

Internment in France 1940 - 1946

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Identifying “Gypsies” and Tracking their Movements | Compulsory Residence Orders for “Nomads” in the Third Reich | Internment in the Unoccupied Zone | Internment in the Occupied Zone | After the Liberation | Daily Life in the Camps | Cases of Deportation from French Internment Camps

In France there were two different but parallel approaches to the so-called “Gypsy question”. The French approach of using internment as a way of bringing the “Tsiganes” (“Gypsies”) into the mainstream of society prevailed over the German approach of internment as the first step to mass murder. Thus France’s Roma, unlike those living in other countries under German occupation, were not exterminated in the camp at Auschwitz. However, they did not escape persecution: whole families were interned in special camps throughout the country, both during and after the occupation.

INTRODUCTION

Whereas in the 1930s in Germany the so-called “Gypsy question” was viewed as a complex one, involving racial, social and cultural features, French authorities, although drawing upon a well-established tradition of anti-“Gypsy” resentments, followed a more or less social approach in their need to deal with the “Gypsy problem”. Avoiding public use of racial criteria, they postulated a population category in 1912, “nomads”, which, although never clearly defined, meant “Gypsies” exclusively. From then on life for Roma in France became more and more difficult. In 1940 the first “Gypsies” were interned in camps both in the occupied and the unoccupied parts of the country.

About half of the pre-war “Gypsy” population of France, some 13,000 people, were interned in special camps throughout the country. Apart from being interned, they suffered diseases and hunger and, in many cases, were recruited for forced labour. Although there are no records of mass deportation on racial grounds until the end of the war, not even in the occupied part of France, at least more than 200 “Gypsies” of French origin were murdered in Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald and Auschwitz-Birkenau.

INTERMENT CAMPS FOR “GYPSIES” IN FRANCE DURING WORLD WAR II

Ill. 1 (by Jo Saville and Marie-Christine Hubert, from Bulletin Association des Enfants Cachés, No. 8 March 1998)

NB. The other interment camps for Jews are not shown on this map



□ Main French internment camps for “nomads”

■ Internment camps where “Gypsies” and Jews were held at the same or at different times

* “Départements” as in that period

Identifying “Gypsies” and Tracking their Movements

Compulsory Residence Orders for “Nomads” in the Third Reich

Internment in the Unoccupied Zone

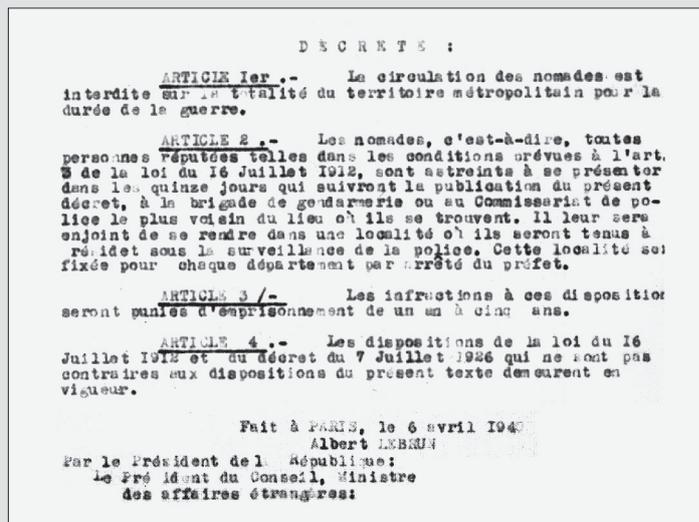
Internment in the Occupied Zone



III. 2

“Nomads” in the camp at Montreuil-Bellay (Département Maine-et-Loire), 1944. This was the biggest internment camp for “nomads” in France, with up to 1,000 people interned.

(from Hubert 1999, p. 76)



III. 3 (Detail)

Decree-law of April 6, 1940. Article 1 reads: “La circulation des nomades est interdite sur la totalité du territoire métropolitain pour la durée de la guerre.” (The circulation of the “nomads” is prohibited in France for the duration of the war.)

