

Bread and Barracks: A History of Everyday Life at Gurs, 1940-1942

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis studies the prisoner society at Gurs, an internment camp in southwestern France, between 1940 and 1942. It focuses on the everyday life of a German-Jewish group of internees, most of whom arrived following the German deportation of Jews from the Rhineland in late October 1940. During this two-year interval, German-Jewish prisoners comprised the critical mass of the prisoner society. This thesis contends that the Gurs prisoner society was not an offshoot of the Vichy state and presented myriad signs of internees' impactful, though constrained, agency. It bore traces of internees' particular trajectories and formed part of the history of western European Jewry. Its gendered division of labor reflected both middle-class European norms of behavior and the spatial separation of men and women in different subsections in the camp. Internees also participated in the management of food resources and bore responsibility for their distribution and maldistribution within and among different sub-groups in the camp. The prisoner society also produced its own heterotopias in the camp cemetery and hospitals. These heterotopias were spaces of both crisis and comfort where prisoners confronted challenges like illness and death but also experienced positive emotions due to reunion with family members and the forging of new bonds. All in all, consideration of the double character of the prisoner society at Gurs permits the reinsertion of German-Jewish victims into French historical narratives about the Holocaust. It also enriches conversations about agency and atrocity during the Holocaust by broadening the social and demographic profiles of those who

qualify as historical actors and destabilizing binary modes of thought prevalent in the field of Holocaust studies.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my Mom and Dad, who generously helped support me while I completed this project. I also dedicate it to the memory of my grandfather, Ralph Franz Hirschmann, whose past as a refugee inspired me to write this thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis focuses on the German-speaking Jewish prisoners of Gurs, the largest of Vichy France's internment camps, located in one of southwestern France's Basque regions, Béarn, at the foot of the Pyrenees. Though Gurs first opened in spring 1939, it did not become an internment center for German-speaking Jewish prisoners until fall 1940, a high point in a progression of legal measures mandating the internment of German-speakers that began during the Battle of France in May 1940. A few weeks after the German invasion of France, the military government of Paris rounded up 9,200 German-speaking women and confined them to the Vélodrome d'Hiver, a cycling stadium. About a week later, they were transported southward to Oloron, a town in southwestern France and waystation to Gurs. Their numbers began to grow in late June, when France signed an Armistice with Germany and was divided into a German-occupied zone in the North that included France's southwestern (Atlantic) coast, a small Italian zone along its southeastern coast, and an unoccupied zone in the South (called the Free Zone). Vichy France was born in early July 1940, when French deputies and senators met in the spa town of Vichy on the central highlands and voluntarily revised the French constitution. Marshal Philippe Pétain assumed the role of both Head of the French State (Chef de l'Etat Français) and Prime Minister (président du Conseil).¹ Vichy would operate as an autonomous state influenced by its German occupiers. At the end of 1940, it had interned around 50,000 to 55,000 people in camps in the Free Zone. Around 70% of them were Jewish.²

Gurs could hold as many as 18,000 internees at once. At the time of its founding in spring 1939, its purpose had been the containment of Spanish refugees who had fled north following the

¹ Chris Millington, *France in the Second World War: Collaboration, Resistance, Holocaust, Empire* (London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 25.

² Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 41.

Republican defeat in late January 1939. Between 1939 and fall 1940, many of these Spanish refugees were incorporated into newly formed work battalions called the Foreign Labour Groups or *Compagnies de Travailleurs Étrangers* (CTEs) and deployed as workers on various infrastructural and defense-related projects within France. Others emigrated to the Americas or returned to Spain. Some were transferred to other camps in the Free Zone, such as Noé, Rivesaltes, Les Milles, Le Vernet, or Récébédou. By September 1940, then, fewer than 1,000 Spanish refugees remained at Gurs, leaving most of its barracks available to hold Jewish prisoners of German, Belgian, or other origins.

Though Vichy France ramped up its legal attack on the Jews leading up the implementation of the *Statut des juifs* (Jewish Statute) in October 1940, this thesis is centered on a German-Jewish group of internees whose journey to Gurs began in southwestern Germany that same month. On October 22, 1940, Robert Wagner, Gauleiter of Baden district, and Josef Bürckel, Gauleiter of the Westmark, deported more than 6,500 local Jews, two-thirds of whom were women, from the Rhineland, jettisoning them across the Franco-German border, where they would be transported by train to southern France. While the Wagner-Bürckel Aktion, as historians call it, had been in preparation since late September 1940, these deportees were given less than two hours warning about their deportation and limited to travelling with no more than 100 Reichsmarks (RM) and luggage weighing no more than 50 kg per person (or 30 kg for children).³ Moreover, they were ordered to leave the keys to their homes in the doors before they departed. Unsurprisingly, then, many of them were already in shock when they reached southern France.

³ Gerhard J. Teschner, *Die Deportation der Badischen und Saarpfälzischen Juden am 22. Oktober 1940: Vorgeschichte und Durchführung der Deportation und das weitere Schicksal der Deportierten bis zum Kriegsende im Kontext der Deutschen und französischen Judenpolitik*, vol. 930, *Geschichte und ihre Hilfswissenschaften* 3 (Frankfurt am Main und Berlin: Peter Lang: Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2002), 24.

One of the arguments of this thesis is that the history of the Gurs prisoner society is part of the broader history of western European Jewry. Prisoners drew on their experiences during the inter-war and National Socialist eras to make sense of their surroundings and shape their living conditions in the camp. As Marion Kaplan and, more recently, Guy Miron, have shown, German Jews living under National Socialism relied on an array of psychological and practical tactics to cope with persecution and the reduction of their living space.⁴ Similarly, as they got their bearings in a new space in October and November 1940, German-Jewish prisoners adjusted to a new space and their separation between men's and women's sub-camps at Gurs.

At the same time, internment at Gurs was a transnational event. Also in October 1940, French authorities transferred nearly four thousand Jewish men to Gurs from the nearby camp Saint-Cyprien (Pyrénées-Orientales). Among them was Rabbi Leo Ansbacher and his brother, Max Ansbacher, who would both work with French Jewish members of the Camp Commission in Toulouse, a collective of French Jewish organizations that had not yet been integrated into the Vichy bureaucratic apparatus, to improve the lives of prisoners between late 1940 and 1941. In addition, around three thousand other prisoners remained in the camp in October 1940, a mix of French political prisoners, “undesirable” foreigners (such as natives of German-occupied territories like Poland and Danzig), and around two hundred Spanish Civil War refugees.⁵

This thesis argues that the social space that emerged in the camp during the winter of 1940 to 1941 was not a direct creation of the Spanish Civil War refugees, the Vichy state, camp administration, or international aid organizations. Rather, German-speaking Jewish internees

⁴ Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Guy Miron, *Space and Time under Persecution: The German-Jewish Experience in the Third Reich*, trans. Haim Watzman (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2023).

⁵ Claude Laharie, *Le Camp de Gurs, 1939-1945: Un Aspect Méconnu de l'histoire de Vichy*, J&D Editions (Biarritz, 1993), 167-68.

acted to produce it, and they engendered and negotiated the boundaries of the prisoner society from below in collaboration with these groups. Prisoners worked with the camp administration and aid organizations to reinforce preexistent economic practices within the camp as well as to produce new ones that encompassed many varieties of informal work. They assumed the roles assigned to them by the non-Jewish and Jewish administrations and crew, but they also independently self-managed tasks critical to the operation of the camp. Healthy and able-bodied prisoners marshalled, organized, and distributed limited resources and occupied themselves with subsistence and administration of their living space. They faced strict limits on their ability to alter their material conditions in the camp, but they did so with decorum and despondency, or, as Marion Kaplan has put it, with “dignity and despair”.⁶

This thesis also describes the challenges that former members of the Central European middle classes faced as they adjusted to life in the camp. While Gurs was not an instrument of a totalitarian state, the psychological and material effects of imprisonment were far from benign. Many prisoner memoirists and diarists documented the unsuitability of the barracks in poor weather conditions, inadequate food and medical supplies, presence of lice and rats, and outbreaks of disease. Internees complained constantly of cold during the late fall, winter, and early spring months. According to a report issued in fall 1941 by the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Comité de Nîmes, a collection of aid organizations, internees in French camps only consumed between 950 and 1,188 calories daily.⁷ During November and December 1940 at Gurs, waves of dysentery and typhoid, combined with poor nutrition, killed 470 people,

⁶ Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁷ Laurie Drake, “Feeding France’s Outcasts: Vichy’s Internment Camps, 1940-1944” (Ph.D. Diss., History, University of Toronto, 2020), 207, ProQuest (28090295).

an average of eight per day.⁸ Life in the camp was particularly difficult during the winter of 1940 to 1941, which is why this thesis also traces an arc in time from late October 1940, when the Jewry of Baden and the Saar Palatinate arrived at the camp, to early spring 1941, when Jewish self-help committees consolidated. During this period, prisoners developed and adapted myriad forms of “making do” but also organized and pressured administrators and acquaintances or contacts outside the camp to improve their living conditions, bringing some desired changes to fruition.⁹

This “making do” was possible because Gurs differed in important ways from camps in central and eastern Europe during the Second World War. Although it held Jewish prisoners, it was neither a forced labor camp nor a death camp. It presented a porousness often absent from camps in eastern Europe. Gurs prisoners could request permission to leave the camp to do errands, visit family or friends, or purchase food in nearby towns. Though prisoners were legally required to return to the camp within a specified amount of time, usually no more than twenty-four hours to a few days, and the number of departures was strictly controlled, this freedom of movement opened the door to internees at Gurs in both a material and social sense. Another significant difference between the camps of Vichy France and those of German-occupied territories was the presence of humanitarian aid organizations in the French camps. When the Spanish Republican government definitively collapsed in January 1939, members of the British Society of Friends (Quakers) accompanied Republican refugees fleeing northern Spain during the “Retirada” (“Retreat”) of February 1939. The Quakers assisted these refugees in obtaining permission from the French government to build camps at Gurs and other locations in southern

⁸ Laharie, 228.

⁹ I borrow the concept of “making do” from Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*. De Certeau conceptualizes acts of “making do” as “transverse tactics that do not obey the law of the place, for they are not defined or identified by it” (29).

France beginning in the spring of 1939. Beginning in spring 1941, the Vichy French government permitted representatives of additional international aid organizations, such as the American Society of Friends (AFSC), International Red Cross, Oeuvre de Secour Enfants (OSE), Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), and Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC), to enter Gurs to provide internees with material assistance, usually in the form of food, medicine, or clothing. The contributions of these aid organizations to internee well-being were significant and, for good reason, attract growing attention from young scholars.¹⁰ Finally, Gurs internees could send and receive remittances, mail, and parcels, which allowed them to benefit from material resources from abroad and communicate with contacts overseas by post.¹¹ In sum, these freedoms were important sources of internee connection to the outside world and distinguished Gurs prisoner experiences from those of prisoners in forced labor and death camps in eastern Europe.

Readers might be forgiven, then, for wondering what importance a “porous” camp like Gurs could have in the story of the murder of two-thirds of European Jewry in places like Auschwitz and Treblinka. After all, wasn’t “making do” also a form of compliance, a “making things work” often practiced by prisoner functionaries and collaborators? Without a doubt, the story of prisoner agency at Gurs is not representative of the experience of Jews at large during the Holocaust in Europe, but it is not a story of complicity, either. Camp life altered traditional

¹⁰ Stephanie Corazza, “The Routine of Rescue: Child Welfare Workers and the Holocaust in France” (Department of History, University of Toronto, 2017); Laurie Drake, “Feeding France’s Outcasts: Vichy’s Internment Camps, 1940-1944” (History, Toronto, University of Toronto, 2020); M. E. R. Riley, “A sword trembles overhead: American humanitarian relief in the concentration camps of Unoccupied France, 1939-1942” (Department of History, University of Indiana, 2027).

¹¹ Ongoing postal service served an important function for the camp administration and Vichy regime, as well, because it allowed them to easily surveil prisoners. Prisoners’ outbound letters and postcards were regularly censored (redacted) by officials who found they contained information about life in the camp that should not be made public. Prisoners were aware of this censorship and thus used opaque language to veil intended meanings. They often referred to visits from “Uncle Raaf”, a euphemism for hunger, instead of describing the problem of food scarcity and theft directly. Laharie, 311.

understandings of work and the forms of sociability associated with it, yet it did not do so by compelling prisoners to collaborate in their own destruction. In camp barracks and compounds at Gurs, female prisoners no longer exclusively cooked, washed, and queued on behalf of family members. Rather, they did so with and for their fellow prisoners. This shift is apparent in a graphic memoir made by a young internee at Gurs, Eva Liebhold of Mannheim. Liebhold produced a series of drawings documenting the daily activities of prisoners in the women's camp at Gurs. Most represent women performing them in pairs or groups. In addition to digging trenches around the barracks to assist with the drainage of water, these activities included transporting barrels of coffee, washing vegetables, laundering clothes and hanging them to dry, cooking in the *ilot* kitchen, queuing at a canteen, visiting the "Ticketschalter" (ticket counter) to collect meal tickets, beating marmalade outside the barracks, showering and bathing in the washroom, and retrieving bread rations.¹² Liebhold's images show that a group-oriented dimension now characterized tasks that had once been performed privately or in the company of hired help.

¹² Eva Liebhold, *Erinnerungen aus Camp de Gurs.*, 1943 1940, Picture Book, 1940-1943, USHMM.



Figure 1. Eva Liebholt. "Women washing vegetables." ("Gemüseputzfrauen.") Page from the *Memoirs of Camp de Gurs Illustrated by Eva Liebholt*, October 1940-1943. USHMM.

Female prisoners experienced collective work in the camp as both frighteningly difficult and satisfying. It was difficult because the division of living space in the camp did not diminish the total amount of work demanded of women. Many woman prisoners had to assume responsibility for preparing supplementary, non-rationed meals for family members, which required additional time and energy. Male family members sent their dirty linens into the women's camp for laundering and drying. The scarcity of food and poor material conditions in the barracks added to the arduousness of simple tasks. But female prisoners also developed tactics that circumvented rules and regulations. For example, Rabbi Dr. Ernst Steckelmacher recalled that after cooking meals "in empty tins on wood fires," women prisoners devised creative ways of delivering them into the men's camp for their male family members.¹³ Women kept their family units and groups of kin afloat materially and made the production and

¹³ Ernst Steckelmacher. "Eyewitness Account by Rabbi Dr. Ernst Steckelmacher of His Experiences in Germany and France between 1933-45," 1955. Wiener Holocaust Library.

transmission of culture and inherited moral values in the camp possible through the efficient organization and management of everyday life.

My project takes up the contradictory behaviors and actions of Gurs prisoners as its object of study. It contains three chapters. The first focuses on the forms of activity in which internees engaged to maintain and improve their living space. I argue that gender informed both the division of labor and its modulation within the prisoner society over time. The second chapter is centered on tactics and practices related to procuring, preparing, and eating food. Though the state's rationing policy, camp administrators, and foreign relief agencies played a part in food distribution, prisoners also determined who secured enough to eat and who did not. This implies that they, too, exercised agency in ways that impacted overall mortality rates within the prisoner society. Finally, in Chapter Three, my contention is that the camp hospitals and cemetery functioned as heterotopias – spaces outside the norm – for prisoners. Due to the logics that ordered daily life, these were spaces where prisoners encountered both suffering and gratification.

This thesis strives to reconcile the relatively non-representative character of this agency in the story of the Holocaust in Europe at large with the problematic erasure of German-Jewish agency in Vichy camps from (French) Holocaust narratives. I do not want to imply that the agency of prisoners in places like Gurs reflects the benignity of the Vichy regime. Rather, I contend that the erasure of their agency reflects French historiography's continued reluctance to recognize the humanity of German Jewry and the habit of consigning its stories to a dustbin. The study of prisoner agency at Gurs poses a challenge to Holocaust narratives in France, whose authors have chosen to pay little attention to the fate of German-speaking Jews without French citizenship, instead focusing on resistance fighters, the actions of French-speaking Jews, and the

noble rescue of Jewry by French villagers and civilians.¹⁴ At the same time, without making claims to representativity, this thesis aims to highlight the value of non-French memories of the Holocaust in France for the field of Holocaust studies. Is it fair that all prisoner actions that cannot be classified as “resistance” be relegated to the category of “complicity”? Should we not consider that prisoners in the camps and ghettos thought of their own actions and lives in terms other than these? This project also entails an effort, then, to think outside inherited binaries that often suggest that some spaces and stories, particularly those of women, the elderly, and the bourgeoisie, are morally impure or irrelevant to the big picture of Holocaust experience. Underlying this effort is my belief that labor that can be quantified or destroyed by the State is not the only value-producing force in human societies.

