

EHRI Online Course in Holocaust Studies  
Memorial de la Shoah Fondation (CDJC); CCXIX 39 0-6  
Persecution and Deportation in Western Europe  
– Jewish Responses to Persecution: The Case of France  
Translation: D03 Report on the condition in Gurs internment camp

**C4 no. 2**

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REPORT ON THE GURS CAMP

FEBRUARY 1941

A. – THE CAMP

a) camp population:

Total .....	12,000
From Baden and the Palatinate.....	7,500
Evacuated from Belgium on May 10, 1940, interned at the Saint-Cyprien camp and transferred to Gurs last October.....	3,150
Interned in France since the start of the war.....	1,350
Women      1 <sup>st</sup> Group.....	3,800
2 <sup>nd</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> Groups.....	500
Children ages 14 and under.....	350
People ages 60 and over.....	2,500
People who are sick and unfit to live at the camp: very high percentage.	
Sick.....	1,200
Deceased (between November 1 <sup>st</sup> and December 31 <sup>st</sup> ).....	600

b) camp life – challenges:

1. Lodging: there are 11 islets with roughly 1,000 people living in each of them. Each islet contains around twenty cabins. There are 50 people living in each cabin. The cabins are made of wood and most of them have no windows. Some of them have windows now, thanks to the efforts of certain individuals. The internees sleep on boards covered with loose straw. Some people have straw mattresses; others have acquired wooden beds that were built for a small fee by Spanish laborers who are staying at the camp. The islets are narrow, offer little room, are surrounded by barbed wire and are guarded by watchmen. These watchmen are no longer members of the Mobile Guard but are rather demobilized soldiers living in the forbidden zone. Civilians have taken over the camp administration, which now

reports to the Ministry of the Interior, specifically the Sûreté Nationale [*National Security department*].

The ground that the camp was built on is marshy and when the rain soaks it, it becomes a huge, muddy swamp. When there is even the smallest shower, it is impossible to get around the camp; the internees have to spend all day in their dark, wet cabins. No matter how you look at it, the sanitary conditions leave much to be desired and the complete lack of amenities is largely responsible for the spread of vermin (fleas and lice.)

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2. food:

300g bread (fresh weight);  
500g vegetables or  
30g dried vegetables;  
10g grease;  
16g sugar  
8g salt  
30g meat  
Fruit twice weekly.

So there is not enough food and it only contains half of the calories that the body requires. Thus, malnutrition is on the rise and is causing sickness, physical exhaustion and death.

On top of this sad state of affairs, there is also a medication shortage. The most essential surgical tools are completely lacking; it is impossible to treat serious illnesses and perform operations.

3. Clothing: those who have been interned for a long time are in an especially dismal situation with regards to clothing, especially the evacuees from Belgium, since most of them couldn't bring anything with them. As for those who came from Germany at the end of October, the German authorities left them very little time- an hour- to pack their bags. Laundry facilities are inexistent so there is no way to really wash laundry at the camp.

4. Hygiene: it is impossible to meet even the most basic needs.

c) internee morale:

We have seen many of them grow less and less resilient, both in terms of their physical health and their morale, because of a long series of challenges:

1. past challenges: emigration, broken homes, financial and professional ruin, scattered families.

2. current challenges: forced inactivity, hunger, uncertainty regarding the future. Discharges are rare. People who try to immigrate overseas face major and sometimes inexplicable challenges, even when they meet all of the legal conditions. This has sent many internees into a state of despair and discouragement.

However, a major effort has recently been made to raise internees' morale. One cabin in each islet has been made into a cultural center where performances, concerts and talks take place. Stages have been built for this purpose. In the afternoon, these cabins become reading and writing rooms. Perfect silence reigns there. On Saturday, they become synagogues and on Sunday, churches or temples. These cabins have truly become spiritual centers and have significantly raised the internees' morale.

There is also a small library now, which travels around between islets; an excellent orchestra performs concerts every evening in every islet and many internees attend.

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On Friday evenings and Saturday mornings, religious services are held in each islet. An Oneg Schabbat brings together the youth and the elderly on Friday evenings or Saturday afternoons. The chatting, singing and distribution of fruit bring a little joy and distraction to this elite group, to all these young people and to all these cloistered men.

As for the children, classes have been organized for them. The coursework includes French, English, Hebrew, arithmetic, history and geography. We have provided them with some of the educational materials that they need.