(from the archives of the Département Bouches-du-Rhône)

IDENTIFYING “GYPSIES” AND TRACKING THEIR MOVEMENTS

There had been Roma in France since the 15th century, but they again came to official notice only at the end of the 19th century. It was at this time that Roma freed from slavery in the Principalities of Romania arrived in France and the rest of Western Europe. Many of these Roma joined the already sizeable numbers of itinerant people (other Roma, seasonal workers, vagabonds, travelling merchants, beggars, vagrants) who roamed the French countryside in search of a better life during a period of economic hardship.

The “Tsiganes” (“Gypsies”) were especially stigmatised. They were blamed for every conceivable crime – thieving, pilfering, poaching, swindling, child abduction and even for spreading disease. The press blew up these real or supposed offences, helping to spread

an exaggerated sense of insecurity in people’s minds whilst, at the same time, the laws against vagrancy and begging were proving ineffective at curbing the itinerant way of life.

In 1895 the government conducted a census of all itinerants. It recorded more than 400,000 itinerant people, 25,000 of them “nomads” travelling as groups in caravans. Faced with pressure from public opinion, the legislators worked from 1907 to 1912 to draft new laws aimed at identifying itinerants and tracking their movements.

On July 16, 1912, the government enacted a law which particularly targeted Roma, though it was addressed to all itinerants. The “Loi sur l’exercice des professions ambulantes et la réglementation de la circulation des nomades” (Law on the Exercise of Travelling Occupations and Control of the Movement of Nomads) distinguishes three categories of travelling people: “travelling merchants”, “forains” (itinerant market

traders) and “nomads”. Article 3 of the law, defining the category of “nomads”, directly targeted Roma. From that time on the French authorities used only the one term “nomads” to encompass Roma and “Gypsies” of all kinds. [III. 4]

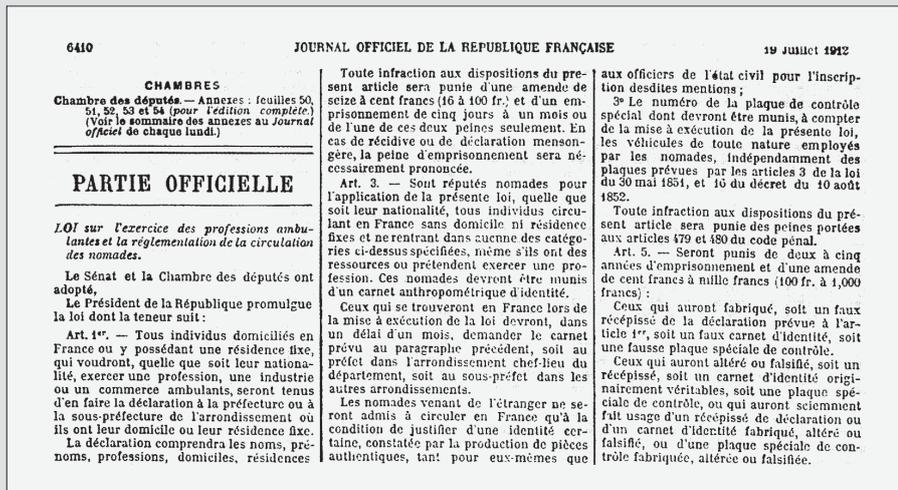
This new administrative category was subjected to multiple constraints. Every individual aged 13 and over was required to carry an “anthropometric record card” containing the particulars of the civil status, two photographs (side and full-face views), his fingerprints and information on his physical characteristics. If he stopped in any district he had to have his card stamped by a public official, both on arrival and departure. The head of the family also had a group card showing the civil status of everyone travelling with him. Vehicles carried a special registration plate. Records were now held on “nomads” in prefectures and at the Ministry of Interior. The authorities knew who they were and could track their movements. [III. 5]

COMPULSORY RESIDENCE ORDERS FOR “NOMADS” IN THE THIRD REICH

With the war, the vice tightened around the Roma. Along with communists and foreigners, they were in effect the first French victims of the conflict. Suspected of being

spies, they were gradually excluded from society and effectively banished.