This effort is particularly necessary because, in demographic terms, the deportees of Baden and the Saar Palatinate possessed specific characteristics that inflected their everyday life in significant ways. Out of 6,500 deportees from southwest Germany, two-thirds were female. One can seek explanations for this in pre-existent demographic characteristics of the Jewish population in Germany in the first half of the nineteenth century. By 1933, there were already 1,093 Jewish women per 1,000 Jewish men in Germany, which reflected both “the proportion of older persons in the Jewish group”, namely aging generations that had lived through the First World War, and “the lack of children” (which reduced the number of women’s deaths during childbirth), also stemming from the loss of a generation of young men between 1914 and 1918.¹⁵ It is also possible that the predominance of the female gender among the Rhineland deportees

¹⁴ As Julian Jackson explains in the introduction to *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944* (2001), the first wave of French historical works (produced between 1945 and 1965) focused on the resistance during the Second World War. A second wave of studies, beginning in the 1980s, focused on French society. This second wave included studies of rescuers in villages like Le Chambon-sur-Lignon and actors in French Jewish groups and organizations like the UGIF (Union Générale des Israélites de France or General Union of French Israelites).

¹⁵ Erich Rosenthal, “Trends of the Jewish Population in Germany, 1910-39,” *Jewish Social Studies* 6, no. 3 (1944): 233–74, 243.

related to imbalances rooted in Jewish migratory patterns under National Socialism. Between 1933 and 1939, Jewish men were slightly more likely to emigrate abroad than Jewish women.¹⁶ Men found work more easily, and women often assumed the roles of caretakers of children or aging parents.

The gender imbalance is important to emphasize because the voices of Jewish women have remained absent from historiography on Gurs. Claude Laharie, the French historian whose work *Le Camp de Gurs, 1939-1945: Un Aspect Méconnu de l'histoire de Vichy* was published in 1993 and is still widely held to be the authoritative work on the camp, included no memoirs or testimonies produced by Jewish woman prisoners among his sources, though he included several produced by German-speaking Protestants (Maria Krehbiel-Darmstädter and Martha and Else Liefmann), socialists (Hanna Schramm), and Jewish aid workers who spoke French, such as Nina Gourfinkel. This same body of sources was relied on by Anne Grynberg in her work *Les Camps de la Honte. Les Internés Juifs des Camps Français (1939-1944)*, published in 1999.¹⁷ The result has been an incomplete picture of who internees were and what suffering and agency looked like in the camp during the years 1940 to 1942.

A second demographic particularity of the internees from Baden and the Saar Palatinate was their advanced age. The deportees remarked on it in their letters and testimonies. One recently-arrived prisoner wrote to friends on October 30, 1940, “But keep in mind that perhaps half of our people are over 60. The oldest man in my barracks turned 85 today. In our train car were Moritz Steiner and his wife Betty, she 85, he 99! Despite his age, he wasn't allowed to live

¹⁶ Hagit Hadassa Lavsky, *The Creation of the German-Jewish Diaspora: Interwar German-Jewish Immigration to Palestine, the USA, and England* (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2017), 69.

¹⁷ Anne Grynberg, *Les Camps de La Honte. Les Internés Juifs Des Camps Français (1939-1944)* (Paris: La Découverte/Poche, 1999).

out the rest of his life in his old homeland!”¹⁸ According to Gerhard Teschner, as of January 1941, they included 2,430 people over age sixty. Because the deportees included patients in the Jewish hospitals and asylums, moreover, many were already ailing when they arrived in the camp.¹⁹ The advanced age and poor health of the Jewish internee population would shape the experience of the prisoners of Baden and the Saar Palatinate. For example, as I explain in Chapter One, which focuses on living and work in the camp, attending to the elderly and sick in separate barracks comprised one of the many ways that younger prisoners obtained extra food.

A third particularity worth noting is the class and professional background of the Rhineland prisoners. In the prewar era, German Jews belonged predominantly to the middle classes of German society. Seventy percent of Jews in Germany lived in cities with populations over 100,000, and one third of them lived in Berlin.²⁰ The urban and middle-class background of German Jews had as its correlate the embrace of bourgeois values and gender norms as early as the Imperial era (1871-1918). Early in the National Socialist period (1933-1945), however, many Jews lost their jobs in the trades and liberal profession or faced the closure of their businesses.²¹ Employment opportunities for Jews in the areas in which they had trained became scarce, and they saw their class position change dramatically. By 1939, 56% of Jews in Germany were manual workers. Life at Gurs thus presented a degree of continuity – the contraction of Jewish living space – for the Rhineland Jews. It also presented a degree of rupture, since in the camp these changes materialized more visibly than before.

¹⁸ “Letters Written by Inmates of Gurs Concentration Camp,” 1940, 1656/3/8/627, Wiener Holocaust Library, 3.

¹⁹ Teschner, *Die Deportation*, 29.

²⁰ M. Kaplan, 11.

²¹ M. Kaplan, 24. According to Kaplan, “Of the approximately 50,000 Jewish small business operating at the end of 1932, only 9,000 still existed by July 1938.”

Some historians would rather dismiss the experiences of outliers, when we might learn something from them. In methodological and conceptual terms, this project takes its cues from the work of the Czech-Jewish historian Anna Hájková, who remapped the study of everyday life in camps and ghettos during the Holocaust in her 2020 book on Theresienstadt, another “exceptional” case in the broader schema of Holocaust camps and ghettos.²² It is largely by using the work of Hájková as a template that I was able to approach the study of everyday life at Gurs without passing moral judgment on my subjects or relying on concepts like Lawrence Langer’s “choiceless choice” and Primo Levi’s “grey zone”, both touchstones for studies of life in camps and ghettos since their initial appearance in the 1980s.²³ In a similar vein, I have tried to avoid mythologizing prisoner behaviors by describing them as forms of “survival” or “resistance”, terms that have come to function as catch-alls for a wide range of victim experiences and behaviors in Holocaust studies.

Following Hájková, I have also tried to consider the actions and behaviors of prisoners at Gurs in separation from their fates following departure from the camp. Nonetheless, a note about the chronology adopted in this thesis is in order. I have chosen to focus on the years 1940 to 1942 because during this period German-Jewish prisoners from the Rhineland and Belgium formed a critical mass at Gurs and greatly influenced the prisoner society’s norms and rules. As Vichy France was completely occupied by Germany between fall 1942 and spring 1943, nearly four thousand of the prisoners I study here were deported to Drancy and then to the East. Most of them died at Auschwitz. I have chosen not to mention the ultimate destinations of individual prisoners at Gurs in my discussion of their everyday life in the camp to avoid interpreting their

²² Anna Hájková, *The Last Ghetto: An Everyday History of Theresienstadt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

²³ Primo Levi, ‘The Grey Zone’, in *Id.*, *The Drowned and the Saved*, translated from the Italian by Raymond Rosenthal, London: Abacus, 22-51; Lawrence Langer, “Auschwitz: The Death of Choice” (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1982), 67–128.

lives through the filter of their deaths or, by the same token, through the lens of their survival or escape prior to deportation. This strategy has allowed me to distill the ways in which the prisoner society at Gurs presented elements of both crisis and character.

THE SOCIAL FABRIC: LIVING SPACE, WORK, AND GENDER

Arrival at Camp de Gurs was a traumatic experience. In addition to significantly reducing the size and diminishing the quality of Jewish living space, it separated family members. Gurs was organized into subdivisions, called îlots.²⁴ Each subdivision was surrounded by barbed wire and contained twenty-five barracks and two latrines. All îlots were segregated by sex. Of the twelve îlots in existence in October 1940, four were reserved for women prisoners and three for male prisoners from Baden and the Saar Palatinate.²⁵ Upon arrival at the camp, the Rhineland deportees were divided between men's and women's îlots. Each barracks had the capacity to hold between fifty and sixty people but, in late October 1940, most lacked beds, mattresses, and furniture. After a journey of between three and five days on crowded trains, the new prisoners spent their first days in the camp sleeping on straw sacks or the floor.

The experience of arrival was particularly shocking for middle-aged and older women, accustomed to structuring their daily activities around the family and home. "At the sight of our desolate housing I broke down for the first time and lost my nerve. It was October 25th - my wedding anniversary," wrote Rosa Meyer-Murr, a widower from Kehl in Baden who was in her sixties in late October 1940, when she arrived at Gurs. "The first night was dreadful. As there was no straw left for me, I lay on the naked, cold, filthy floor. I could hardly stand up straight."²⁶ Though it may have taken her a few days to come to terms with her surroundings, Meyer-Murr's memoir shows that her attention soon shifted to pressing concerns like the procurement and distribution of food in her barracks, where she became an assistant supervisor responsible for

²⁴ The word "îlot" means "island" in French and is used to refer to city blocks in urban, working-class neighborhoods in large cities like Paris, but in this context it refers to a compound of twenty-five barracks surrounded by barbed wire. The population of the Gurs camp varied over time but between 1940 and 1942 consisted of between eleven and thirteen îlots.

²⁵ Eugen Neter, "Camp de Gurs," 1943, Leo Baeck Institute, 5.

²⁶ Rosa Mayer-Murr, "My Camp Diary," 1944, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 3.

doling out the morning coffee and cutting bread, as well as tasks like picking up stamps and making purchases at the canteen.²⁷ Before she knew it, she was too busy to ruminate about her predicament.

Much of the work performed by Jewish internees at Gurs has been overlooked by historians, who have focused on the construction and upkeep of the camp by the refugees of the Spanish Civil War in the 182nd labor battalion of the CTE.²⁸ However, Jewish prisoners engaged in less easily recognizable forms of activity. Young male Jewish prisoners in good health participated in maintenance work alongside the members of the 182nd labor battalion. In the barracks and îlots, Jewish prisoners of both genders contributed to the maintenance and care of fellow internees by performing daily tasks like cleaning, cooking, and caring for the aged and sick in the infirmaries. Prisoners participated in new and old forms of sociability that rearticulated gender roles. They also participated in an informal economy by engaging in commercial activities in exchange for food or money. By spring 1941, both men and women also participated in initiatives sponsored by the Comité Central de Assistance (CCA), a Jewish self-help committee that won the support of the Camps Commission in Toulouse, an aggregate of French Jewish organizations. Despite its limited means, the CCA focused its attention on ameliorating the precarious situation of prisoners in the women's camp and achieved significant, but gradual and limited, improvements of prisoners' living conditions and morale.

²⁷ Mayer-Murr, 4.

²⁸ Laharie is the principal culprit here, attributing sole responsibility for operation of the camp to Spanish Civil War refugees. He wrote that "The 200 members of the company (or group) of workers carry out all the work: restoration of huts, cleaning of ditches, leveling of the ground, installation of barbed wire, stoning of paths, incineration of waste. The operation of several services is their total responsibility: driving and repairing motor vehicles, monitoring the Dognen pumping station, maintaining the firefighting service in working order, manufacturing coffins and cleaning the cemetery. In return, the workers of the C.T.E. enjoy appreciable advantages: they are housed in a special îlot (îlot F until the fall of 1940, îlot A thereafter), receive additional food, and receive an output bonus. Without them, the camp would not be able to operate normally." Claude Laharie, *Le Camp de Gurs, 1939-1945: Un Aspect méconnu de l'histoire de Vichy*, J&D Editions (Biarritz, 1993), 50.

WORK AND THE INFORMAL ECONOMY

Even though Gurs was not a labor camp, prisoners performed work necessary to operate the camp and maintain the internee population and the barracks. At Gurs “everybody had some duty to perform, such as cleaning the vegetables, scrubbing the barracks, sorting the post, etc.,” wrote Adele Cantor of Mannheim, who spent over two years there.²⁹ Cantor was referring mainly to duties performed by women prisoners and prisoner functionaries within the îlots. Male and female internees living in each of the îlots apportioned food from the kitchens, prepared food in the barracks, washed and laundered clothes, ran the canteens, cleaned the barracks and latrines, and crafted tools and equipment. Prisoner duties were assigned by the *chefs de baraque* (barrack chiefs) and *sous chefs de baraque* (barrack sub-chiefs), as well as by administrators, guards, and members of the maintenance crew. These duties were sometimes compulsory and sometimes assigned on a volunteer basis in exchange for additional rations or money.

The tasks performed both voluntarily and compulsorily varied according to gender. Instead of washing or laundering clothes³⁰ or preparing additional meals for their families, Jewish prisoners in the men’s îlots often gathered and chopped firewood, designed small, portable ovens built out of tin cans, or carved or designed utensils, furniture, or other objects.³¹ Rolf Weinstock earned extra food by building windows and furniture for other prisoners. In his

²⁹ Adele Cantor, “Tears and Joys of a War-Time Deportee,” trans. Tolly Cantor, 1946, Renata de Gara Cafiero Collection, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 9.

³⁰ Laundering clothes was a highly gendered task, and some observers remarked on a lack of cleanliness among of the male prisoner population. Rosa Traub wrote in her diary about a reencounter between separated family members in which this got her attention: “We were all happy when the men, brothers and other relatives were allowed to come to us and we could see each other and talk. You could already tell from the clothes and underwear of most of the men that the women were missing, and that was just the beginning.” Rosa Traub, “Tagebuch 1940-1942,” 1940-42, LBI Memoir Collection (ME 1041), Leo Baeck Institute Archives, 41.

³¹ Gertrude Oppenheimer’s husband, Leo, for example, occupied himself making these stoves. She wrote: “Leo made a lot of them. He supplied the entire family with them and also made them for the older people.” Gertrud Oppenheimer, “Gertrud Oppenheimer Memoir,” n.d., United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 8.

memoir *The True Face of Hitler's Germany*, he described how he began to construct windows for other prisoners in the barracks: "One day a friend received a package. It contained noodles, which were again wrapped in cellophane paper. I had this paper given to me and tried it, choosing according to the size of the paper, wooden parts were removed from the walls to make a window."³² Later, the French camp administration hired him to repair suitcases, increasing his income and earning him permission to circulate freely throughout the camp.³³ He also worked in a nursery in the camp and formed part of a team of prisoners that monitored the nearby Dognen pumping station.³⁴

Women, as well as men, had some opportunities to take on work outside the îlots, and sometimes, outside the camp. They sewed and mended clothing for camp guards or local households. Esther Topaz Tichauer remembered that her mother, Adrienne Rosenthal Tichauer, earned extra food by sewing for the families of camp guards.³⁵ Similarly, Marie Grunkin of Lörrach wrote in a letter to family members that she sewed in a French household two to three times per week and received supplementary food.³⁶ Ida Jauffron-Frank wrote that she earned

³² „Eines Tages erhielt ein Bekannter ein Paket. Darin befanden sich Nudeln, die aber noch einmal in Zellophanpapier eingeschlagen waren. Ich ließ mir diesem Papier geben und versuchte nun, indem ich entsprechend der Größe des Papiers Holzteile aus den Wänden entfernte, ein Fenster zu machen.“ Rolf Weinstock, *Das wahre Gesicht Hitler-Deutschlands : Häftling Nr. 59000 Erzählt von Dem Schicksal Der 10000 Juden aus Baden, aus der Pfalz und aus dem Saargebiet in den Höllen von Dachau, Gurs-Drancy, Auschwitz, Jawischowitz, Buchenwald* (Singen Hohentwiel: Volks-Verlag/Singen HTW., 1948), 47.

³³“I now had enough to do from early morning to late evening. But I continued to work after work, repairing suitcases and chairs and making suitcase handles out of iron. I often had to work for the French command. After a while I even received an ID card that entitled me to enter all the camp's buildings. This meant I could visit the women's îlots where I had urgent work to do without fear of inconvenience.” Weinstock, *Das wahre Gesicht Hitler-Deutschlands*, 49.

³⁴ Weinstock, *Das wahre Gesicht Hitler-Deutschlands*, 51-56.

³⁵ Alia Pagin, “Born in an Internment Camp: Esther Topaz,” *Remapping Refugee Stories* (blog), 2025; Oral History Interview with Esther Topaz Tichauer. May 4, 2025.

³⁶ Letter from Mari Grunkin to Rosel and her mother on March 18, 1942. Lukrezia Seiler, ed., *Was Wird aus uns Noch Werden? Briefe Der Lörracher Geschwister Grunkin aus Dem Lager Gurs, 1940-1942* (Zürich: Chronos, 2000), 101.

extra money by sewing and knitting because she “was not lucky enough to receive a subsidy.”³⁷

These examples illustrate that women prisoners also sought out and often found ways to remain active in order to earn additional rations. However, there were fewer opportunities to earn extra food or wages available to them overall, especially if lacked skills like sewing when they arrived.