In the islets where there are children, we have set up small collections of children's books and to entertain them, we found them some balls and toys.

d) efforts made:

1) by the camp management: the management staff, who have been very sympathetic and kind, tried to make improvements at the camp by repairing the cabins and paths. However, the cabins are still dark, since they don't have windows. In certain islets, the straw has been changed. Ever since the end of December, fruit has been distributed twice a week. The manager, whom I spoke with at length, assured me that the funds they received were sufficient to properly feed the

internees. Unfortunately, difficulties in obtaining provisions have prevented them from using all of the funds that they received from the government. He showed me the orders that had been placed for the camp, which will increase by 104 tons over the previous months. He told me that soon a quarter of a liter of wine will be given to every internee every day. They would have done this already if it weren't for the transportation problems. I must say that all of the Gurs Camp staff have been very sympathetic toward the internees.

However, the food issue is far from being resolved. Without a doubt, internees who don't have any resources would inevitably reach a state of physical exhaustion if they didn't receive help from outside the camp.

Thanks to the dedication of Miss Helga HOLBECK, the Quakers sent provisions that have made possible the distribution of 1,300 meals per day to those who need them the most, namely internees whose health the doctors have deemed fragile. For now, these meals are distributed to internees over the age of 50.

The issue remains of how to improve the food for the sick, the convalescents and everyone under the age of 50. Efforts must be made to remedy the situation.

As for the Secours Suisse [*Swiss Emergency Assistance organization*], it gives all of the children and adolescents under the age of 20 an excellent snack every day in a cabin that Miss KASSER, who runs the project, has marvelously transformed into a refectory, whose cleanliness and order bring to mind beautiful Swiss chalets.

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Additionally, 56 children left the Gurs camp accompanied by Mrs. Andrée SALOMON to go live in OSE homes. Thanks to the efforts of Miss HOLBECK, roughly sixty children were admitted to an orphanage in the Haute-Garonne and to the AUCH Oratory. It is our duty to provide these Jewish children with Jewish social workers, women who will see to their education. Let us not forget that we have a great responsibility before history.

During my stay at Gurs, I saw many internees leave the camp to go work at either the Albi camp or the Agen camp. At Albi, I had the chance to see some former Gurs internees who are working there now. They were all happy to have left Gurs. There is no comparison between the lives they lead now, which are the lives of French soldiers, and the terrible lives they led at Gurs. Additionally, a certain number of internees left Gurs for the Camp des Milles, from whence they will be able to finalize their exit and immigration visas in Marseille.

Rumors of upcoming discharges, transfers to better camps and multiple-day leaves granted by the authorities to a fairly large number of internees have brought a wave of optimism to Gurs.

2. by the internees: each islet now has a small canteen. Unfortunately, it is difficult to obtain provisions because of the large number of food supplies that are subject to quotas and the fact that the buyers' range is limited to Oloron and Pau. The residents in Oloron are fairly angry at the internees, whom they accuse of buying every last thing off of the market. The police commissioner of Oloron has forbidden people there from selling anything to the Jews. One shopkeeper protested, asking how can you tell if a customer is Jewish, and the police commissioner told him, all you have to do is look at his facial features.

To remedy the situation, we have created a special commission at the camp tasked with drawing up and centralizing purchase requests. These requests will then be given to someone who will try to find the requested items. Mr. SAMUEL volunteered to do this important, useful job. Sales from these canteens are used to improve the everyday fare and purchase medications. To this same end, a tax has been imposed on the packages and money orders received by internees of certain means.

N.B. These different efforts are obviously not enough to compensate for the internees' sad situation. Luckily, the camp has benefitted from the charity and solidarity of committees, organizations and individuals who have been moved by the destitution and plight of the internees.

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B. the C.C.A.

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a) its structure:

The Central Assistance Committee was created in early January 1941 on the initiative of Rabbi KAPEL from Toulouse. It is led by Rabbi ANSPACHER.

This committee is made up of a secretariat and social representatives (one per islet). The camp doctors share their thoughts. The representatives, who are all supported by associates, are tasked with assessing the needs of their islets and notifying the committee of any unfortunate people who urgently need assistance.

b) its activities:

The social representatives meet twice a week at the secretariat. They take stock of social conditions and internees' urgent needs. Donations that have been received and held at the store are equitably distributed. Requests from the camp that will be communicated to the outside world are discussed. Special consideration is given to those in need, the sick, the elderly and the children.

