, the camps remained a subject of contention between the authorities of Vichy and the German occupation powers. From 1939 to the end of 1940, the camps were an institution whose role was unclear and disputed.

¹⁹⁵ Christian Eggers: *Im Vorzimmer zu Auschwitz: Juden aus Deutschland und Mitteleuropa in Internierungslagern in Frankreich (1940-1942)*. PhD dissertation defended in 1992, Freie Universität, Berlin.

This being said, and even with the best of intentions, the historian cannot reverse the path taken by History. The role of the camps might have been called into question, but the fact remains that after all they eventually came into Vichy's hands. Within days after the proclamation of the *État Français* on the 11th of July, 1940 the Vichy regime passed a series of laws directed against specifically the foreign Jews still living in the country. On the 17th of July, 1940 working in the civil administration was conditioned to having a French father. With two other laws passed on August 16th and September 10th 1940 this regulation was expanded to the medical profession and the membership in the *Barreau* (legal profession). Agitation against foreign Jews reached a climax with the internment passed on October 4th 1940. Now, the internment in special camps (*camp spéciaux*) of citizens of "Jewish race" (*ressortissants étrangers de race juive*) was subject to the whims of the prefects of the department in which they resided. Besides, the French government devised a "Jewish statute" which aimed for a comprehensive "purge" of the management as well as the state-controlled occupations in the areas of Justice, medicine, education and culture. As Michael Mayer has demonstrated, said statute, passed October 1940 was the product of a French Jewish policy, which was elaborated with no direct German influence at work and only very little indirect.¹⁹⁶ On the 2nd of June, 1941 the clauses of the *Statut des Juifs* became even more restrictive, so that the Jewish population was now subjected to a comprehensive juridical discrimination. Raids occurred with increased frequency and on March 27th 1942, the first convoy left Paris for the East.

In the final instance, and even if this thesis has not totally fulfilled the task at hand, perhaps it has at least brought more nuances to the narrative about the internment camps in the "phoney war" period. Lastly, I would like to express the hope that the reader might have found enlightening certain similarities and parallels between the thesis' subject matter and the current debate about the situation of refugees from war and dictatorship enlightening.

¹⁹⁶ Michael Mayer, *Staaten als Täter: Ministerialbürokratie und "Judenpolitik" in NS-Deutschland und Vichy-Frankreich. Ein Vergleich* (München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2010).

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