Figure 2. Paul Ripp. *Handmade Combination Fork and Spoon Used by a Jewish Man in an Internment Camp.* USHMM.

Because of the division of the camp into men’s and women’s spaces, women prisoners often had to perform forms of work that they found physically demanding. Ida Jauffron-Frank, born in Mannheim in 1891, recalled that women in the camp gathered, hauled, and chopped wood: “Sawing, chopping and carrying wood was also far too difficult for most women, and only a few were able to carry out these tasks. In addition, the strongest of us were burdened with this manly work.”³⁸ Jauffron-Frank’s use of the words “männliche Arbeit” (“manly work”) underscores how a woman prisoner relied on prewar gender distinctions to apprehend the

³⁷ „Ich selbst verdiente mir einige Groschen durch Nähen und Stricken für die, die Geld von außerhalb bekamen, denn ich hatte nicht das Glück, einen Zuschuss zu erhalten.“ Ida Jauffron-Frank, “Rückblick, Erinnerungen und Gedankensplitter einer alten Mannheimerin,” 1971, ME 337, Center for Jewish History/Leo Baeck Institute, 33.

³⁸ „Auch die Holzsägen, Hacken und Tragen war für die meisten Frauen viel zu schwer, und nur wenige waren imstande, diese Arbeiten auszuführen. Auch dazu wurden die Stärksten von uns mit dieser männlichen Arbeit belastet.“ Jauffron-Frank, Center for Jewish History/Leo Baeck Institute, 20.

character of women's work in the camp. It also suggests that the need for women to perform grueling physical tasks at Gurs was experienced as an affront to the gendered character of manual labor that members of the Central European middle classes perceived as natural and proper.



Figure 3. Lili Andrieux, *Drawing of Women Washing Clothes in a Basin by a German Jewish Internee*, December 1940. USHMM.

Trade and the sale of services to other prisoners in the informal economy was also important to internee subsistence in both the men and women's camps. Upon his arrival in the camp in fall 1940, Arthur Trautmann of Karlsruhe, a shoemaker, quickly opened a workshop in his *îlot* after he arrived at Gurs and ordered materials from the surrounding villages. He supplied other prisoners with more durable footwear.³⁹ In his letters to his son, Maurice Meier referred to a panoply of "private entrepreneurs" in his *îlot*: "Shoemakers, watchmakers, tailors, saddlers, hairdressers, masseurs and foot care specialists, as well as two dental technicians."⁴⁰ Prisoners in the women's *îlots* also sold their services to each other. Alix Preece of Hamburg, who was

³⁹ Arthur Trautmann, "# 62 118: In Auschwitz," 1945, ME 645, Leo Baeck Institute, 2.

⁴⁰ Maurice Meier, *Briefe an Meinen Sohn* (Switzerland: Steinberg Verlag Zürich, 1946), 83.

interned at Gurs during the summer of 1940, recalled: “There were beautifully drawn signs on our barracks: Laundry washed here, shoe shining, manicures, pedicures, water waves, tailoring, laundry sewing, language lessons, fortune telling, scripture reading, bridge courses, typewriter work, translations.”⁴¹ Rosa Meyer-Murr remembered that when she attended weekly religious services in a men’s ilot, “Every week a tall, elderly spinster sold good, simple baked goods in the form of rings or pretzels.”⁴² Evidence from women’s memoirs, diaries, and letters indicates that, though women also participated in informal trade within the camp and provided services to other prisoners, the informal economy in the women’s camp was more precarious because there were fewer opportunities available overall relative to the men’s camp. This also meant that, while both male and female prisoners’ individual and small-scale initiatives added to the informal economy’s ability to supply goods and services, its benefits may have been distributed unevenly.



Figure 4. “Internment Camp Gurs: Old Woman Shaping.” (*Internierungslager Gurs; Ältere Frau Beim Hobeln.*) is licensed under CC BY 3.0 DE.

Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek & Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg, Abt. Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart.

⁴¹ “Eyewitness Account by Alix Preece, Paris, of Gurs Concentration Camp and Her Emigration to London,” February 1956, Wiener Holocaust Library.

⁴² Mayer-Murr, 6.

CHILDREN AND THE ELDERLY

Prisoners who did not work for the camp guards or local families and could not sell their services in the informal economy looked for other ways to earn additional food in the camp. They worked shifts as helpers in the sickbays, as well in as special barracks reserved for the elderly. Internees of both genders attended to and comforted infirm refugees. In addition to writing letters to family, attempting to arrange her emigration to the United States, and knitting, for example, Gretl Drexler served as a companion in the elderly barracks, noting “I help where I can and with the many old people there is opportunity”.⁴³ Hans Solomon, only a teenager at the time, recalled in his memoir that he spent busy eight-hour nights in the infirmary during his short stay at Gurs.⁴⁴ Caretakers included family members of the sick, but also neighbors, friends, kin, and members of the same ethnic group.

Though they occupied the lowest rungs of the prisoner society’s social hierarchy, the elderly were not abandoned by other prisoners. Younger prisoners sometimes developed special relationships with older prisoners who had been separated from biological kin. Flora Uffenheimer invited a “nice young man”, a *chef de baraque* who “takes good care of Papa”, to her father’s birthday celebration.⁴⁵ Older and younger prisoners also found occasions to trade favors. For example, Gretl Drexler rewarded a young man who helped her carry a heavy package with bread.⁴⁶ Younger prisoners also regularly accompanied older prisoners to the lavatories and washrooms, so they did not suffer immobilization, injury, or death in the sludge. Younger

⁴³ Roland Paul, ed., *Gretl Drexler. Briefe Aus Mannheim, Gurs Und Grenoble (1939-1942). Das Schicksal Einer Jüdischen Frau Aus Landau in Der Pfalz* (Kaiserslautern: Institut für pfälzische Geschichte und Volkskunde Kaiserslautern, 2014), 194.

⁴⁴ Hans Salomon, “A Personal Story: The Holocaust Years, 1940-1942,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 5.

⁴⁵ Letter from Flora Uffenheimer to Semi Uffenheimer. September 16, 1941. “Flora Uffenheimer’s Letters to Semi Uffenheimer from Gurs, 1941 - 1942,” n.d. Semi Uffenheimer Family Collection. Leo Baeck Institute Archives.

⁴⁶ Roland Paul, ed., *Gretl Drexler. Briefe aus Mannheim, Gurs Und Grenoble (1939-1942)*, 227-228.

caretakers were usually motivated by the desire to serve others and stay active, but material incentives like additional rations also played a role.

Some prisoners left memoirs and testimonies that contest this image of good-willed inmate behavior toward elderly prisoners, however. One of them was Curt Lindemann, who alleged in his memoir *Mein Campleben* that two îlot chiefs in the women's camp "forgot about the old age barracks" even though they "knew how to ensure a pleasant and comfortable existence in every possible way" because they had been absorbed in the care of their skin and nails.⁴⁷ Though these accusations cannot be corroborated and their accuracy might be put in question for reasons related to trauma and memory, it is also possible that the îlot chiefs Lindemann mentioned failed to find volunteers to help in the elderly barracks because they did not offer incentives, such as additional food. Hanna Schramm, who worked as an îlot chief in the women's camp at Gurs, noted that few people volunteered to work in the elderly barracks when no reward was offered, but that the promise of additional food solved the problem. Nonetheless, the separation of the elderly into separate barracks was a tactic relied on to organize their care and supervision, not merely their isolation.

This relative attentiveness to the elderly among Jews at Gurs stands in contrast to Theresienstadt, where older internees were often treated as social outcasts.⁴⁸ This difference reflects the specific demographics and origins of the Gurs prisoner society. The elderly formed a critical mass at Gurs that could not be ignored, while the number of children was relatively low. Moreover, because many internees from southwestern Germany had been deported from the

⁴⁷ Curt Lindemann, *Mein Campleben* (Lourdes, France: Imprimerie Lacrampe, 1946), 6. „Bei den Frauen war es auch nicht, wie es sein sollte, beispielsweise in dem Îlot J; Îlotchefin Frau Scheidt, Îlot K Îlotchefin Frau Kauffmann aus Mannheim, herrschten sehr miessliche Zustände. Für die beiden Damen gab es nur eine, allem übrigen vorangehende Arbeit: „die Sorge und Pflege für ihren Teint und ihre Finger-und-Fussnägel. Sie vergaßen darüber sogar sich um die Altersbaracken und Krankenabteilungen zu kümmern und wussten auf allererdenkliche Weise sich ein angenehmes und bequemes Dasein zu verschaffen.“

⁴⁸ Hájková, 113-114.

same cities and towns in Baden and the Saar Palatinate, ties to communities of origin remained. In this sense, the prisoner community at Gurs displayed some of the characteristics of immigrant populations in urban areas. This is yet another factor that distinguished the prisoner society at Gurs from those of other camps in existence across Europe during the same period.

The total number of children at Gurs was relatively low because they had been among the first to leave Germany through initiatives like the Kindertransport, but children still occupied a privileged category, and their presence impacted the structure of work in the camp. Because all children were housed in the women's camp, many women prisoners had responsibilities as caretakers and educators, while men did not. Male family members were sometimes allowed to visit for a few hours at a time, but the greater part of the responsibility for childcare fell on women, female relatives, and female friends. For example, Susan Phillip remembered that she was "underfoot" in the company of her mother in the barracks of kitchens for most of the day.⁴⁹ Similarly, Elsa and Martha Liefmann described a mother with four children ages seven and under in Barrack 11, Îlot K, where she slept with all of them in a double bed.⁵⁰ An aunt, a sister of their mother, assisted with childcare duties in the absence of their father, who was in the men's camp. Female kin, such as aunts, sisters, cousins, neighbors and friends, increasingly stepped into the role of primary caretakers in the absence of a female parent. For example, Fanny Gottlieb's aunt took charge of her siblings and her after her mother's death.⁵¹ Her father was also interned at Gurs but separated from his children, who remained in the women's barracks.

⁴⁹ Dr. Albert Erlebacher, "As I Recall," 2009, USHMM, 10; Susan Philipp. Interview 48261. Interview by Mindy Kornberg. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, November 15, 1998. Accessed December 23, 2024. <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/48261>

⁵⁰ Else Liefmann and Martha Liefmann, *Helle Lichter auf Dunklem Grund: Erinnerungen von Martha und Else Liefmann* (CVB-Druck Zürich: Christliches Verlagshaus Bern, 1966), 37.

⁵¹ Fanny Gottlieb. Interview 50121. Interview by Toby Lieberman. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, July 07, 1999. Accessed December 23, 2024. <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/50121>

Women prisoners from Baden and the Saar Palatinate had devised partial solutions to the problem of childcare before international aid organizations stepped in. Soon after the arrival of the Jews of Baden and the Saar-Palatinate at Gurs in late October 1940, each ilot designated specific barracks for the creation of kindergartens. In these children's barracks, small children no longer had to share beds with their parents. Girls and boys lived in separate barracks within the women's camp but were allowed to visit their mothers daily. These children received supplemental rations and participated in organized group activities. Laure Kolb remembered that she stayed with her mother and sister in the boys' barracks because her mother was assigned the job of teacher there.⁵² This arrangement was practical. The spatial separation of the children in separate barracks also made the delivery of additional food more efficient.

In early 1941, three other developments that indirectly assisted women prisoners with childcare emerged. In March 1941, many families chose to be transferred to Rivesaltes, a family camp. In February 1941, the American Society of Friends (Quakers) transferred forty-eight children from Gurs to the Maison des Pupilles de la Nation, a children's home in Aspet, France, where they were supervised by Alice Resch Synnestvedt, a well-known humanitarian who later published a memoir about her work in France. Finally, in February 1941, the Oeuvre secours aux enfants (OSE), a Jewish childcare and child rescue organization founded during World War I, initiated efforts to place children prisoners in local homes where they would receive schooling. These efforts materialized gradually, but OSE would eventually operate 18 children's homes in unoccupied France lodging up to 1,500 children.⁵³

⁵² Laure Kolb. Interview 30356. Interview by Ruth Meyer. *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation, June 25, 1997. Accessed December 21, 2024. <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/30356>; Segment 14.

⁵³ Stephanie Corazza, "The Routine of Rescue: Child Welfare Workers and the Holocaust in France" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Toronto, 2017), 127.

International aid organizations could do little to assist youths aged fifteen and above, who were legally too old for transfer to a children's home. In the case of young men, this did not pose a problem. They could perform manual labor and earn extra rations at Gurs because of their physical strength, good health, and gendered privilege, and they were often central to family economies in the camp. Ellen Litman remembered that her older brother was "always working" at Gurs: "He was working for the guards. The people were working in the kitchen. They were working to dig graves in the cemetery. They were working to clean latrines." He managed to earn extra food rations for her family this way and "did well for all of us".⁵⁴ Similarly, Josef Grunkin wrote in a letter to relatives in late November 1940 that thanks to his work in a camp kitchen, he managed to eat enough and provide for female family members: "I come to Mom and Marilie almost every day, and not a single one went by without me sending something across."⁵⁵ The relative cultural and economic valorization of manual labor at Gurs put young men in an advantageous position when it came to obtaining resources and supporting family members. It also kept them busy.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE COMITÉ CENTRAL DE ASSISTANCE (CCA)

The growth and centralization of Jewish self-help committees operating at the level of the barracks and the îlots in the form of the Comité Central de Assistance (CCA) in early 1941 marked a turning point in the history of the prisoner society at Camp de Gurs. The consolidation of Jewish self-help efforts strengthened ethnic identity by energizing pre-existent, inchoate efforts aimed at productively mobilizing the labor of the Jewish prisoner population within the

⁵⁴ Ellen Litman. Interview 33969. Interview by Eileen Molfetas. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, September 24, 1997. Accessed December 22, 2024. <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/33969>

⁵⁵ „Ich komme fast jeden Tag zu Mama und Marilie; und es verging noch keiner, ohne dass ich etwas rüber gebracht hätte.“ Lukrezia Seiler, ed., *Was wird aus uns noch werden?*, 72.

camp. In early 1941, a Belgian rabbi named Jehuda Leo Ansbacher assumed the committee's helm with the help of his brother Max Ansbacher.

Alongside the Quakers and Secours Suisse, the CCA attempted to alleviate some of the internees' most pressing material problems, such as hunger and cold. By instituting a tax of 5% on remittances destined for internees in the camp and accepting donations in kind from packages, it created a small collective welfare fund that needy prisoners drew on to improve their living conditions. In early 1941, it also created a special team of male prisoners who assisted with tasks in the women's camp, such as collecting and chopping firewood for barrack stoves.

The CCA also leveraged ties to a nearby conglomerate of French Jewish organizations, the Camp Commission headquartered in Toulouse, to obtain materials needed by female prisoners to participate in vocational training focused on sewing and crafting. This support allowed Senta Luzie of Talheim to participate in a sewing workshop run by another prisoner. In her memoir, Luzie recalled learning to handle a needle in cold weather and using her mattress cover to make a dress.⁵⁶ Many other female prisoners also participated in workshops on fashioning items out of raffia, a fibrous material donated by the Camp Commission. In 1990, Ruth Newmann Saffro, the daughter of Johanna Zwang Neumann, donated a purse made from raffia that her mother had made in the camp to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.⁵⁷ Numerous other objects made from raffia form part of the Museum's collection today.

⁵⁶ Senta Luzie Manasse Victorovich, "J'étais une Juive Allemande: Histoire de Senta Luzie, née 1926, à Talheim," 2005, USHMM, 8.

⁵⁷ Johanna Zwang Neumann, *Purse Made while Johanna Zwang Neumann was Interned in a Camp*, USHMM.



Figure 5. Purse made while interned in Gurs Concentration Camp.
Johanna Zwang Neumann. USHMM.