ROUGH TABLE OF THE MAIN ITEMS DISTRIBUTED

FOOD SUPPLIES.-

PASTA, SEMOLINA, RICE.....	300kg
coffee, tea and substitutes.....	50kg
military biscuits.....	200kg
fruits and vegetables.....	1,000kg
jam.....	300kg
canned goods.....	100kg
ovomaltine and blédina.....	600 boxes
cheese.....	600 boxes
Bouillon in cubes and powder.....	1,500 units
sardines in oil.....	250 tins
chocolate.....	800 bars
salted sardines.....	200kg

CLOTHING.-

shirts.....	2,600
Covers.....	1,000
SUITS.....	350
sweaters.....	600
skirts.....	400
scarves and flannel belts.....	₺ 650
stockings, socks and house slippers.....	800
undergarments.....	450
cloth vests.....	4,200
shoes, galoshes and slippers.....	600
wooden clogs.....	200
sewing fabric.....	₺ 1,500 meters
dishware (dishes etc.).....	700
scissors.....	50
yarn.....	100kg
sewing thread.....	5kg
books.....	₺ 200

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The committee enjoys ongoing partnerships with various organizations that have been authorized by the Ministry of the Interior to work at the camp. These organizations seek to improve the internees' living conditions.

The committee partners with:

1. THE SECOURS SUISSE [*Swiss Emergency Assistance organization*].-

2. JEWISH GUIDES AND SCOUTS OF FRANCE, which is made up of Social Assistance Teams. This team has made itself available to the internees for any services that they might need, since they are sadly deprived of their freedom. The women make inquiries, study each case, visit the islets and cabins and write up leave and discharge requests.

Together with this team, Mr. WEILL, a Saverne bar member who is accredited to the camp authorities through the Nîmes Coordination Committee, provides counsel to the internees and takes all of the necessary steps on their behalf. He spends six days a week at the camp.

3. L'EQUIPE DES JEUNESSES PROTESTANTES [*Protestant Youth Team*];, which, even though it pays special attention to the Protestant internees at Gurs, does not forget its charitable obligations to internees of other denominations.

C.- ORGANIZATIONS AND COMMITTEES that have actively helped improve living conditions at the camp as well as the physical health and morale of the internees. -

1. THE JOINT DISTRIBUTION COMMITTEE has always been very interested and sympathetic regarding the internees' situation. They are largely responsible for saving many unfortunate people from decline and death, thanks to the grants that they made to organizations working in France.

2. le C.A.R. de Marseille [*the Marseille Resistance Action Committee*] has sent numerous shipments of provisions and goods. For example, they sent 2,600 shirts, which improved the internees' extremely precarious clothing situation.

3. ORGANIZATION TO SAVE THE CHILDREN (OSE) provided children's clothing for the nursery in addition to milk flour formula and over 2,000kg of jam for the children.

4. SOCIETY FOR TRADES AND AGRICULTURAL LABOR (ORT) put in a request with the management to obtain permission to hold training and vocational rehabilitation workshops at the camp. The camp director warmly welcomed this proposal and promised to submit it to the prefect of the Basses-Pyrénées with a favorable opinion. We are awaiting the decision of the prefecture or the ministry. The ORT has sent tools (shovels, pickaxes, axes, saws, hammers etc.) to be used by a group of internee laborers selected by the management.

The manager agreed to let this group make small repairs in the islets, large repairs being reserved for the Spanish laborers. The ORT also intends to use a certain number of the internees to do some gardening at the camp. There is land at Gurs that could be cultivated.

5. the COMMITTEES of VICHY - LIMOGES - PERIGUEUX - CASTRES - NICE & LYON are worth mentioning because of the efforts they have made on behalf of the internees and because of the large number of people in need whom they have agreed to help. Nearly 500 people who were not receiving any assistance from outside the camp have been adopted, thanks to these committees.

Overall, the living conditions at Gurs have significantly improved. However, if we want the rescue operation to truly be a success, efforts to help the internees must be increased.

The Central Assistance Committee of Gurs, in consideration of the camp's needs and its own responsibilities, has taken the liberty of submitting to both organizations and individuals the following list of items, which cover the internees' most pressing needs.

CLOTHING:

Women's skirts.....	1,500
Men's pants.....	2,000
Women's underpants.....	4,000
Men's underpants.....	1,000
Shoes and galoshes.....	3,000

Men's socks and women's stockings: as many as possible

Bath towels - sanitary napkins

FOOD SUPPLIES:

pasta - cornmeal, wheat meal, bean meal - rice - oil - cooking fat - grapes for Easter -

supplements - ovomaltine - blédina - cod liver oil -

Funds to improve the everyday fare served at the hospitals and infirmaries.

Help organizing the evacuation of internees who have serious illnesses, are insane or are in need of an operation that cannot be performed at the camp.



S. KAPEL

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*translated by Nina Fink*