On October 22, 1939, a military decree prohibited them from travelling in



III. 4
“Law on the Exercise of Travelling Occupations and Control of the Movement of Nomads”
“Regardless of nationality, all persons travelling in France who have no domicile or fixed abode and do not come into any of the categories stipulated above shall be deemed to be nomads, even if they have assets or claim to exercise an occupation. These nomads must carry an anthropometric record card.”
(translated from the Official Journal of July 19, 1912)



III. 5
Anthropometric record card.
(from the archives of the Département Bouches-du-Rhône)

eight “départements” of Western France and from making camp in two “départements” (Indre-et-Loire, Maine-et-Loire). The military authorities invoked Article 5 of the Law on the State of Siege which dated from August 9, 1849, and had previously been used during World War I to justify interning the “Gypsies” in “clearance camps” and “suspects’ camps”.
On April 6, 1940, a legislative decree issued by the president of the re-

public banned itinerants from travelling anywhere in metropolitan France for the duration of the war and made them subject to compulsory residence orders. Officially, this measure was meant to reduce the risks of espionage; unofficially the aim was to force the “Tsiganes” to settle. [III. 3]
The gendarmerie initially carried out a census of “nomads” carrying an anthropometric record card. The

prefect then published a decree requiring them to be resident in one or more designated districts. As no budget had been adopted for implementing the decree, the “nomads” were allowed to move around within a specified radius to find work and the means to provide for themselves. The invasion by German troops in May 1940 prevented that this decree was implemented countrywide.

INTERMENT IN THE UNOCCUPIED ZONE

The Roma in Alsace-Lorraine, like the Jews, were expelled to the unoccupied zone where the Vichy Government imposed compulsory residence orders (“assignations à résidence”) on them or interned them in camps originally built to house Spanish republicans. Thus 376 “Gypsies” were being held in the camp