Fewer male internees, particularly those who were younger during their internment, mention the workshops and crafts making activities sponsored by the CCA. Because younger men's labor was in higher demand within the camp and the Vichy state had created CTE battalions for Jewish men between the ages of 18 and 55 by January 1942, the primary participants in CCA-sponsored workshops at Gurs were women.⁵⁸

In addition, Rabbi Leo Ansbacher made special efforts to mobilize Jewish women prisoners, particularly the young, in religious and social organization within the camp. Several sources mention the formation of the young women's group Menorah, formed in 1941.⁵⁹ Menorah was a cultural and social group of about twenty-five young female prisoners above age fifteen who met weekly to sing, discuss the Torah, and study Hebrew. Its members also assisted the CCA leaders with service work with the elderly in the camp. The group was formed because young women over age fifteen did not qualify for transfer to children's homes and lacked the

⁵⁸ By the beginning of 1942, all young men healthy enough to work were integrated into the CTEs. Peter Gaida, *Camps de Travail Sous Vichy: Les "Groupes de Travailleurs Étrangers" (GTE). France et Afrique du Nord 1940-1944* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2023), 194; Hugo Schriesheimer, "Die Hölle von Gurs," in *Oktoberdeportation 1940: Die Sogenannte "Abschiebung" der Badischen und Saarpfälzischen Juden in das Französische Internierungslager Gurs und andere Vorstationen von Auschwitz* (Konstanz: Hartung-Gorre Verlag, 1990), 190.

⁵⁹ Bella Gutterman and Naomi Morgenstern, eds., *The Gurs Haggadah: Passover in Perdition* (Jerusalem: Devora Publishing and Yad Vashem, 2003), 29.

same opportunities to perform labor for wages and food as young men. Menorah provided leadership and service opportunities to young women who lacked other safe pathways to subsistence due to their age and gender.



Figure 6. Members of Menorah. Rabbi Leo Ansbacher stands in the back row, left of center. Yad Vashem Photo Archive.

CONCLUSION

Though the efforts of outsiders to support prisoners at Gurs must be acknowledged, internees' contributions to the materialization and stabilization of everyday life in the camp should not be overlooked. One of the signs of German Jewish prisoner agency was its gendered character. Prisoners attempted to restore ties to family members in the face of persecution and displacement, and they often did so by adhering to a gendered division of labor. Tasks like sewing, crocheting, knitting, and craftmaking gained importance, as did service as teachers and caretakers of children. The prisoner society created new spaces for women's participation but faced constraints that curtailed women's agency.

Age, in addition to gender, conditioned these limits. Younger male prisoners who had the strength and vitality to perform manual labor had more access to opportunities to earn wages and

food within the camp and outside of it as members of work groups. In turn, providing supplementary support for female and elderly family members became central to the experience of young Jewish men in Camp de Gurs. Women at Gurs also performed domestic chores like laundering and cooking for male family members and friends. Both genders attended to elderly prisoners. Unlike other prisoner societies during the Holocaust, elderly prisoners at Gurs formed a critical mass and could not be ignored.

The emergence of the Comité Central de Assistance (CCA) gradually improved the moral and material well-being of the prisoner society. The CCA facilitated collaboration with the French Jewish community and centralized self-help efforts within the camp. It organized workshops that provided prisoners with training in sewing and crafting. It also formed Menorah, a service and leadership group for young women that enhanced their agency. The creation of the CCA led to the mobilization of women in new capacities and attempted to compensate for the uneven effects of internment on Jewish women at Gurs. It restored only fragments of the agency that German-speaking Jewish women had enjoyed in the pre-war era, but its efforts still enhanced internee well-being overall.

It is important to acknowledge the structural and demographic inequalities related to work and gender at Camp de Gurs because they can contribute to a growing understanding of how social differences influenced human experience during the Holocaust. In Vichy France, as in the labor camps of the East, men were considered more desirable for manual labor and often enjoyed privileges or protections as a result. In Vichy France, however, the process of differentiation of necessary or surplus labor occurred in more subtle fashion than in the east because it did not involve the infamous process of selection upon arrival, which immediately separated those who would live from those who would die in places like Treblinka or Auschwitz.

At the same time, Vichy France did not draft foreigners for labor in industry, which also constrained German-Jewish women's possibilities for survival through labor.

By the same token, widening our understanding of the structural inequalities facilitates recognition of both internees' suffering and their accomplishments. By recognizing the specific forms of exclusion of women that existed at Gurs, we can perceive the challenges that women faced, such as the need to perform work for both for the operation of the camp and for their families. We are also better able to perceive the ways in which they acted. Women prisoners acted when they devised solutions to everyday challenges in the barracks, participated in the informal economy both inside and outside the camp, and took part in social and political activities that contributed to the organization and stabilization of the prisoner society's living space. Though their stories have been left out of accounts of life at Gurs, they were integral to the internee collective's social fabric.

THE TIME OF TOPINAMBOUR: FOOD AND HUNGER

In her diary of her experiences during the Holocaust, Friedel Stern Weil described an encounter with a Spanish prisoner at Gurs. She recalled that she “begged the Spaniard to sell me a piece of bread and, when he saw the condition I was in, he looked around and, while no one was looking, he gave me a piece of bread.”⁶⁰ Weil’s account illustrates the flexible disposition that German-Jewish prisoners needed to beg for food. It also documents a moment in which a Spanish prisoner contravened the dominant social logic governing behavior in the camp, which mandated that food be shared within groups of kin. Life at Gurs was punctuated by moments of fear and surprise like the one Weil described in her diary. It was characterized by scarcity and regulated by logics that made transactions with prisoners beyond the limits of one’s ethnic group improbable but not impossible.

The Gurs prisoner society was hierarchical, and access to food was instrumental in structuring it. Broadly speaking, the hierarchy possessed five layers. The centrality of food as a unit of exchange positioned prisoners with jobs in the kitchens and manual laborers at the top of the hierarchy. Similarly, the relatively high level of economic capital of Spanish prisoners, who belonged to the Foreign Labor Groups (CTEs) and thus the “T” ration category for hard laborers, was also linked to their greater access to food. The same applied to German-speaking prisoners with money that could be used to buy food at the camp canteens, which were small self-managed retail stores in the îlots (compounds or blocks). The managers of the canteens also had enhanced access to supplies at lower prices. A fifth group of prisoners with increased access to food was

⁶⁰ Friedel Stern Weil, “Diary of Friedel Stern Weil : 1886-1970.,” n.d., Leo Baeck Institute, 14.

the “parcelled class”.⁶¹ These internees received individualized aid packages from outside the camp.

One effect of this hierarchy was that, as they translated traditional categories like ethnicity, class, age, and gender into kinship, prisoners played an active role in both the distribution and maldistribution of food at Gurs. Despite the centrality of food distribution to the camp’s internal hierarchies, however, prisoner attitudes toward and behaviors around food have received relatively little attention from scholars. Instead, most studies of Gurs and other Vichy camps have tended to focus on the role of the Vichy French state, international aid agencies, and the local population in the province of Béarn in supplying and distributing food to prisoners. To some extent, this is a by-product of the sources that historians have used to study Gurs. Claude Laharie used administrative documents and local archives to estimate the amount of food that prisoners were allotted as official rations. Based on this research, Laharie laid blame for the maldistribution of food on the camp administration and staff. He found both that the rations supplied to the camp were not fully distributed, and that rations that had been withheld were used to benefit the supervisory staff.⁶²

Laharie acknowledged the importance of the black market and aid agencies to food provision in the camp but left a historiographic gap that has only recently been filled. In her 2020 dissertation “Feeding France’s Outcasts: Rationing in Vichy’s Internment Camps, 1940-1944,” Laurie Drake offered a fuller picture of the camp’s food system. Drake expanded her aperture to include the state rationing system, impact of international food aid, and internee accounts of hunger in six camps in southern France. Drake’s dissertation included an account of the canteen

⁶¹ Arthur Koestler, *Scum of the Earth* (London: Eland, 2006), 107. Koestler wrote about his experience at Le Vernet, another camp in Vichy France.

⁶² Laharie, 307.

system and the efforts of the Camps Commission in Toulouse, a collective of French Jewish organizations that worked with internees to procure, produce, and distribute food (“Feeding Themselves: Internee-led Food Solutions in Vichy’s Camps”). She addressed unofficial social practices such as bartering, purchasing food on the black market, rummaging, and stealing in the camps in one chapter. In a later study in the edited volume *More than Parcels: Wartime Aid for Jews in Nazi-era Camps and Ghettos* (2022), Drake focused on the efforts of the American Joint Distribution Committee and the Quakers, as well as the Camps Commission, in delivering food aid to the Vichy camps, including Gurs.

In most studies of the camp, the actions and choices of prisoners are granted little importance. Most historians of the Vichy camps have devoted their attention to the camp’s administration and the actions of its administrators.⁶³ The scope and character of the food-related agency of prisoners at Gurs has largely remained unexplored. In what follows, I analyze the role of prisoners in food procurement, (mal)distribution, and preparation at Camp de Gurs at the level of the German-Jewish group of kin. How were food sharing practices structured? How evenly was food distributed by prisoners between generations and genders? What role did food preparation play in the division of labor within these units? I argue that food-related attitudes and practices of prisoners encompassed efforts to ameliorate the shortage of food at Camp de Gurs but also contributed to it. The food-related actions and beliefs of prisoners, not just those of administrators, aid workers, and functionaries, mattered. Prisoners developed strategies for coping with and combatting hunger, including expanding what they consumed, liquidating assets

⁶³ One example is Denis Peschanski, *La France des Camps: L’internement, 1938-1946*. Mayenne, France: Éditions Gallimard, 2002. Another is Anne Grynberg, *Les Camps de La Honte. Les Internés Juifs des Camps Français (1939-1944)* (Paris: La Découverte/Poche, 1999). Both examples are studies of multiple Vichy camps, which may have limited the authors’ attention to some of the particularities of Gurs and its inmates.

in exchange for food, engaging in trade, barter, or sale of products or services within the camp, begging, stealing, practicing sexual barter, and participating in individual and collective efforts to increase the food supply to the camp. In addition, prisoners chose when and how to share or withhold food. Finally, they were responsible for grassroots efforts to organize food supply and distribution in the camp prior to the entry of representatives from the Camps Commission on the scene, though these efforts were only partly successful. These efforts could not break down gender or ethnic boundaries within the prisoner society, and their impact is difficult to quantify. Nonetheless, a complete picture of everyday life in the camp calls for serious consideration of prisoners as historical actors.

OFFICIAL RATIONING AND FOOD PROCUREMENT

In assessing the role of food in the prisoner society, it is worth bearing in mind how Gurs differed from other sites of detention and confinement in Nazi-dominated Europe. In Nazi-ruled Europe, the state engaged in a deliberate politics of hunger, weaponizing food and its distribution and allocation in accordance with racial policies that distinguished between desirable and undesirable groups. By contrast, no policy of racial purification underlay the collaborationist Vichy French government's administration of Gurs and other camps. Marshall Pétain's newly formed Ministry of Food Supply (*Ravitaillemente générale*) in October 1940 devised a rationing policy that made no explicit distinction between Jews and non-Jews. Instead, the policy divided the population into broad, non-racial categories: the "A" category (for non-laboring adults ages 21-70), categories E, J1, J2, and J3 (children and young adults under age 21), and the "T" category (for hard laborers).⁶⁴ Most of the French inmates, including the Jews among them,

⁶⁴ Drake, 29.

fell into the “A” category. The daily diet for a prisoner in category A consisted of between 900 and 1200 calories.⁶⁵ Thus, the official food supply never adequately nourished most of the French population, least of all prisoners in its internment camps.

The official rations at Gurs were not only meager but also lacking in nutritional variety. Their most common ingredients were root vegetables, particularly *topinambour* (the French name for the Jerusalem artichoke), turnips, and rutabagas, as well as chickpeas and pumpkins. Internees ate meat about once per week. Rationed meals were almost always served in the form of soups or stews, which prisoners often described them as watery in substance and lacking in flavor. This likely reflected their insubstantial contents as well as the absence of variation in ingredients, which both affected internees’ ability to enjoy rationed meals.

The lack of variety was due, at least in part, to the camp’s geographic location. Gurs was situated on a wetland and lay in the vicinity of three small villages, whose total population reached only 1,000 people, a number that the camp population came to surpass eightfold with the arrival of the internees from Baden and the Saar-Palatinate in October 1940. The camp’s eighty hectares were unfavorably positioned for the purpose of both food procurement and agricultural development. To complicate matters further, the department of the Basses-Pyrénées (today called the Pyrénées Atlantiques), where Gurs was located, was split in two because of the armistice agreement following the German invasion: the department’s coastal strip was under direct German rule, while the rest remained subject to Vichy. German policies prohibited food from leaving the occupied zone of the department, which aggravated supply problems in the contiguous unoccupied zone.

⁶⁵ Werner L. Frank, *The Curse of Gurs. Way Station to Auschwitz* (Werner L. Frank, 2012), 241.

The division of the department also fomented the growth of a “brown market” supported by German officials. The “brown market” channeled food illegally from unoccupied to occupied zones, whereas the “black market” operated within each zone.⁶⁶ Rolf Weinstock, a prisoner at Gurs, observed in his memoir, “The farmers in this part of the country were very poor. Their main crops consisted of turnips and pumpkins. There was very little fat and meat. And the few vegetables that were grown were confiscated for transport to Germany.”⁶⁷ In combination, poverty and wartime German poaching of resources across the demarcation line significantly reduced the food supply in and around the camp.

To forestall hunger and starvation, the prisoners of Gurs were compelled to augment camp-supplied rations with other sources of nourishment. The Vichy state hampered the prisoners’ efforts to augment their food supply through the black market, and their efforts at Gurs were more draconian and successful than those made to clamp down on illicit trade among French civilians. Ultimately, prisoners relied on a variety of sources of food, including their official rations, food obtained in packages, the camp’s informal economy, on the black market or in the camp canteens, or obtained from international aid agencies present in the camp. The contributions of the latter were supplementary but comprised as much as 20% of total food resources by 1941.⁶⁸

PRISONER FOOD MANAGEMENT: A BRICOLAGE OF TACTICS

Laharie emphasizes the isolation of Gurs prisoners vis-à-vis French society. This is accurate but also misleading. Even in confinement, Jewish internees continued to inhabit

⁶⁶ Drake, 55-56.

⁶⁷ Weinstock, 50.

⁶⁸ Drake, 212.

transnational networks of communication, which they actively engaged by post. As they came to terms with their news surroundings in Camp de Gurs in late October 1940, prisoners from Baden and the Saar Palatinate sent letters to family members, friends, and Jewish community leaders in Germany, Switzerland, England, the United States, and even South America. In them, they provided what limited information they had about their whereabouts and requested a wide variety of items, including food. “Please send food and essentials, everything, everything one needs. Please also ask acquaintances and friends...But soon, soon!”⁶⁹ wrote Klara and Trudel Hirschfelder to friends in England in early November 1940. Moritz Jäger wrote to the Oppenheimer Family, also in England, but made his request less directly: “Food was urgently requested, maybe there is the possibility of sending some.”⁷⁰

One recipient of their letters was Siegfried “Fred” Weissmann (Weissman), formerly the leader of the Jewish community in Karlsruhe and, since May 1940, the executive secretary of a small organization founded by German-speaking refugees in the United States in 1937:

Selfhelp.⁷¹ In his New York exile, Weissmann facilitated humanitarian food relief for the Jewish inmates. Others wrote to the German-language newspaper *Aufbau* in New York, which published news of the Wagner-Bürckel Aktion’s displacement of Baden and Saarpfalz Jewry and called for donations from readers as soon as early November 1940.⁷² *Selfhelp* and *Aufbau* were instrumental in organizing the first international aid efforts for Jewish prisoners at Gurs. By

⁶⁹ Letter from Klara and Trudel Hirschfelder at Camp de Gurs on November 3, 1940. “Letters Written by Inmates of Gurs Concentration Camp,” 1940, 1656/3/8/627, Wiener Holocaust Library.

⁷⁰ Letter from Moritz Jäger to the Oppenheimer Family on November 1, 1940. “Letters Written by Inmates of Gurs Concentration Camp,” 1940, 1656/3/8/627, Wiener Holocaust Library.

⁷¹ “Letters Written by Inmates of Gurs Concentration Camp,” 1940, 1656/3/8/627, Wiener Holocaust Library.

⁷² “Nach Südfrankreich Verschickt,” *Aufbau*, November 1, 1940, Volume 6, Number 44, 1; “Aufruf,” *Aufbau*, November 8, 1940, Volume 6, Number 45, 3.

