

JEWISH TRACES

ORDINARY EXILE



[fr](#) - [en](#) - [de](#)

- [History](#)
- [Individuals](#)
- [Documents](#)
- [Home](#)
- [Places](#)

Camp of Gurs

Following the capture of Barcelona by General Franco and his army on January 16th 1939, France faced a massive influx of Spanish republican army combatants, civilians and International Brigade fighters. It was therefore with much urgency that a dozen of camps were opened in the south of France. The camp at Gurs was erected in the space of 24 days in the summer of 1929 in the Atlantic Pyrenees.

The camp was officially opened on April 2nd. Initially it housed Republican Army combatants and International Brigade combatants.

The location was carefully selected, far from urban zones, yet only a dozen kilometres from Oloron station and close by to a motorway. It was hence easily accessible both for trains transporting Spanish republicans and for the provision of supplies. Furthermore Gurs was under the administration of the mayor of Oloron, Georges Mendiondou, who was the only Popular Front deputy in the Basses Pyrénées, as well as the only elected figure to back the camp's development.

The construction

From the months of March to April 1939, the regional public's works administration constructed a town out of wood capable of housing 18,500 people. The barracks were located along the camp's central street, which was two kilometres long and its only tarred area. The 428 barracks making up the camp took up 79 hectares, which were divided into 13 sectors. Each sector was surrounded by barbed wire. Gurs was constructed in the same mould as the region's other concentration camps, with the barracks constructed from wood and very poorly insulated. Designed as temporary housing, they provided little protection from the cold and rain. Each barrack measured 24 by 6 metres and was designed for approximately 60 inmates. Sanitary installations were communal for each sector, as were its kitchens.

The refugees:

'The captured army'

By August 1939, 24,500 Spanish fighters had been interned in Gurs, and if until that point they had been considered as refugees to 'house', the local press was extremely suspicious of them, speaking of 'disarming the red army' to protect from invasion.

In August, some inmates were repatriated while others were conscripted into the 'Bataillons de Marche' to fight alongside French troops, and a quarter of them were integrated into the national economy, providing low cost labour.

'Undesirables'



In the last week of May 1940, the population of Gurs grew from 1,500 to 12,000 people. German and Austrian women displaced from Belgium after the

May 10th 1940 invasion (mostly Jewish) and women arrested in France from May 15th arrived in Gurs, as well as French communists considered as pro-Nazi after the signing of the German-Soviet non-aggression pact, and Jewish Germans. In Germany the latter were persecuted as Jews, in France on the grounds of being German. All these people were classed as undesirables by the French administration and suspected as working as spies for the German Reich.

Source: USHMM, Courtesy of Hanna Mayer-Moses

On June 22nd 1940 the Armistice was signed, the Vichy government took power and the administration of Gurs was transferred from military to civilian control. Most of its interns were then freed, with the new authorities completely overwhelmed by the camp's extreme state of disrepair. The German nationals no longer amounted to an enemy population as a result of the armistice, and dispersed throughout the valley. The camp rapidly emptied and was in such a state of disrepair that everyone believed that it would be permanently closed. The Vichy government decided otherwise. Several waves of internments took place at Gurs. The first occurred on October 22nd 1940 with 6,538 Jews from Baden, Saarland and the Palatinate, who having been expelled from Germany and were held in the camp. The governor (Gauleiter) of Baden, also having been nominated governor of Alsace, was able to make enquiries and to ascertain that Gurs was almost empty.

Predominantly, it was elderly people and children who were unable to take part in the 1938 exodus and who found themselves rounded up in October 1940. This deportation took place as part of the 'Madagascar' plan, which looked to convert the area into a massive Jewish ghetto. This plan never materialised. On October 31, 7,010 men and women who were already interned in other camps in the south of France were transferred there (from St Cyprien, Rivesaltes, Récébédou, Noé, les Milles.)

Identity card

- **Department and territory: Basses Pyrénées (Pyrénées Atlantique (64)), spread over the communes of Gurs, Dognen and Préchacq-Josbaig.**
- **Period of activity: Cconstruction began 15th March 1939, opened on 5th April 1939, closed on 31 December 1945.**
- **Size: 80 hectares, 428 barracks.**
- **Capacity: 15 to 18,000 people.**
- **Category: "semi-repressive" camp, housing centre, then national sorting camp and transit camp.**
- **Populations: Members of the International Brigades, Spanish republicans, German Jews and former Austrians, gypsies.**



Identity photo of Ruth Zarnicer, Gurs camp.

Search

ok

- [Rivesaltes](#)
- [St Cyprien](#)



source: USHMM, Courtesy
of Ruth Zarnicer

source: AD64

As a result of the laws of October 3rd and 4th, Gurs came to specialize in the internment of foreign Jews. The Vichy regime hardened its anti-Semitic policy. For those German women who, through not knowing where to go or in believing themselves to be relatively safe in the camp had not left by July 1940, the trap closed irremediably. The dilapidation of the damp barracks, the cold and despair resulted in almost 800 deaths in Gurs in the winter of 1940. At the end of the summer of 1942, almost as many Jewish victims of the roundups in the free zone arrived as those transferred from St Cyprien. On November 23rd 1942, the population of the Rivesaltes camp was entirely transferred to Gurs. Ultimately it was to be all those classified by the French administration as “foreigners overrepresented in the national economy” who were interned at Gurs from 1940 to 1943.

In August 1942, the radicalisation of Vichy policy was expressed by the departure of the first convoys to Nazi extermination camps. On August 6th, 850 people were deported via Drancy to the death camps. Two days later, 800 other prisoners left for an “unknown destination”, and in total 1,457 people were deported from Gurs under the same conditions from between August 24th and March 3rd 1943. Over the same period, the camp registered 1,038 deaths and 910 escapes. In addition to this 12,000 Gurs inmates were transferred to other camps in the south of France, the majority of whom were also deported to Auschwitz.

At the end of summer 1943 the camp still housed a hundred inmates, even if its dissolution seemed imminent. It took the **“helping hand of the resistance”** of September 25th 1943, when two resistance groups neutralized the camp guards and seized all the artillery stored in the camp’s gunsmith’s, for the minister of the interior to recognize the impossibility of continuing to protect the

camp and to decide on its disbandment on November 1st 1943.

Although no inmates lived at Gurs, the camp did not close, with 4 sectors and the administrative quarters remaining open in case of it reopening.

On April 9th 1944, a group of gypsies were interned in the camp, coming from a recently closed camp for nomads in Saliers. Around 78 gypsies, judged as undesirables by an administration in little hurry to close the camps, found themselves in Gurs. On June 5th they were joined by a group of 151 women coming from Brens. On seeing the appalling state of the barracks, the group began to set fire to it; overwhelmed, the head of the camp decided to intern them at the central hospital.

The gypsies and women from Brens escaped on June 25th as the German army attacked resistance fighters at Saint Blaise hospital.

From the liberation until December 31st 1945, the camp was in a state of the utmost confusion, with the Resistance having taken control but the camp director still in charge. At the end of August 1945 German prisoners of war were interned there along with Spanish guerrilla fighters who had taken refuge in France after attempting to seize Aragon from Franco. In addition to these fighters were 1,585 "minor collaborators", mostly petty dealers who had profited from the black market. Gurs closed permanently on December 31st 1945.

[Haut de page](#) - [Search](#) - [Map](#)

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