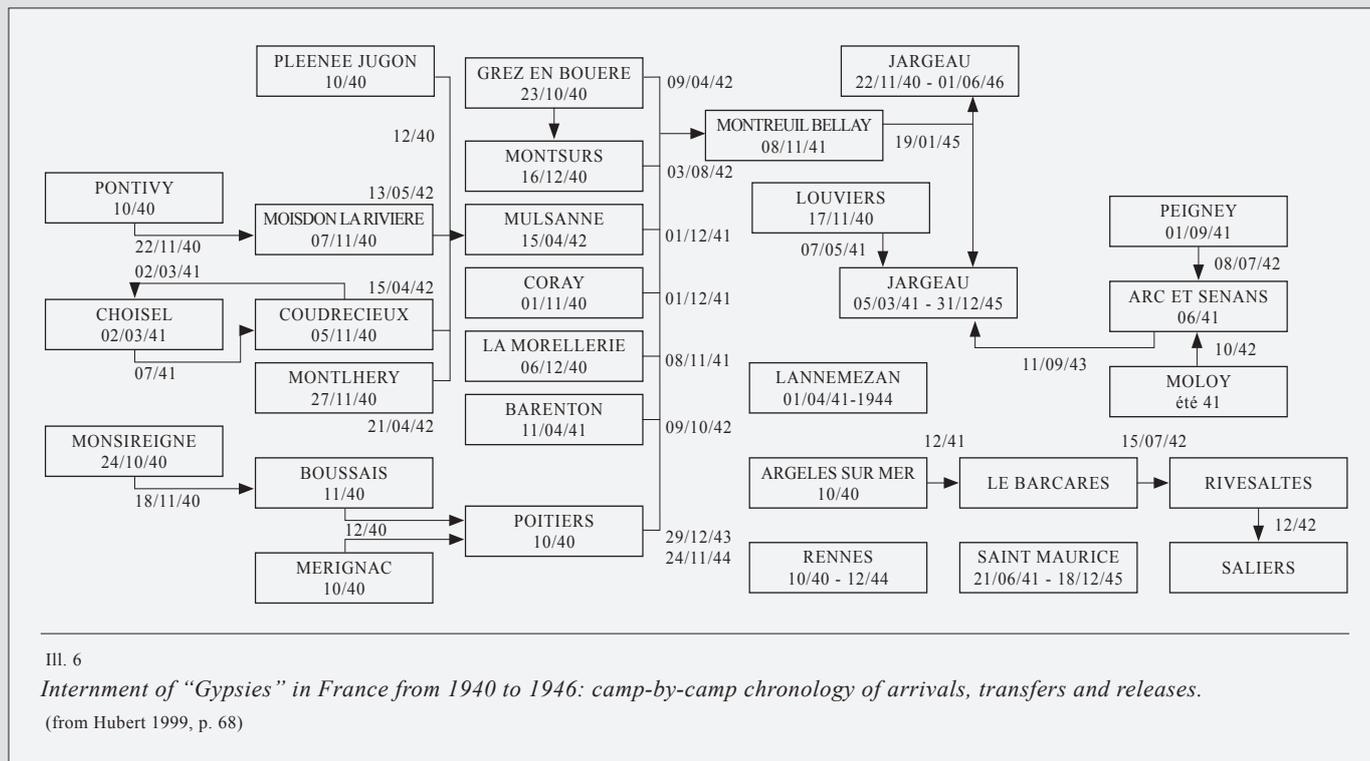
at Argelès-sur-Mer (Pyrénées-Orientales) by October 30, 1940. They were then transferred to the camps at Barcarès and Rivesaltes and in November 1942 to the camp at Saliers (Bouches-du-Rhône). [Ills. 6, 7]
In the rest of the unoccupied zone compulsory residence orders remained the norm. In reality the fate of the Roma depended on the goodwill of the prefects, who could intern any “nomads” they judged undesirable. Thus, in April

1941, the prefect of Hautes-Pyrénées assembled all the “département” ’s “nomads” on the Lannemezan plateau, and then placed them in a ruined hospital guarded by the gendarmerie.
Between October 1940 and August 1944 some 1,400 “nomads” were interned in the two camps in the unoccupied zone, by sole decision of the Vichy Government. The German invasion of the zone in November 1942 had no bearing on their fate.

INTERMENT IN THE OCCUPIED ZONE

On October 4, 1940, the German High Command in France ordered the transfer of “Gypsies” in the occupied zone to camps under French police

guard. The French authorities were in charge of organising the whole operation, the Germans simply giving a few instructions: families were not to



be split up, children were to be given schooling.

From mid-October the “Feldkommandanten” (field marshals) gave the prefects instructions on how to enforce the order, specifying which people were concerned: “All persons of French or foreign nationality who have no fixed abode and who roam the occupied region in the Gypsy manner (“nomads” and “forains”), whether or not they are in possession of an anthropometric record card or personal identity card.”

Unlike the French, the Germans defined “Gypsies” in very broad terms. They applied racial, but also social criteria. Both nomadic and settled persons, whether integrated into society or not, were designated as “Gypsies”. Knowing that since 1912 the French only officially recognised persons who carried an anthropometric record card as “Gypsies”, in 1940 the Germans tried to impose their own definition of a “Gypsy”, but without success.

The gendarmes applied the German definition only in that they carried out their arrests on the basis of the prefectural decree published in their “département”. The prefects, anxious to preserve

legality, had published a prefectural internment decree which thus transformed a German order into a French legal act. In this way, in the eye of public opinion and the internees, the responsibility for internment lay with the French authorities alone. The internment of the “Gypsies” was a German initiative carried out by the French authorities.