December 1940, *Selfhelp* had initiated a committee dedicated specifically to collecting and sending food and other resources to Baden Pfalz Jewry at Gurs.⁷³

In their letters to friends, family, and Jewish organizations overseas, prisoners requested both food and money. Money was used by prisoners to purchase food at the canteens during their stay at Gurs, and many relied on these internee-led retail stores regularly to supplement their official camp rations. The canteen system appeared in the Vichy camps as early as 1939. The canteens supplied both food and basic goods like toilet paper. At least to start with, they were provisioned by privileged prisoner managers with special permission to leave the camp to purchase goods for sale. According to Adele Cantor, barrack chiefs travelled to the canteens to buy for their respective barracks: “The purchases consisted, in the first months, mainly of fruit such as apples, very large and nice Jaffa oranges, grapes, dates and figs, and were then sold in each barrack with great excitement, pushing and bustling.”⁷⁴ Later, a wider range of prisoners gained permission to purchase items at the canteen directly. “We have the opportunity to buy food in the canteen, although it's not much. Mainly fruit and canned goods,” wrote Friederike Niedermann at New Year’s 1940-1941.⁷⁵ Prices charged at the canteens were high and the size of portions small, but this system presented some advantages to prisoners who ran the canteens because they obtained the food items they wanted and set profit margins.⁷⁶ For other prisoners, money remained the decisive factor. “As long as you still have a little money—we hope for supplies from Switzerland soon, as they have immediately promised to help—you can still buy a

⁷³ “Baden-Pfalz Hilfe,” *Aufbau*, December 20, 1940, Volume 6, Number 51, 7.

⁷⁴ Adele Cantor, “Tears and Joys of a War-Time Deportee,” trans. Tolly Cantor, 1946, Renata de Gara Cafiero Collection, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 10.

⁷⁵ “Wir haben in der Cantine Gelegenheit, Essbares zu kaufen; wenn es auch nicht viel ist. Vor allem Obst und Conserven.” Stadtarchiv Karlsruhe, ed., *Briefe. Gurs. Lettres. Briefe einer Badisch-Jüdischen Familie aus Französischen Internierungslagern. Lettres d’une Famille Juive Du Pays de Bade Internée dans les Camps en France*. (Karlsruhe: Info Verlag, 2011), 82.

⁷⁶ Drake, 162.

few things from the canteen,” wrote Dr. Hugo Stein to friends in the United States.⁷⁷ For those prisoners with cash, the canteens improved overall access to food in the camp.

Because access to food in the canteens depended on the possession of money, however, there is little evidence that the canteen system improved the evenness of food distribution within the prisoner society. This may be the reason that some prisoners harbored distrust for the canteen managers and represented them unfavorably in their memoirs. Curt Lindemann, for example, wrote in 1946 that in his îlot, “the manager of the canteen was a certain Sepp Weil from Karlsruhe. The man had certainly never seen such good days in his life as those he was privileged to spend as manager of the canteen. He had a laissez-passer for purchasing groceries; he also shopped in the nearby village, but we never saw any of these fine things.”⁷⁸ Lindemann’s words suggest that internees did not want to believe that there was a scarcity of food outside the camp when there was so little inside it. At the same time, they signal that Lindemann believed it was the responsibility of internees to look after the fair and equitable distribution of food within the prisoner society. While the scarcity of food outside the camp may have been real, this seemed to him to provide little reason for inequality within it. While Lindemann may not have fully grasped that food was scarce throughout France, he could not help but resent the privileged access to goods enjoyed by the canteen managers.

The uneven distribution of food throughout the camp also tended to work against prisoners in îlots holding Jewish internees. For example, food prices at canteens often varied between one îlot and another because prisoner canteen managers directly determined the cost of food. “Our canteen is very expensive...For example, the small cookies in îlot A cost only 30 centimes, while they cost 50 centimes here. Apples and everything else are also much more

⁷⁷ Stadtarchiv Karlsruhe, ed., *Briefe*, 60.

⁷⁸ Curt Lindemann. *Mein Campleben*. Lourdes, France: Imprimerie Lacrampe, 1946, 5.

expensive here than in the neighboring îlots. Everyone wants to profit from us,” wrote Arthur Lorch of Eschollbrücken to a family member in mid-November 1940.⁷⁹ Lorch’s remark that “everyone wants to profit from us” suggests that spatial organization and inequality within the camp allowed stark lines of division between “us” and “them” to emerge. These divisions, here reflected by prices at the canteens, were an effect of a social hierarchy that positioned Jewish prisoners at the bottom.

This hierarchy also governed exchange on the black market. As both Laharie and Drake show, prices of goods that were exchanged illicitly at Gurs heavily favored French officials and Spanish intermediaries. They could also be prohibitively high, including as much as 400 to 500% of the prices outside the camp. Laharie goes so far as to suggest that the prices for food at Gurs were some of the highest in the country.⁸⁰

This inequality was not the reason that the Gendarmerie and police attempted to clamp down on illicit commerce in early 1941, however. “It was dangerous and there were severe punishments for it,” recalled Rabbi Jehuda Leo Ansbacher of the black market.⁸¹ As new restrictions emerged, illicit trade also adapted to changing conditions. Jewish prisoners attempted to gain greater control over prices and supply through smuggling. For example, Wilhelm Tichauer of Munich, Germany, participated in the smuggling of additional food through the camp cemetery. His daughter, Esther Topaz, recalled that her father told her that he used a tunnel under the camp perimeter to bring in food.⁸²

⁷⁹ Letter from Arthur Lorch to Julius Lorch on November 18, 1940. Arbeitskreis ehemalige Synagoge Pfundstadt e.V., ed., *Briefe aus den Lagern: Briefe der Brüder Arthur und Rudi Lorch aus Gurs, Noé und anderen Lagern in Südfrankreich* (Pfundstadt: Frotscher Druck Darmstadt, 2014), 75-76.

⁸⁰ Laharie, 323.

⁸¹ Leo Ansbacher, “Testimony of Rabbi Dr. Leo Ansbacher, Regarding His Experiences at the Saint Cyprien Camp and the Gurs Camp, 1940-1942,” 1946, Yad Vashem Archives.

⁸² Alia Pugin. “Born in an Internment Camp: Esther Topaz,” *Remapping Refugee Stories* (blog), 2025, University Vienna, <https://refugee-stories.org/#/story?id=/api/stories/18&lang=en&previousOverviewCompName=map&uiLang=en>; Leslie Lutsky,

Another source of supplementary food was the barter economy. Prisoners traded and purchased food and other goods and services, such as the makeshift stoves that were often handmade by male prisoners.⁸³ Most prisoners relied on these handmade contraptions, which were typically made using tin cans, when cooking outdoors, as the number of camp ovens was limited. Prisoners also bartered for cigarettes, foodstuffs, dishware, and utensils. While deals in the barter economy could sometimes be more favorable to disadvantaged prisoners than those on the black market, this was not always the case. Jack Hirsch remembered that his mother once bartered her wedding ring for an egg.⁸⁴ This example suggests that inequality in the barter economy could be at least as severe as on the black market.

Perhaps inevitably, food became a form of currency that enabled some inmates to rise in the camp's internal hierarchy, even as others fell. Some prisoners also exchanged their labor directly for food. In early 1942, for example, Marie Grunkin worked as a maid for French family two to three times a week and received food, not money, in return. "I no longer work in the sewing room but instead work in the household for a French family 2 to 3 times a week, and in return, I get something to eat. I still sew, but only for food, since I can't buy anything with money," she wrote in March 1942.⁸⁵ Her words underscore the scarcity of food in the vicinity of the camp. Because of this scarcity, food, not money, served as the principal means of exchange in and around Camp de Gurs between 1940 and 1942.

Esther Topaz Tichauer. Visit to Her Birthplace at Gurs Concentration Camp, France, 2009, Canadian Jewish Archives, <https://www.cjhn.ca/link/cjhn49484>.

⁸³ Weinstock, 47.

⁸⁴ Jack Hirsch. Interview 24953. Interview by Mia Segal. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, January 21, 1997. Accessed January 02, 2025.

⁸⁵ Letter from Marie Grunkin on March 18, 1942. Lukrezia Seiler, ed., *Was wird aus uns noch werden? Briefe der Lörracher Geschwister Grunkin aus dem Lager Gurs, 1940-1942* (Zürich: Chronos, 2000), 101.

This situation forced some prisoners with little food and money to turn to tactics that did not involve exchange, such as increasing their calorie intake by expanding the limits of what they consumed. Several prisoners documented efforts to collect herring heads and other scraps from other internees.⁸⁶ Hans Steinitz, who arrived in the camp in May 1940, wrote about hunting and cooking small domesticable animals and rodents, such as cats, dogs, and rats, in the îlots.⁸⁷ Others relied on non-edible additives like woodchips or leather (from clothing items like belts or suspenders) to give meager rations more substance.⁸⁸

In conditions of food scarcity, theft among inmates was inevitable: the transformation of food into currency only underscored the value of food, both as nourishment and as a means of social differentiation. Food theft among prisoners may not have been its most impactful form. More detrimental were the camp administrators and guards who stole food from prisoners' packages before they were delivered to their intended recipients. Prisoners often noted in their letters that goods were missing from packages. Sophie Adler remembered that when she received packages from her parents in the camp, they arrived empty.⁸⁹ In some cases, these thefts occurred right before the eyes of the prisoners.⁹⁰

One effect of the camp's porosity was that prisoners also stole food outside of its limits. For example, Jewish children stole vegetables from garden patches in areas surrounding the

⁸⁶ "Some individuals were so starving that they sought out herring scraps and then ate them." "Eyewitness Account by Clara Hirschfelder, Karlsruhe, of Her Experiences in Gurs and Noé Concentration Camps," December 1954, Wiener Holocaust Library, 3; "Just now there was a young, starving man here who was putting herring heads on his bread..." Rosa Traub, "Tagebuch 1940-1942," LBI Memoir Collection (ME 1041), Leo Baeck Institute Archives, 46.

⁸⁷ Hans Steinitz, "Das Buch von Gurs. Ein Weissbuch über das südfranzösische Interniertenlager Gurs.," n.d., United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 34.

⁸⁸ Meier, 107.

⁸⁹ Martin Ruch, ed., *Familie Cohn: Tagebücher, Briefe, Gedichte einer Jüdischen Familie aus Offenburg* (Offenburg: Reiff Schwarzwaldverlag Offenburg, 1992), 178.

⁹⁰ Drake describes the findings of an April 1942 investigation by undercover agents at Gurs in response to internee reports that the camp staff had been removing food from incoming packages. Drake, 155.

camp. In her VHA testimony, Erika Gold recalled climbing under the barbed wire with other children to leave the camp and smuggling in carrots and other vegetables from properties in the area.⁹¹ Teenagers at Gurs also stole food from businesses in the vicinity of the camp. In 2006, Margot Schwarzschild Wicki donated a one-page document to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum that provides some clues as how such thefts occurred. The note is dated February 26, 1941, and is signed by the îlot chief Samuel Liebermensch. It reads “I hereby confirm that Mr. Richard Schwarzschild from Kaiserslautern served as sports director and youth leader in our îlot and has proven himself to be of the highest caliber in this capacity.”⁹² The USHMM catalogue’s curation states that the donor’s father, Mr. Schwarzschild, the supervising adult who had accompanied the youths, was held to account for the theft and sent to jail in the nearby city of Pau for three months. The note thus indirectly confirms that youths at Gurs engaged in theft outside the camp. Liebermensch’s wording of the note also suggests that he did not willingly “collaborate” with the French camp administration in punishing Schwarzschild. Liebermensch’s confirmation of Schwarzschild’s “high caliber” further reflects the stark ethnic divide between “us” and “them” that the uneven distribution of food produced.

⁹¹ Erika Gold. Interview 21372. Interview by Nancy Fisher. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, November 06, 1996. Accessed April 22, 2025

⁹² “Charges against Richard Schwarzschild, 1941,” February 1941, Margot Schwarzschild Wicki Papers, Series 1: Official documents, 1941-1951, Folder 3, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

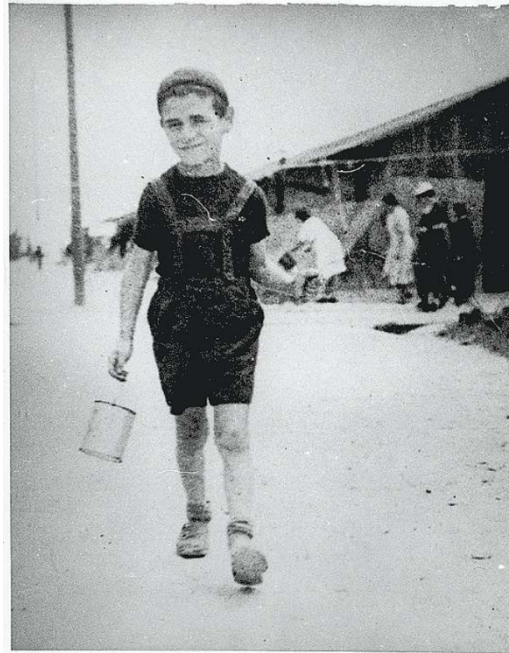


Figure 7. A young boy strolls down the street at Gurs. He holds a *Konservenbüchse* (can), a typical eating receptacle in the camp, in his right hand.
 („Internment Camp Gurs: Young boy en route in the camp“ (*„Internierungslager Gurs; Kleiner Junge Unterwegs im Lager“*)) is licensed under CC BY 3.0 DE. Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek & Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg, Abt. Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart.

FOOD SHARING AND SOCIAL RITUAL

Food scarcity produced isolation and antagonism at Gurs, but simultaneously, it could reinforce or rearticulate social ties between friends, family, and compulsory community.⁹³ The distribution, preparation, and consumption of food at Gurs were also steeped in social ritual. Prisoners considered waiting in food distribution lines an essential activity. Meticulous preparation of food did not necessarily diminish in importance due to extreme hunger. Food sharing among friends and family members was common, especially during holidays, and food

⁹³ “Compulsory community” and “forced community” are terms used by scholars of Holocaust Studies to describe collectives formed involuntarily during the Shoah. In this case, I am borrowing the term from Adam Rayski’s study of the UGIF (General Union of French Jews). See Adam Rayski, *The Choice of the Jews under Vichy: Between Submission and Resistance*, trans. William Sayers (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

sharing defined family, which frequently extended beyond or restructured the bourgeois nuclear unit of the pre-war era.

Queuing was one ritual central to the daily food distribution routine in the camp. According to Eva Liebhold's illustrated memoir of the daily routine in the women's camp at Gurs, prisoners waited in line as many as four times per day to obtain food at the canteen, kitchen, or ticket counter.⁹⁴ Lines were one of only a few meeting places where separated family members and friends encountered one another. Queuing was also fraught with anxiety because the failure to queue meant the forfeit of rations. Prisoners also brought their own dishes or eating receptacles. Those who arrived in the camp without supplies repurposed coffee tins or marmalade jars for this purpose, turning objects into affordances.

Prisoners also showed creativity in transforming foods served in these queues – like white bread – into dishes embodying variety and skill. This enhanced prisoner morale by creating a space for resourcefulness and affection to materialize. Flora Uffenheimer wrote regularly in her letters to her sister Semi in Buenos Aires about the meals she prepared in the camp using ingredients that she had received by post or shared by friends. For example, in August 1941, she wrote to her sister “On Saturday I made some pear balls. I got some bread and some pears from the Epstein's, which was great.”⁹⁵ She shared the pear balls with her aging father. While Uffenheimer's actions might initially appear insignificant, internees' desire to show their inventiveness and create meaning for one another through the preparation of food provided them with a measure of satisfaction.

⁹⁴ Eva Liebhold, *Erinnerungen aus Camp de Gurs.*, 1940-1943, Picture book, 1943 1940, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

⁹⁵ Letter from Flora Uffenheimer to Semi Uffenheimer on August 31, 1941. “Flora Uffenheimer's Letters to Semi Uffenheimer from Gurs, 1941 - 1942,” n.d. Semi Uffenheimer Family Collection. Leo Baeck Institute Archives.



Figure 8. Eva Liebhold, “The Whipping of the Marmalade.” (“*Die Marmelade wird geschlagen*”) Page from the *Memoirs of Camp de Gurs Illustrated by Eva Liebhold*. USHMM.

Uffenheimer was only one of many internees in the women’s camp who found food preparation to be a productive and fulfilling task. Careful attention to the transformation of scarce food resources into tasty meals also gave many women from Baden and the Palatinate a sense of purpose. In this vein, Hanna Schramm contrasted the behaviors of veteran female prisoners with those of more recently arrived Jewish internees from southwest Germany. The latter caught Schramm’s attention for both their cooking and organizational efforts:

They were good housewives, and they remained so in the camp. They maintained the order and cleanliness of their spaces and their appearance; they cleaned, washed and cooked all day long. We were amazed to see how the new ones devoted themselves to improving the food, sizzling and bubbling in cans or other random dishes, and with a lot of patience, skill and a few ingredients that they brought with them or bought in the canteen, they turned their ration of boring water soup into a reasonably tasty dish.⁹⁶

Schramm’s words indicate that the female internees of Baden and the Saar Palatinate adjusted to their new environment actively using domestic tasks like cooking and cleaning. Her emphasis on the transformation of “boring water soup” into a “reasonably tasty dish” also suggests how careful food preparation was also a form of resource management that contributed to prisoner

⁹⁶ Hanna Schramm, *Menschen in Gurs: Erinnerungen an Ein französisches Internierungslager (1940-1941)* (Worms: Verlag Georg Heintz, 1977), 75.

well-being. It is also likely that food preparation brought these women a sense of calm and control that they struggled to find elsewhere in the camp. This sense of purpose and control had limits, of course, and might be related to what Marion Kaplan identified as a “temporary frame of security”.⁹⁷ Considering the constant scarcity of food in the camp, however, such temporary behaviors were marked by contradiction. They diverted prisoner attention and energy away from pressing structural and collective concerns and channeled them into micro-behaviors like those described by Schramm. In short, “temporary frames of security” rooted in small-scale everyday practices comprised a double-edged sword.

In contrast, testimonies describing time spent cooking in Camp de Gurs written by male prisoners are scarce. However, young male prisoners with jobs in the camp derived meaning from helping their family members secure additional food resources.⁹⁸ Rolf Weinstock cited his increased ability to provide more food for his mother as one reason he developed his small business as a carpenter and gardener at Gurs. When he began to fear for his mother’s health due to her weight loss, he began to smuggle food into the camp through an unidentified intermediary.⁹⁹ Weinstock attributes some of his choices to act in the camp to his mother’s health and nutrition, highlighting yet another dynamic that put food at the center of human relationships in the camp.

⁹⁷ Kaplan, *From Dignity to Despair*, 58.

⁹⁸ Gert Wollheim, *Drawing of a Couple Sharing Bread through Barbed Wire in Gurs by a German Inmate*, 1940, USHMM.

⁹⁹ Weinstock, 51.



Figure 9. Three Women Toasting Bread on a Heating Stove (1940), by Lili Rilic-Andrieux. Ghetto Fighters House Archives.

Though records indicate that it was more common for men to support and provide for women in the camp, this was not always the case. As Hájková argues in the case of Theresienstadt, food sharing was marked by “double-genderedness”.¹⁰⁰ It did not always begin with men and end with women but rather assumed a range of forms. For example, Ida Strauss wrote to her children in March 1941: “Julius and Berthold are coming to visit me. Berthold looks very ill and has to eat the food that doesn’t agree with him before. I’ve often given him my share of my aunt’s food...”¹⁰¹ Food sharing and exchange with friends and neighbors was common among older female prisoners, who were sometimes widowed and without family members in the camp. For example, Rosa Mayer-Murr, a widow without children in the camp, both sold and shared food with other female prisoners: “I could not eat my bread - every week I gave Lene a

¹⁰⁰ Hájková, 122.

¹⁰¹ Letter from Ida Straus at Gurs to her children on March 21, 1941. Stadtarchiv Karlsruhe, ed., *Briefe*, 116.

portion, sometimes two, then came other women who were grateful customers.”¹⁰² Similarly, Gretl Drexler developed close ties to neighbors and friends in the camp. She wrote that she “gave a little bit (one rib) to my new mattress neighbor (since Aunt Lina left), a nice person my age, Miss Luise Kaufmann from Ladenburg...In return, I'm getting some vegetables today that she sometimes makes on the stove.”¹⁰³ These examples show that the group of kin was a molecular and dynamic social unit and not always synonymous with heterosexuality or biological relation. Ties to a common place of origin, social class, and convenience also played a role.

Regardless of the logic structuring it, food sharing elicited positive emotion and left a mark on the memories of prisoners. In an oral history interview in the USC Shoah Institute's Visual History Archive, Joan Mass, who was interned at Gurs as a child, remarked that she had a “strong memory of a friend of my mother's who was in the barrack who had a husband. Evidently the men were given some additional food at some point. It was a potato...the husband of my mother's friend brought the potato over and she shared it with us.” Even though they usually involved the sharing of only small amounts of food, the scarcity of resources imbued such moments with a sense of comfort and connection.

¹⁰² Mayer-Murr, 5.

¹⁰³ Roland Paul, ed., *Gretl Drexler. Briefe aus Mannheim, Gurs und Grenoble (1939-1942). Das Schicksal einer Jüdischen Frau aus Landau in Der Pfalz* (Kaiserslautern: Institut für pfälzische Geschichte und Volkskunde Kaiserslautern, 2014), 237.



Figure 10. „Internment Camp Gurs: Women waiting for food distribution.”
(„Internierungslager Gurs; Wartende Frauen Bei Essensausgabe.“) is licensed under CC BY 3.0 DE.
Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek & Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg, Abt. Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart.

The distribution of food did not always elicit positive emotions, however. It is important to acknowledge that prisoners sometimes jostled for scarce rations or confronted each other with anger. Kurt Löw and Karl Bodek’s drawing of a group of men watching a fellow prisoner cut their bread rations, titled “Man Cutting a Loaf of Bread” and nicknamed “The Bread Surgeon”, has been held out repeatedly as evidence of this dynamic.¹⁰⁴ Löw and Bodek’s image also highlights the immense food-related anxiety prisoners experienced in the camp. This anxiety about losing one’s share to a fellow prisoner may have motivated some prisoners to consume supplementary food in secret at night in the barracks while their fellow prisoners slept. Several prisoners recalled hearing the rustle of paper wrapping in the barracks at night because other internees chose to eat additional food as their fellow inmates slept, perhaps to avoid requests to

¹⁰⁴ Laharie, 304.

share.¹⁰⁵ This confirms both that sharing was an expectation within the prisoner society and that adherence to norms related to sharing remained a challenge for many prisoners.



Figure 11. Kurt Löw and Karl Bodek. *Man Cutting a Loaf of Bread*. Harvard Art Museums/Busch-Reisinger Museum.

Whether prisoners shared or competed, commensality stood at the center of social relations in the camp. In many ways, food was the central unit of social currency in the prisoner society, more valuable than money or other goods. This was not just a function of its relative scarcity but also reflected the ways that prisoners structured their social interactions around it.

¹⁰⁵ Weinstock, 54.

CONCLUSION

Former prisoners sometimes remarked in their memoirs and diaries that hunger at Gurs was not severe enough to kill quickly yet provoked constant suffering.¹⁰⁶ It was this suffering that demobilized prisoners by forcing them to preserve their energy, yet it was also what pushed them to organize early in the winter of 1940-1941. This organization took place at the level of individual barracks within the îlots but also on behalf of Jewish prisoners in the camp as a group.

Some prisoners took the initiative in organizing efforts to sustain their fellow barracks mates. One example is Theodor Rosenthal, a professional chef from Bad Homburg, Germany, who continued to work in this profession in his îlot of 580 people at Gurs. In a thank-you note that Rosenthal saved in his camp diary, one of his barrack mates, the artist Henry Choke-Berkefeld, credited him with saving the lives of the inhabitants of his barrack:

He suggested that the inmates in his barracks contribute 10 francs per week to the general rations. With this contribution, he and the eight men who worked in his kitchen were able to purchase additional vegetables, as well as corn and bean flour for more substantial soups, from the camp's small, internee-run shops. The high mortality rate in our îlot had decreased rapidly with this new diet, so that 14 days later, thank God, there were no more deaths.' He enjoyed great respect among his fellow prisoners.¹⁰⁷

Choke-Berkefeld's note suggests that some prisoners could and did act to save the lives of those outside the bounds of their family units. Other records left by prisoners further indicate that idea of organizing to purchase additional food at the level of the barracks became a common form of mutuality.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Gertrude Oppenheimer, for example, wrote in her memoir that "The food was too little to exist on and too much to die a fast death from hunger." Gertrud Oppenheimer, "Gertrud Oppenheimer Memoir," n.d., USHMM.

¹⁰⁷ "Rosenthal, Theodor," Gedenkbuch der Stadt Baden-Baden, accessed April 25, 2025, <https://gedenkbuch.baden-baden.de/person/rosenthal-theodor/>.

¹⁰⁸ "A lot of money is needed, so now we're supposed to organize a barrack-by-barrack collection to improve the food supply," wrote Arthur Lorch to Julius and Jeanette Lorch on January 6, 1941. Arbeitskreis ehemalige Synagoge Pfundstadt e.V., ed., *Briefe aus den Lagern*, 107.

Additional efforts to organize on behalf of Jewish prisoners occurred at a more centralized level. When the camp directors attempted to limit the amount of food internees could purchase in December 1940 and prohibited vendors from entering the camp in early 1941, prisoners fought to retain these rights with the help of Rabbi Kapel of the Camps Commission, an organization run by French Jewish leaders and headquartered in Toulouse.¹⁰⁹ Kapel created a purchasing cooperative called the Coopérative d'achats (CDA), which purchased food items requested by prisoners and resold them to the camp canteens.¹¹⁰ The CDA contributed to a revitalization of the canteen system and allowed it to supply low-cost and free food to prisoners without means.

The CDA was also a wedge that the Camps Commission in Toulouse used to build a relationship with Jewish prisoners at Gurs and vice-versa. Over the next eighteen months, they worked together to improve the position of the prisoner collective at Gurs vis-à-vis its administration and the Vichy state. Though they were not able to produce significant amounts of food on the land in and around the camp, prisoners at Gurs achieved some strategic objectives that allowed them to increase their chances of survival within limits and improve their well-being as a collective. These improvements were not always evenly distributed, however, and significant differences in conditions between îlots and barracks persisted. The observations of Ludwig Cahn in a letter to family abroad on December 20, 1940, reflected this unevenness: “By improving our barracks and also changing the food a little, it's becoming a little more bearable now. You get used to everything little by little. But in îlot L it's still almost unbearable and dear

¹⁰⁹ The Camps Commission was 90% funded by the American Joint Distribution Committee (J.D.C.) and 10% funded by the Grand Rabbinat of France. Drake, 202.

¹¹⁰ Laurie A. Drake, “Jewish Food Aid in Vichy’s Internment Camps, June 1940-November 1942,” in *More than Parcels: Wartime Aid for Jews in Nazi-Era Camps and Ghettos*, ed. Jan Láníček and Jan Lambertz (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2022), 213.

Rosa and her colleagues are the ones to be pitied the most.”¹¹¹ Cahn’s remark also suggests that organization proceeded at different rhythms in the men’s and women’s îlots.

Though the prisoners society improved the distribution of food at Gurs over time, the balance may have tilted against older, female prisoners. The elderly perished in disproportionately high numbers at Gurs, and they were mostly women.¹¹² The relatively high value placed on the labor of young men by the French administration allotted them greater food resources. Young Jewish and Spanish men who worked in the camp or in its vicinity experienced hunger less frequently than other prisoners.¹¹³ There is also statistical evidence that women suffered slightly more hunger at Gurs than men. In a study on nutrition in Vichy French camps conducted in 1942, the French Jewish doctor Joseph Weill and his colleagues observed that a larger percentage of women (around 53%) at Gurs suffered hunger edema than men (around 48%).¹¹⁴ While the gap between genders is not large, this finding is significant because it runs contrary to the established consensus on the effects of famine in world history and during the Holocaust. Hájková asserts that “women deal better with starvation because their normal nutriment intake is already smaller, due to their lesser weight and body mass. With corresponding reduced rations, women fare better than men.”¹¹⁵ Weill and colleagues interpreted the findings of higher edema rates in women to mean that, though women are initially better protected against starvation because their caloric intake is 20% lower than that of men, by 1942 their resistance in the French camps had reached its limits “and that at present the prognosis for

¹¹¹Letter from Ludwig Cahn-Born to Clem and Emil on December 20, 1940. Martin Ruch, ed., *Letzte Briefe: Offenburg-Gurs-Auschwitz. 1940-1942*. (Bühl/Baden: Deutsche Erstausgabe, 2022), 23.

¹¹² According to Laharie, more women perished at Gurs than men. 230.

¹¹³ For example, Josef Grunkin wrote in a letter: „I split wood and wash laundry and actually have a lot of work, but it has the advantage that you get full and earn a little.” Letter from Josef Grunkin, November 25, 1940, Lukrezia Seiler, ed., *Was Wird aus uns Noch Werden?* 72.

¹¹⁴ J. Weill, R. Zimmer, and M. Dubois, 306.

¹¹⁵ Hájková, 101-102.

women is worse than formerly.”¹¹⁶ Though prisoners shared food and practiced forms of mutuality that redistributed it as evenly as possible, they struggled to fully realize this equality. In purely numerical terms, more people might have survived at Gurs if food had been distributed more equitably. The internees were by no means solely responsible for their situation, but their choices and actions still played a role in determining hunger’s impact on the prisoner society.

¹¹⁶ J. Weill, R. Zimmer, and M. Dubois, 309.

THE HOUSE OF THE LIVING: ILLNESS, DEATH, AND BURIAL



Figure 12. Handwritten Death Certificate for Lilly Weilheimer decorated with a Jewish Star and Written in the Gurs Internment Camp. July 20, 1941. USHMM.

Lilly Weilheimer, age 39, died of cancer at Camp de Gurs. The handmade death certificate, shown above, provides a record of her passing on July 18, 1941, and her burial two days later, on July 20. It reads: “Taken from us all too soon, she was laid to rest as a victim of our struggle in her final resting place in the camp cemetery on July 20, 1941, among almost 800 fellow sufferers. Honor her memory.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ “Handwritten Death Certificate for Lilly Weilheimer decorated with a Jewish Star and Written in the Gurs Internment Camp,” July 20, 1941, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The precise wording on the document reads as follows: “The Lord has given, and the Lord has taken, Praised be the name of the Lord. On the 18th of July, 1941, the 23rd of Tamuz 5701, there came upon us the harsh death in the Camp de Gurs, Basses Pyrenees, France of my beloved darling, our dear cherished mother, our dear daughter, sister, aunt and sister-in-law, our faithful friend, Mrs. Lilly Weilheimer, nee Wetzlar from Ludwigshafen on the Rein born 4/24/1902 taken from us so very soon, we bury her on July 20, 1941 at the camp's cemetery for her eternal rest, in the midst of 800 mourners, a victim of our struggle. Honor be her memory. Lea Bas Gidel. Died on 23 Tamuz 5701. May she rest in peace. Distant from the eye, always near to the heart.”

Weilheimer's death certificate illustrates multiple dimensions of living, ailing, and dying among the Jewish inmates of Camp de Gurs. First, it offers evidence of one of most tragic dimensions of everyday life at Gurs: the absence of medical infrastructure, equipment, and supplies. If Weilheimer had lived in the Theresienstadt ghetto, it is possible she might have been operated on.

The death certificate also speaks to the centrality of the Gurs cemetery, where Weilheimer's funeral, attended by 800 prisoners, occurred. For prisoners from Baden and the Saar Palatinate, the cemetery was a "heterotopia", an "other" space where they mourned lost community members but could also circulate and communicate without regulation. Michel Foucault described the heterotopia as a space with "the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect."¹¹⁸ The cemetery at Gurs functioned as a heterotopia by serving as a gathering place for prisoners, one which they visited often during November and December 1940, when an average of eight prisoners perished per day.¹¹⁹ In the cemetery the prisoners of Baden and the Saar Palatinate grieved for hundreds of kin but also mixed freely with family members and friends from whom they lived in separation in the barracks. There they lived mixed experiences marked by both the tragedy of loss and the joy of reunion.

Despite, or perhaps, *because*, of the proliferation of disease and the high mortality rate at Gurs, its hospitals also functioned as heterotopias. This reflected the specific character of medical agency at Gurs, where the infrastructure, supplies and equipment needed to diagnose unfamiliar diseases and provide high-quality care were lacking. Medical personnel had little

¹¹⁸ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces (1967), Heterotopias.," Michel Foucault, Info., 1984, <https://foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en/>.

¹¹⁹ Claude Laharie, *Le Camp de Gurs, 1939-1945: Un Aspect Méconnu de l'histoire de Vichy*, J&D Editions (Biarritz, 1993), 228.

hope of saving aged prisoners who were ailing. Thus, prisoners were interned in the camp hospitals only if they belonged to a privileged category – such as children – or suffered from maladies that doctors could treat with scarce, often primitive resources. Doctors did not apply a triage mentality because they did not have the resources required to do so. Many diseases of unknown origin – including tuberculosis and a dysentery-like malady that assumed epidemic-proportions – were not consistently treated in the camp hospitals. Instead, prisoners received care in the barracks or infirmaries, located in the îlots. The camp's two hospitals were spaces reserved for treatment by medical personnel, but the forms of treatment administered were limited by material resources and capacity.