By October 31, 1940, some 400 “nomads” were already interned in six camps in the occupied zone. The pace of internment quickened after the publication of the German order of November 22, 1940, which prohibited the exercise of travelling occupations in 21 “départements” in Western France. At the same time the Roma were expelled from the coastal zone, together with Jews and foreigners. The Germans themselves then expelled and interned all those they regarded as “Gypsies”: “nomads” who carried an anthropometric record card but also “forains”, settled persons publicly known to be “Gypsies” and “asocials” such as tramps and other vagrants.

These numerous internments made it necessary for more structured camps to be opened, to receive the “nomads” interned in camps that had been

set up on an urgent and ad hoc basis in October 1940. “Nomads” held in Mérignac (Gironde) and Boussais (Deux-Sèvres), for example, were moved to the Route de Limoges camp in Poitiers (Vienne). At the end of December 1940 about 1,700 “nomads” and “forains” were interned in 10 camps. [Ils. 8, 10-12]

In Eastern France camps were set up from April 1941 onwards. In the Département Doubs, Roma were interned in the former Royal Saltworks of Arc-et-Senans, a building which is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In the Département Yonne, they were held in the forecourt of a disused railway station at Saint-Maurice-aux-Riches-Hommes.

At the end of 1941, about 3,200 “nomads” and “forains” were interned in 15 camps. Chief among these were Jargeau (Loiret), Poitiers (Vienne), Moisydon-la-Rivière (Loire-Inférieure) and Coudrecieux (Sarthe).

In November 1941 the Germans decided to reorganise these camps in order to reduce their running costs, ease the pressure on guards and stop the many escapes. Like the “Zigeunerlager” (“Gypsy” camps) in Germany or Aust-

“SHOW” CAMP AT SALIERS (BOUCHES-DU-RHÔNE)

The camp at Saliers (Bouches-du-Rhône) has a special history because it was designed as a propaganda instrument. In an attempt to refute Swiss and American press allegations that too many opponents of the Nazi regime were dying in internment in the south of France, the government decided to set up “show” camps.

Following the failure of the camps at Noé and Récébédou (“hospital” camps that soon had to be closed because of bad conditions for internees), in March 1942 it decided to set up a camp exclusively for “nomads”. Based in the Camargue where there is a certain “Gypsy” tradition, it resembled a typical village of the region. Once again this was a dismal failure: the beaten earth floors dissolved into mud whenever it rained, the cabins were crawling with parasites, etc. Internees escaped en masse.

III. 7



III. 8

Main entrance to the Route de Limoges Camp at Poitiers (Département Haute-Vienne)

(from Hubert 1999, p. 74)

ria, these camps were now organised on a regional basis.

This was the background for the establishment of the biggest internment camp for “nomads”, the camp at Montreuil-Bellay (Maine-et-Loire). Between April and July 1942 internees from camps

in three different “départements”, Coudrecieux, Montlhéry and Moisdolla-Rivière, were moved to the camp at Mulsanne (Sarthe). On August 3, 1942, the 717 internees were transferred to Montreuil-Bellay to join internees moved there from two other camps. On August

18 the numbers peaked at 1,018 internees. [III. 2]

In January 1943 some 2,200 “nomads” were interned in eight camps. The drop in numbers when the camps were reorganised is due to the release of “fores”.

AFTER THE LIBERATION

The transfers continued even after the liberation. On January 19, 1945, the “nomads” in Montreuil-Bellay were moved to two other camps. Though some were freed, 734 “nomads” were still being held in three camps. In December 1945 the camps at Jargeau and Saint-Maurice were finally closed down and their internees released.

Unlike other victims of the occupying forces, the Roma were not systematically liberated after the summer of 1944, or even after May 8, 1945. Just like the Vichy Government, the new French authorities viewed internment of the “nomads” as a first step towards forcing them to settle.

The correspondence between the General Inspectorate for the Camps and the General Inspectorate of Administrative Services is highly revealing: both parties agreed that internment should be replaced by compulsory residence orders. This piece of legerdemain enabled the authorities to remain within the law, since the decree making “nomads” subject to compulsory residence orders was still in force.