From the perspective of prisoners, the camp's hospitals were spaces of connection and crisis. Given the cramped quarters that prisoners inhabited in the barracks and îlots, a visit to the hospital was a pleasant respite. In the hospital, one no longer had to face the harsh realities of day-to-day living in the camp itself. A hospitalized prisoner also enjoyed better, larger meals, formed new friendships with prisoners from other compounds or the medical personnel, and was temporarily excused from responsibilities related to self-care.

In what follows, I argue that prisoners found relief from a growing contraction of their living space in the hospitals and cemeteries at Camp de Gurs. Reliance on these spaces as heterotopias was a response to the experience of inhabiting crowded barracks in the camp and to the continued contraction of Jewish living space in Europe. Retreat to these spaces represented continuity with tactics adopted in Germany under National Socialism, where Jews also relied on spaces like cemeteries to cope with exclusion.¹²⁰ Similarly, in the camp hospitals and cemeteries

¹²⁰ Guy Miron, *Space and Time under Persecution: The German-Jewish Experience in the Third Reich*, trans. Haim Watzman (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2023), 4.

at Gurs, prisoners found the stability in space needed to imagine themselves as members of social units other than their barracks, and sometimes, other than their groups of kin.

ILLNESS AND ITS TREATMENT

The perception of the hospitals at Gurs as spaces that were “other” had little to do with their facilities. The word “hospital” at Gurs referred to a wooden barracks where medical personnel administered treatment and care to around thirty patients in individual beds. The camp had two hospitals, one for men and another for women. Prior to the arrival of women in the camp in May 1940, there was only one, central hospital, located in a barrack, where the most serious patients were treated.¹²¹ Each of the îlots also had an infirmary with capacity for thirty internees. Prisoners complained little about a lack of space in the hospitals and infirmaries, but this may be because many of them became ill, remained in bed, and never visited a sickbay. At Gurs, prisoners suffered, ailed, and died in the hospitals and infirmaries, but also in the barracks.

There was only one disease at Gurs that qualified as an epidemic: a malady that prisoners called “dysentery” but has never, in fact, been precisely identified. Its symptoms included violent diarrhea, fever, stomach pains, nausea, and intense thirst due to the drying of the mucous membranes.¹²² Few of those who suffered from it at Gurs lived to write about it, and those who did were young. Usually, they referred to it as “dysentery”. Senta Luzie, a teenager in 1940, recalled in her 2005 memoir that the disease affected nearly all internees during the winter of 1940 to 1941: “Most of us had dysentery. Every day someone else died.”¹²³ Because she worked as nurse in the Red Cross barrack, Gertrude Oppenheimer was treated there when she became ill.

¹²¹ Frank, 257.

¹²² Laharie, 331.

¹²³ Senta Luzie Manasse Victorovich, “J’étais Une Juive Allemande: Histoire de Senta Luzie, née 1926, à Talheim,” 2005, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

She provided an account of her experience in a short, unpublished memoir: “Got sick with dysentery, was put in the bunk where the 19-year-old girl had just died. This was a very painful sickness to have with no soothing food for the intestines and no medicine to kill the pain. After I was over it, I was so terribly weak, I could hardly stand up anymore.”¹²⁴

Doctors believed this illness might have been typhoid fever, not dysentery, however. These two maladies had similar, often concurrent symptoms, which made them difficult for medical personnel and patients to differentiate. “A doctor told us later on that it might have been typhoid fever, what we called dysentery, nobody could really know for sure as no culture was ever made of the bacteria or virus or whatever it was,” recalled Oppenheimer.¹²⁵ A lack of information was one reason for inadequate treatment.

Most patients suffering from this unidentified illness remained in the barracks, where poor conditions and the need to reuse medical supplies and equipment aggravated the suffering of patients and accelerated the spread of contagious disease. Eugen Neter, a pediatrician from Mannheim, later wrote in a short testimony of his experiences at Gurs: “In the cold, makeshift barracks, with 30 to 40 people suffering from diarrhea, there was a single bedpan. The soiling was terrible, with the lack of linen, and the resulting physical and mental torment unspeakable.”¹²⁶ Doctors and nurses treated patients with crushed charcoal, which they dissolved in water.¹²⁷ On some occasions, they prescribed a limited supply of bismuth or tannalbine. Despite the skill at smuggling in goods from outside the camp that internees later developed, during the winter of 1940 to 1941 they found little relief from pharmacies in towns near the

¹²⁴ Gertrud Oppenheimer, “Gertrud Oppenheimer Memoir,” n.d., United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 6.

¹²⁵ Oppenheimer, 6.

¹²⁶ Eugen Neter, “Camp de Gurs,” 1943, Leo Baeck Institute, 6.

¹²⁷ Werner L. Frank, *The Curse of Gurs. Way Station to Auschwitz* (Werner L. Frank, 2012), 257.

camp.¹²⁸ Almost all the medications that could be administered were supplied by internees themselves, who had packed them before their deportation from Germany.

Similarly, contagious lung diseases such as tuberculosis and pneumonia, which also remained undiagnosed, likely spread swiftly in the barracks. Camp de Gurs lacked the infrastructure and equipment necessary to send patients for X-rays or sputum analyses, which might have helped them diagnose and cure these maladies. The inability to identify and categorize the sick, in turn, hindered the ability of caregivers to separate the healthy in the barracks and quarantine the sick. Thus, prisoners suffering from contagious lung diseases remained among healthy prisoners barracks, further contributing to its spread. In an oral history interview recorded in 1998, one survivor recalled that her mother had suffered from tuberculosis in the camp and transmitted it to her.

My mother had a job in the kitchen and so I think my sister and I were better off than some of the other children, because she was able to, to get us food. But even the little bit that she got us, it wasn't enough, and I think she gave us a lot of her own because she, she was very very sick. I suspect that she had TB because that's what I had. I got it from her. And there were many people who had TB.¹²⁹

The director of the women's hospital in the camp confirmed that tuberculosis "was, as might be expected from the poor housing and hygiene conditions, much more common than under normal circumstances."¹³⁰ While both prisoners and administrators knew the disease was present, little action was taken to isolate the sick and treat them systematically.

In contrast, medical personnel made some efforts to identify and treat typhoid and the dysentery-like malady that affected many prisoners. According to Laharie, however, medical personnel requested analyses of organic matter from patients with the diarrheal disease in an

¹²⁸ Laharie, 332-333.

¹²⁹ Susan Philipp. Interview 48261. Interview by Mindy Kornberg. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, November 15, 1998. Accessed December 23, 2024

¹³⁰ Max Ludwig, *Das Tagebuch Des Hans O.: Dokumente und Berichte über Die Deportation und den Untergang der Heidelberger Juden* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1965) 17-18.

army laboratory, who claimed that it was not, in fact, dysentery.¹³¹ In late winter 1941, prisoners finally received vaccinations against typhoid, tetanus, and diphtheria.¹³² No similar initiatives seem to have been organized to respond to tuberculosis. While streptomycin had only first appeared in 1940, many smaller measures might have been taken to control the disease's spread.

Hájková observed similarly blasé attitudes toward tuberculosis at Theresienstadt, where patients manifesting symptoms were at least X-rayed. She attributed it to the prevalence of tuberculosis in the 1930s and its association with the poor and working classes, as well as with Jews living in cramped, urban settings. She maintains that “the prevalence of tuberculosis thus represented a fitting marker of the prisoners’ social descent.”¹³³ Hájková’s interpretation of medical personnel’s relative resignation in the face of tuberculosis echoes the argument of Susan Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor*. Sontag pointed out that, though Central European doctors like Robert Koch led the medical field in research on tuberculosis, Romantic-era beliefs about the disease, such as that it reflected an individual’s inner disposition or character, remained influential among the bourgeoisie in the twentieth century.¹³⁴ The absence of treatment of tuberculosis at Gurs might therefore reflect widely held beliefs among the central European middle classes in the pre-war era.

All maladies, including tuberculosis, were aggravated by the poor nutrition suffered by internees. In a significant number of cases, diseases appeared, spread, and turned fatal because prisoners lacked adequate food.¹³⁵ Malnutrition also led to cases of amenorrhea, anorexia, eye

¹³¹ Laharie, 332.

¹³² Oppenheimer, 5.

¹³³ Hájková, 145.

¹³⁴ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1978).

¹³⁵ Laharie, 331.

diseases, tooth loss, stomach cramps, and hemorrhages. Edemas were an everyday affair, as were patients whose body weights had dropped to a fraction of their usual levels.¹³⁶

Poor housing and hygienic conditions also contributed to the spread of vermin. Even though internees had access to showers, few could avoid infection with lice, fleas, and bedbugs in the barracks, where rats were also common. In addition to regular washing, delousing by hand, using bleach and disinfectants when washing sheets, blankets, and clothes, and burning infected materials were the only steps that internees and medical personnel could take to combat them. Laharie states that “It is no exaggeration to say that all the men and women imprisoned during the Vichy era were, at one time or another during their internment, lousy.”¹³⁷ In July 1941, the camp chief organized a systematic effort to rid the barracks of lice, which was implemented by doctors, nurses, and internees. This effort improved conditions noticeably by fall 1941.¹³⁸

In assessing the causes and effects of the spread of disease in camps, ghettos, and other overcrowded spaces, historians have assigned different degrees of agency to the internees. Laharie, for example, strives for balance when discussing the mortality rate in wintertime but links the material and moral state of internees: “As soon as winter approaches, all those who are not animated of sufficient moral energy are in danger of death. The feeling of their decline crushes them, their uselessness in a world which rejects them overwhelms them, and they allow themselves to be destroyed little by little”.¹³⁹ Hájková’s take reaffirms the significance of the demoralization of internees to the proliferation of illness at Theresienstadt but adds nuance and empathy by claiming that sickness was both “a specific physiological, immunological reaction to the ghetto” and “a psychological mechanism indicating the powerlessness of Holocaust

¹³⁶ Laharie, 334.

¹³⁷ Laharie, 330.

¹³⁸ Laharie, 335.

¹³⁹ Laharie, 230.

victims”.¹⁴⁰ Hájková’s interpretation is relevant to the case of Gurs, where nearly 50% of the deaths in the camp’s history occurred in the winter of 1940-1941, immediately following the arrival of the Jews of Baden and the Saar Palatinate. In their case, illness may have constituted a complex response to grief and loss experienced following deportation, displacement, and arrival at the camp, often at a late stage in life.

HOSPITALIZATION AND MEDICAL PERSONNEL

Prisoners who were hospitalized at Gurs left behind few records of their experiences, but the few records that have survived indicate that it may not have been a universally terrible experience. For one thing, prisoners received more and improved food in the camp hospitals, a benefit they valued highly. In the hospital, they also had increased contact with prisoners from other barracks. In his memoir about his childhood experiences at Gurs, Kurt Salomon Maier remembered that he struck up a friendship with a young girl named Liesel Kling, whom he met when both were hospitalized for diphtheria. As the two recovered, they sat on a small hill together and enjoyed the view of the rest of the camp.¹⁴¹ “I wanted to take her hand and kiss her, but I didn't dare. I don't think the sweet girl would have turned me away,” he wrote. When Liesel finally recovered and left the hospital, her mother’s gave Maier a small picture of mother and daughter. On the back Mrs. Kling had written: “In memory of the diphtheria survived in Camps de Gurs. Liesel – Ruth Kling.” Maier cherished the image, the only material souvenir of his internment at Gurs that he retained.¹⁴² Maier’s fond memories of his time in the sickbay suggest that hospitalization at Gurs did not have the same meaning for all prisoners.

¹⁴⁰ Hájková, 151.

¹⁴¹ Kurt Salomon Maier, *Unerwünscht: Kindheits- Und Jugenderinnerungen eines Jüdischen Kippenheimers. Eine Jüdische Jugend Im Dritten Reich*. (Ubstadt-Weiher/Heidelberg/Basel: Verlag Regionalkultur, 2018), 104.

¹⁴² Maier, 105.

Many middle-aged and older prisoners with serious illnesses never reached the camp hospital. They perished in the barracks and infirmaries. This was the case, for example of Gertrude Oppenheimer's brother-in-law, Isi, who died of pneumonia in an infirmary during the winter of 1940-41. The doctor in the infirmary administered an infusion of eucalyptus to Isi, but it had little effect. "We tried to make him comfortable as well as we could, but he could not hear us anymore. And there were the three of us when he passed away... We laid him to rest the next day, on one of the stormiest winter days of this terrible winter of 1940/41," wrote Oppenheimer in her memoir.¹⁴³ Oppenheimer's description of Isi's death suggests that, in the absence of modern medical equipment and supplies, transfer to a camp hospital from an infirmary would have made little difference. Only an infusion of eucalyptus was available.

With only herbal remedies available to treat patients with serious pulmonary illnesses, the ability of doctors and nurses to act was constrained. Yet there was no shortage of medical personnel in the camp, and any deficiencies in treatment cannot be attributed to their absence. There were enough doctors within the prisoner society to run the two hospitals and one infirmary in each of the îlots.¹⁴⁴ Dr. Eugene Neter, a pediatrician from Mannheim, Dr. Alfred Wolff, a gynecologist and obstetrician from Ludwigshafen, and Dr. Ludwig Mann, a neurologist and psychologist from Mannheim, ran the camp hospital facilities. Wolff and Mann ran the Women's Hospital, and Neter ran the men's hospital.¹⁴⁵ At least one doctor from the prisoner society was assigned to work in each îlot. In addition, Dr. Johanna Geissmar, a woman pediatrician from Heidelberg, saw patients from a makeshift hospital in her îlot in the women's camp.

¹⁴³ Oppenheimer, 5.

¹⁴⁴ "Mission d'Alec Cramer En France Non Occupée En Novembre 1940 : Correspondance, Rapports Sur Les Visites de Camps d'IC Dans Le Sud de La France," January 1941, ACICR B G 003 028 01, International Red Cross Archives, 10-11.

¹⁴⁵ Werner L. Frank, *The Curse of Gurs. Way Station to Auschwitz* (Werner L. Frank, 2012), 258.



Figure 13. “Internment Camp Gurs: Nurse with patient in wheelchair.” („Internierungslager Gurs; Krankenschwester mit Patientin im Rollstuhl“) is licensed under CC BY 3.0 DE. Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek & Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg, Abt. Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart.

Despite the services they provided to other internees, doctors did not occupy positions of privilege in the social hierarchy of the prisoner society. “Although the doctors are also hungry, they eat with us and receive no more from the camp. Despite their work throughout the day and often through the night, none of them has ever participated in the Quaker or Swiss meals in our camp,” observed Maurice Meier.¹⁴⁶ This is not to say that their efforts went unacknowledged by other prisoners. Several prisoners expressed gratitude to physicians who had treated them. Meier expressed his respect for the doctors in his barracks by assigning them symbolic pseudonyms in his letters to his son: Dr. Uermüdlich, Dr. Helferich, and Dr. Liebreich (Dr. Tireless, Dr. Helpful, and Dr. Lovely).¹⁴⁷

Prisoners bestowed much praise on Geissmar, the only female physician in the camp, in their memoirs. Rosa Mayer-Murr recorded her memory of consulting Geissmar on various

¹⁴⁶ Meier, 78.

¹⁴⁷ Meier, 82.

occasions.¹⁴⁸ Martha and Else Liefmann also acknowledged Geissmar's professionalism in their memoirs, noting that she was "completely absorbed in caring for her patients in Gurs."¹⁴⁹

Geissmar, who had earned her medical degree from Ruprecht-Karls-Universität-zu-Heidelberg in 1915 after writing a dissertation on a genetic disorder called Wilson's disease, was rarely praised by other medical elites at Gurs for her skill or intelligence, however.¹⁵⁰ For example, Dr. Mann remarked of the facilities where Geissmar worked in her report: "It was a good hospital in spite of having been hammered together from thin boards. Johanna Geissmar and her three helpers ruled and worked here together in cheerful harmony as if there wasn't any Gurs."¹⁵¹ Mann's emphasis on "cheerful harmony" could reflect the significance that prisoner medical elites placed on psychological agency. However, it might also reflect a conflation of women's competence and character.¹⁵²

Most women medical personnel served as nurses, not doctors. Because of the prevalence of illness and lack of modern medicine, nursing and patient care were central to health services in the camp. For one thing, the need for care of the sick and elderly demanded that some older women who had practiced nursing during the First World War use their skills again to care for fellow prisoners. One male prisoner wrote that his wife had quickly found occupation in a sick barracks, where she took up her "old occupation".¹⁵³ Young "new" women with experience in

¹⁴⁸ Mayer-Murr, 6.

¹⁴⁹ Else Liefmann and Martha Liefmann, *Helle Lichter Auf Dunklem Grund: Erinnerungen von Martha und Else Liefmann* (CVB-Druck Zürich: Christliches Verlagshaus Bern, 1966), 52-53.

¹⁵⁰ Johanna Geissmar, "Über Die Leberveränderung bei Wilsonscher Krankheit" (Wiesbaden, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität zu Heidelberg, 1915).

¹⁵¹ Dr. Ludwig Mann, "Heroism at Gurs / Heldentum in Guers," 1942, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 9.

¹⁵² Geissmar may have been popular with patients, but she was never awarded a position working in the camp's main hospital with her male peers. While it is hard not to read this as sexism, it also reflects the gendered division of space and labor to which the medical personnel at Gurs generally adhered.

¹⁵³ "Meine Frau hat bereits Bestätigung in einer Krankenbaracke gefunden und ist damit in ihrem alten Beruf." "Letters Written by Inmates of Gurs Concentration Camp," 1940, 1656/3/8/627, Wiener Holocaust Library.

nursing from the interwar period also worked in the sick barracks (infirmaries), the Red Cross barracks, or the camp hospitals. The nurses of the women's infirmaries in camp won the respect of the Liefmann sisters, who noted in their memoir in 1966 that they "were in a much better medical condition than those of the men, where some medics from the First World War, who despite the best intentions provided a care could not compare with female nursing, were employed."¹⁵⁴ Some prisoners without experience in nursing also attended classes for student nurses in the infirmary.¹⁵⁵



Figure 14. Photo of Gertrud Oppenheimer, who worked as a nurse in the Red Cross barracks in the women's camp at Gurs. USHMM.

Nurse Pauline Maier, formerly the Head Nurse at the Jewish Hospital in Mannheim, managed the women's hospital at Gurs. Despite the scarcity of means, prisoners recognized Maier's achievements at Gurs and acknowledged them in memoirs. Adele Cantor recollected that "after two days some nurses arrived, including a very capable matron from Mannheim, who was an excellent organizer and knew how to make something out of nothing."¹⁵⁶ In his 1943 reflections on his experience at Gurs, Dr. Eugen Neter underscored the achievements of the

¹⁵⁴ „Die Infirmerien in den Îlots der Frauen waren in einem weit besseren hygienischen Zustand als die der Männer, wo als Krankenpfleger einige Sanitäter aus dem ersten Weltkrieg tätig waren, eine Pflege, die mit der weiblichen Krankenpflege nicht zu vergleichen war, trotz bestem Willem.“ Else and Martha Liefmann, *Helle Lichter*, 52.

¹⁵⁵ Oppenheimer, 6.

¹⁵⁶ Adele Cantor, "Tears and Joys of a War-Time Deportee," trans. Tolly Cantor, 1946, Renata de Gara Cafiero Collection, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 6.

Jewish nurses of Gurs: “What Jewish nurses and helpers accomplished back then can only be fully appreciated by those who experienced the unfavorable conditions under which they had to begin their difficult service.”¹⁵⁷

Health services at Gurs provided some temporary relief to ailing patients, who fought spaces of connection and care in the camp’s hospitals. However, this did not necessarily reflect an ability on the part of the camp’s health services to diagnose and treat disease within the prisoner society. Despite their competence and good intentions, the ability of many nurses and doctors to save lives was restricted by limited access to supplies and equipment and a lack of living space.

DEATH AND REUNION

The total number of deaths at Gurs pales in comparison to the number of deaths at camps in eastern Europe, but it was the highest at any internment camp in France. At least 1,038 deaths occurred between October 24, 1940, and November 1, 1943.¹⁵⁸ More than half of these deaths occurred within a short period of time running from late October 1940, when the Jewish deportees of Baden and the Saar Palatinate arrived in the camp, to winter’s end in late February 1941. As the winter of 1940-1941 culminated, the mortality rate slowed considerably.

During the same period, prisoners developed a particular set of practices linked to burials. The names of the dead were read out loud in each îlot in the early afternoon. “Every day a death cart came through the camp and pulled five, six, seven bodies out of each îlot,” remembered Hal Myers, who was a child at the time.¹⁵⁹ Though estimates of the precise number of deceased per

¹⁵⁷ Eugen Neter, “Camp de Gurs,” 1943, Leo Baeck Institute, 6.

¹⁵⁸ Laharie, 228.

¹⁵⁹ Hal Myers. Interview 4141. Interview by Merle Goldberg. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, July 20, 1995. Accessed January 02, 2025.

day varied greatly and were sometimes exaggerated, almost every survivor who produced a memoir or testimony recorded the impression made by the immense wave of death that pervaded the camp during the winter of 1940 to 1941.

Burials provided an opportunity to move freely and therefore presented prisoners with an opportunity to temporarily escape restrictions on their circulation within the camp and contact with family members in other îlots. "...You would always see parades of people marching down to the cemetery. You were allowed to follow," remembered Ellen Litman.¹⁶⁰ "A technique for meeting one's spouse was at the frequent funerals that became a social event," according to Werner Frank.¹⁶¹ In addition, burials allowed family members to pass food to each other. "All the men and the women attended the burial and during these meetings the cooked food was handed to the men," affirmed Rabbi Ernst Steckelmacher.¹⁶² In this sense, burials served more than one significant social function for Jews at Gurs. The presence of eight hundred people at Lilly Weilheimer's funeral further suggests that burials provided prisoners with a social space that had both a material function (the transmission of food and information) and a moral one (social and cultural reproduction).

The experiences of that winter left an indelible mark on the culture of burial and memorialization that internees developed. The *Hevra Kadisha*, or Jewish burial society, moved to the center of everyday life because it managed the care of the bodies and burial of the deceased. "...The *Hevra* is one of the institutions that always has its hands full," wrote Dr. Hugo

¹⁶⁰ Ellen Litman. Interview 33969. Interview by Eileen Molfetas. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, September 24, 1997. Accessed December 22, 2024.

¹⁶¹ Frank, 245.

¹⁶² Ernst Steckelmacher, "Eyewitness Account by Rabbi Dr. Ernst Steckelmacher of His Experiences in Germany and France between 1933-45," 1955, Wiener Holocaust Library.

Stein to friends from Gurs in November 1940.¹⁶³ Its functions of *Hevra* were manifold. It assisted with the preparation for burial and interment of the dead according to *Halacha* (Jewish law). When possible, it communicated news of an individual's death to family members. The *Hevra* also provided older male prisoners at Gurs with a space for service to the prisoner community. For example, Fanny Zuckerman's late husband, Ludi, occupied himself with the *Hevra* at Gurs: "Ludi and his friend Ansbacher were fully occupied with the burials, ritually and manually."¹⁶⁴ Louis Reutlinger of Pforzheim also participated in the *Hevra*, and he took such pride in his work that when he transferred to Camp Rivesaltes in March 1941, he asked Rabbi Ansbacher to compose a recommendation letter for him so that he might participate in the *Hevra* in his new camp.¹⁶⁵

In some instances, the control of the *Hevra Kadisha* over the choreography of funerals was limited, and the transmission of information between family members in the camp did not always occur without confusion and disruption. Occasionally, it was only upon the removal of bodies from an îlot and subsequent transport to the cemetery that family members learned of the deaths of loved ones.¹⁶⁶ Curt Lindemann remembered one such moment of tragedy: "One sad case has remained particularly vivid in my memory: at a funeral of a large number of deceased, at which their names were read out, a woman present was the first to learn of her husband's death."¹⁶⁷ This anecdote suggests that the public character of burials in the cemetery was a double-edged sword. On one hand, funerals allowed the prisoner community to affirm shared values and support the bereaved. They allowed members of the Jewish community of

¹⁶³ Letter from Dr. Hugo Stein to friends on November 18, 1940. Stadtarchiv Karlsruhe, ed., *Briefe. Gurs. Lettres. Briefe Einer Badisch-Jüdischen Familie Aus Französischen Internierungslagern. Lettres d'une Famille Juive Du Pays de Bade Internée Dans Les Camps En France*. (Karlsruhe: Info Verlag, 2011), 59.

¹⁶⁴ Fanny Zuckerman, "Erinnerungen," 1990, ME 736, Center for Jewish History/Leo Baeck Institute, 3.

¹⁶⁵ "Reutlinger Family Papers," 1940-1943, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

¹⁶⁶ Curt Lindemann, *Mein Campleben* (Lourdes, France: Imprimerie Lacrampe, 1946), 6.

¹⁶⁷ Lindemann, 6.

southwestern Germany to surreptitiously reaffirm its existence. On the other hand, burials had the potential to stage trauma publicly in a way that may have exacerbated the pain of the family members and friends of the deceased.

The practice of congregating in the cemetery for funerals was a response to the practice of strictly policing prisoner movement on an everyday basis. During the winter of 1940 to 1941, camp administrators and guards limited the movement of prisoners between the îlots, purportedly to control the spread of disease. Prisoners travelled between îlots only with a special pass called a *laissez-passer*. “Passes were issued on a limited basis that allowed a person to go for short periods (such as a half-hour) from one îlot to another. The wait time for this privilege could be several months since 15 to 25 passes were granted for an entire îlot that contained over one thousand individuals,” according to Frank.¹⁶⁸ In response to these restrictions, prisoners awaited the chance to socialize and reunite with friends and family in the cemetery with mixed emotion. Burials elicited both sorrow and joy.

CONCLUSION

Despite the cemetery’s central place in the everyday prisoner experience at Gurs between 1940 and 1942, it has received little attention from historians of life in the camp. Its postwar history has drawn some attention from Scott Soo, a historian of the Spanish refugee experience in France and author of an article on the Gurs cemetery’s postwar trajectory published in *French History* in 2020.¹⁶⁹ Soo’s article reaffirmed the singularity of the Gurs cemetery and attributed it to the history of Baden and Saar Palatinate Jewry in the camp during the winter of 1940 to 1941:

¹⁶⁸ Frank, 245.

¹⁶⁹ Scott Soo, *The Routes to Exile: France and the Spanish Civil War Refugees, 1939-2009* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2013); Scott Soo, “From International Origins to Transnational Commemoration: The Cemetery of the Gurs Camp, 1939–1963,” *French History* 34, no. 1 (2020): 82–104.

“The combination of old age, ill health and the appalling camp conditions caused a high number of deaths and an expansion of the cemetery into the largest of its kind in France.”¹⁷⁰ Despite its singularity, as Soo points out, the cemetery was largely ignored by the French state until the 1960s. Soo claims that the administration of the cemetery obscures its origins in the Third French Republic and the role of Spanish prisoners in creating it. This may be true, but narratives of its history should incorporate knowledge of its role as a site of particular importance to Jewry during their internment.



Figure 15. “Internment Camp Gurs: Cemetery” („Internierungslager Gurs; Gräberfeld.“) is licensed under CC BY 3.0 DE. Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek & Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg, Abt. Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart.

Even when the prisoner society lacked access to modern medical supplies and equipment, the camp hospitals and cemetery remained *heterotopias*, spaces of particular importance to Jews in the camp as their living space continued to contract and deteriorate. These were spaces of

¹⁷⁰ Soo, 86.

sociability, relief, and agency within limits. At the same time, both the cemetery and the hospitals represented the camp's transitional, mixed character in microcosm.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has argued that German-Jewish prisoners at Gurs were not just the charges of humanitarian aid workers and the Vichy state but also historical actors who subtly turned the tables when time and circumstances permitted. This is a radical and contradictory description of victim agency during the Holocaust and one that is clearly not representative of the experience of European Jewry at large. In the case of prisoners at Gurs, however, it is evidence-based and necessary. Recognition of the agency of the victim opens the door to inclusion in historical narratives that would otherwise portray them as an empty receptacle for the wishes of others.

The Gurs prisoner society comprised a semi-autonomous collective with many of its own norms and values. These were not identical to the norms and values of the pre-war German-Jewish bourgeoisie, but they were not wholly distinct from them either. German-Jewish prisoner behaviors reflected their history as an urban, bourgeois ethnic group accustomed to a gendered division of labor but also capable of adapting to challenges. Prisoners often “made things work” and “made do” at the same time. While this might seem inconsistent, it is more accurate than describing prisoner actions and behaviors categorically as “collaboration” or “resistance”.

As far the division of labor within the prisoner society was concerned, the prevalence of seemingly conservative prisoners behaviors often veiled a prioritization of practicality and efficiency. Men tended to work with and craft tools from wood or other materials, while women tended to practice handicrafts like dressmaking and sewing. These tasks were neither compulsory nor typical of the German-Jewish middle classes, but they were legible to them for social and cultural reasons and because of what they had lived under National Socialism in Germany. This does not mean, however, that the division of space did not produce discomfort or

circumventions. The prisoner society's adherence to a gendered division of labor in the camp also created opportunities to engage in what Michel de Certeau referred to as "tactics":

...procedures that gain validity in relation to the pertinence they lend to time – to the circumstances which the precise instant of an intervention transforms into a favorable situation, to the rapidity of movements in an action, to the possible intersections of durations and heterogeneous rhythms, etc.¹⁷¹

One revealing example is prisoners' reliance on funerals as opportunities to gather with those from whom they lived in separation and to pass food to their loved ones. The organization of the camp materialized the division of labor in a way that was in some ways consonant with the gendered *habitus* of prisoners but also opened the door to the use of such "tactics".

Prisoner behaviors yoking sociability to food also exemplify the variety of tactics relied on by prisoners. Queuing, engaging in illicit commerce on the black market, and food sharing are a few instances. Prisoners also developed mutualistic practices within their groups of kin and barracks. These practices presented elements of both continuity and change. While these groups often overlapped with biological family units, they were not identical to them, assimilating new members, excluding others, and shifting form in molecular and dynamic ways. "Privileged" prisoners made efforts to ameliorate food scarcity and were neither heroic nor selfish. Though food distribution and consumption structured prisoner social relations, none of the practices linking food and sociability ensured equity. Because of the link between officially sanctioned forms of work within the camp and supplementary food rations, younger and male prisoners suffered less hunger and perished at a lower rate than other prisoners. Even when they redistributed food to loved ones, however, unevenness remained. The circulation of food within the prisoner society thus both articulated social practice and highlighted its limits.

¹⁷¹ De Certeau, 38.

The creation of heterotopias also put prisoners' reliance on tactics on display. Gurs had several heterotopias, and they were in many ways the product of "intervention transformed into a favorable situation" like that described by de Certeau. Camp hospitals lacked modern medical supplies and equipment but functioned as heterotopias because they became spaces of care and companionship, and prisoners encountered both suffering and a sense of community there. The healthcare system in the camp was also primitive in many ways. Most prisoners hospitalized in the camp belonged to privileged categories or suffered from ailments or injuries that doctors and nurses believed they could successfully treat. Moreover, the greater part of ailing prisoners suffered and died in the barracks or infirmaries and never reached a camp hospital bed. The high mortality rate at Gurs put death and burial at the center of social relations as well. It enhanced the prestige of its Jewish burial society (*Hevra Kadisha*), which organized the interment and mourning of prisoners and was one of the most active institutions in the camp. The members of the *Hevra* were key players in the production of heterotopia in the cemetery by ensuring it remained a space for the gathering of prisoners and ritual memorialization of the dead. All in all, while illness and death occurred throughout the camp because of the pervasiveness of disease and poor medical care, its hospitals and cemeteries imbued tragedy with elements of connection and comfort.

Ultimately, the prisoner society at Gurs was neither complicit in its own tragedy nor openly combative. Its character should be appraised in tandem with recognition of the difficulties it faced. As Lilly Weilheimer's death certificate shows, it was not unusual for tragedy and subversion to materialize as two faces of the same coin. Prisoners suffered immensely but also pushed back in oblique ways against forces pressuring them to comply. Because prisoners participated in the black market, for example, they might be accused of collaborating in their

own oppression. By participating, however, they also obtained food and other resources that at least partly sustained them as a group. Similarly, women who adopted “temporary frames of security” by performing domestic tasks with energy and dedication both sustained their families and undercut plans that might have been more impactful in the long term, such as those related to immigration. In short, because it is often impossible to differentiate adherence to tradition from submission in ways that make moral judgement a reasonable and attainable goal for historians, victim behaviors must be explained, not evaluated. Like most human behaviors, those of prisoners at Gurs were often Janus-faced.

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Esther Topaz Tichauer. May 4, 2025.