Only with the law of May 10, 1946, which set the statutory date for the cessation of hostilities and de facto repealed the decree of April 6, 1940, did the authorities agree to release the Roma unconditionally. Les Alliers, the last internment camp for “nomads”, was then closed down on June 1, 1946.

An update of the many transfers – some internees served time in 4 or 5

camps – made it possible to revise the number of Roma interned in France downwards. Up to 1992 an estimate of 30,000 was widely accepted. A new figure was arrived at by checking the camp records held in “départemental” archives and more precisely by analysing the numbers camp by camp. Taking care not to count the same people several times over, we calculated figures of 4,600 internees in the occupied zone and 1,400 in the free zone, that is to say a total of 6,000 internees. Given that some records are incomplete, it can be assumed that between 6,000 and 6,500 people were interned as “nomads” in 30 French internment camps, or roughly half the Roma population present in France in 1939. [III. 1]



Ill. 9

“Gypsy” internees at the Rivesaltes camp.

(from Hubert 1999, p. 67)



Ill. 10

Huts used to house “nomads” in the Route de Limoges camp in Poitiers (Vienne).

(from National Archives, photographic section (NAPs), F7 15109, January 6, 1942)

DAILY LIFE IN THE CAMPS

France’s Roma were interned on German orders with the collaboration of the French authorities and the assent of the majority of public opinion, which remained totally indifferent to the fate of the people interned.

More than 90% of these were of French nationality. Many foreign Roma seem to have left the country at the outbreak of war. Some were interned as foreigners in camps in Southern France, such as Gurs.

One of the main features of the Roma’s internment was that whole families were held together. In contrast to the Jews, the men were not separated from their women and children. The integrity of the family group was fully respected. Children made up 30–40% of all internees.

The Roma spent these six years of confinement in conditions of the greatest hardship. Often the camps were built on a plain or a hillside at the mercy of the elements, as at Lannemezan. They were poorly equipped or even insanitary. Not being designed for this purpose, the pre-

mises rapidly became uninhabitable. The beds no longer had mattresses or blankets. The huts were infested by fleas and lice. In Haute-Marne the “nomads” were interned in a disused fort which no longer had doors, windows or running water. At Mulsanne the huts were roofed with corrugated iron, freezing in winter and stiflingly hot in summer. Where they could, the Roma preferred to live in their caravans rather than in huts which were insanitary and unsuited to their way of life.

The Roma suffered from the cold because they no longer had any clothes. These had been left in their caravans, which in turn had usually been abandoned at the roadside when their owners were arrested. Having no fuel, the internees at Moisdon-la-Rivière had no option but to burn the floor boards of their huts for heating.

According to numerous reports, they also went hungry. In some camps such as Coray (Finistère), the administration made no provision for feeding them. The men worked outside the camp while the women and children stayed inside, to dissuade the men from escaping. Elsewhere the funds earmarked were insufficient or arrived late, especially during the first few months.

Internment was all the more difficult in that the “nomads” had to cope on their own. Unlike other categories of internees, they received no aid from outside. They could not count on their own families, which were also interned or were too poor to help, and they had no help from charity which did a great deal for other categories of internees. So they were not able to supplement their rations, as other internees did. Only the Red Cross, the Secours National charity and one or two religious foundations came to their aid – in isolated cases. Despite all this, severe cachexia and oedemas so widespread elsewhere were not very common. [Ills. 2, 6-13]

Internment may not have been an initiative of the French authorities, but they made use of it as a way of bringing the “Tsiganes” into the mainstream of society. The children were sent to school, usually within the confines of the camp. In the camps at Les Alliers and Saliers orphans and children abandoned or temporarily separated from their parents were placed in the care of welfare authorities or religious institutions. The authorities thought that on their own the children could be “socialised”, provided they



III. 11
Camp infirmary at Mérignac (Gironde).
(from NAs, F7 15099, February 18, 1942)



III. 12
Interior of barracks at camp Mérignac (Département Gironde).
(from Hubert 1999, p. 74)

had no further contact with their original environment.

For the adults, social integration was through work. In addition to their usual duties, internees worked for private companies inside the camp itself. Others worked outside the camp, in farms and forestry holdings but always guarded by a few gendarmes. Part of their pay was withheld to meet the cost of their internment.

The Germans also requisitioned this workforce for the Todt Organisation, which built major projects in the

occupied countries, including the Atlantic Wall, and later for the Compulsory Labour Service. The numbers requisitioned were quite small because many internees escaped. The Germans were also reluctant to take on a workforce, which they judged to be “unskilled and work-shy”.

It was extremely difficult for Roma to gain their freedom. They had to own a house or produce a proof of accommodation certificate, be accepted by their host locality, have a clean record of conduct from the camp, and obtain

permission from the prefect in the district of their arrival and departure and sometimes from the German authorities. Once released, they were subject to compulsory residence orders under the decree of April 6, 1940. In very extreme cases, the local population who did not want the Roma their area, successfully applied for them to be re-interned.

The Roma did everything they possibly could to escape. The camp at Arc-et-Senans was closed down in September 1943 because so many people escaped from it.

CASES OF DEPORTATION FROM FRENCH INTERMENT CAMPS

For a variety of reasons the Nazis never ordered the deportation of France’s Roma to Auschwitz for extermination. Therefore, there was no mass deportation on racial grounds. Some Roma interned in France, however, were deported to the camps at Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald and even Auschwitz-Birkenau.

On January 13, 1943, 70 men between the ages of 16 and 60 left the

Route de Limoges camp in Poitiers, supposedly, according to the camp commandant, to work in factories in Germany. In fact, these Roma never reached the German factories. They were moved to the Royallieu camp in Compiègne before being transferred to Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen on January 23. On June 23 another 25 men were moved to Compiègne. On June 26, 23 of them left for Buchenwald. Why? It seems that the prefecture handed over these Roma to the Germans so that young, settled workers would be spared. Once the Germans realised that the people they

had been sent were not skilled workers, they sent them to the Nazi concentration camps.

According to various reports yet to be corroborated by other sources, the events in Poitiers were not unusual. It seems that Roma subject to compulsory residence orders in the unoccupied zone were arrested by the French authorities and then handed over to make up the labour quotas demanded by the Germans. Then, like the Roma from the Poitiers camp, these unfortunates were sent to the Nazi concentration camps and not to factories in Germany.



III. 13

Camp at Saint-Maurice-aux-Riches-Hommes (Yonne). (from NAs, F7 15110, June 1943)

The camp records for Auschwitz-Birkenau reveal traces of about 40 Belgian and French Roma interned in France from 1940 to 1943. Arrested on the outskirts of Rouen (Seine-Inférieure), these Roma were interned at Montlhéry and then at Montreuil-Bellay. In summer 1943 they were freed and given compulsory residence orders

for places close to the camp. They then returned to their region of origin where they were rounded up by the Germans in the autumn of 1943, interned in the Dossin barracks in Mechelen/Malines (Belgium) and then deported to Auschwitz as part of Convoy Z on January 15, 1944. This convoy included 144 French Roma.

The deportation was carried out under the “Auschwitz Decree” of December 16, 1942, according to which all “Gypsies” in the Greater Reich were to be deported to the camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. It is the only recorded deportation from French territory which was made on racial grounds.

CONCLUSION

France’s Roma escaped extermination because France was not part of the Greater Reich. But they did not escape internment. Although ordered by the German authorities, internment was seen as a golden opportunity to achieve

the goal set by French authorities right at the start of the 20th century, namely forcing the Roma to settle, since the nomadic way of life was seen as the only thing preventing them from being integrated into society.

The French authorities thus made use of internment, together with

measures likely to encourage the “nomads” to settle once they left the camps: schooling for the children, work for the adults, Christian teaching for all and compulsory residence orders. The authorities in power after the liberation continued this policy as a matter of course.

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