

# **The Urbès camp**

## **Conditions of survival, hard labour, incidents**

### **February- October 1944**



Urbès, border between France and the II. Empire of Germany, 1914.

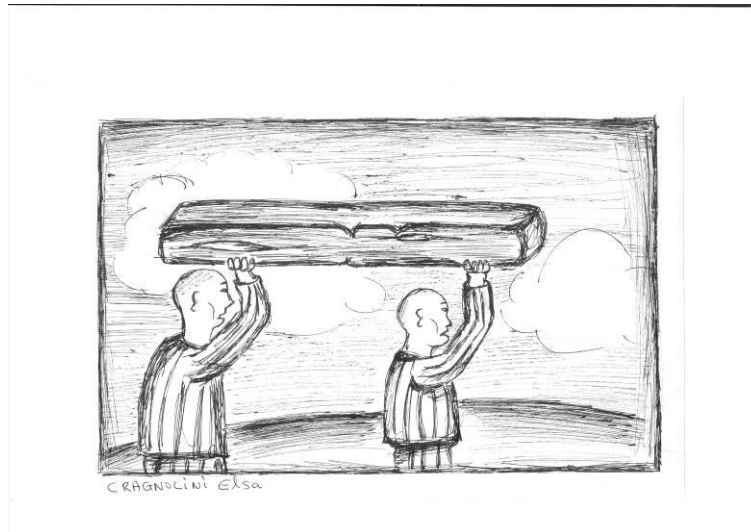
- **Different categories of camp prisoners:**

2 categories of deportees:

- « **Produktionshäftlinge** » were prisoners who had to work inside the tunnel in the secret and underground factory; they manufactured Diesel engines for DB-605 planes for the benefit of Daimler-Benz Company and under the direction of the Luftwaffe (Nazi aviation ministry). These Jewish hard labourers were also called “Daimler-Benz-Juden”.

- « **Bauhäftlinge** » were prisoners affected outside the tunnel in the construction of huts or in preliminary works for the plant of the underground factory.

The only train charged with engines from the the camp of Urbès had been derailed not far from Thann.



Drawing by Elsa Cragolini, 2015

- **Survival Condition – testimonies of former deportees and of an Alsatian civilian employee in the camp of Urbès:**

Mr. **Etienne Kotz**, born 19th September 1927 in Mulhouse, was assigned as a tinsmith worker for nearly 4 months to carry out work inside the tunnel. He testifies:

*“The deportees were in a pitiful state, only the prisoners working outside the camp wore approximately correct clothes (...). Hygiene was non-existent. I remember a man, who used muddy water from a puddle to shave with a razor blade equipped with a small wooden handle (...). I have never heard one of these men complaining about their fate”.*

*« (...) From the truck, I could see the camp; deportees survived in appalling conditions. I often saw 5 to 10 dead bodies lying in the mud; they were lying there between the latrines. One morning, a truck like ours had just been loaded*

*with naked corpses piled up and covered with a canvas sheet. Where were they brought to? I don't know (...)”.*



**Ernest Gillen**, former Luxembourger deportee, detained in the camp from March to September 1944 testifies:

*“When there were dead people, the naked bodies were laying between the second and the third hut. They were placed into reusable coffins and stayed there a certain time, the corpses darkened (...)”.*

*“We slept very poorly: 120 to 150 men in a cramped room and on straw”.*

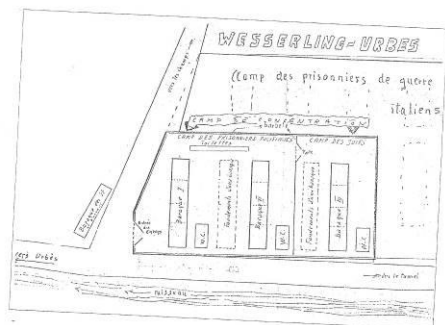
*«The work was hard: we had to drag bags and cables, to work ourselves to death with picks and shovels. We had to work in the rain, in the cold and in a hurry or else inside the tunnel”.*

*« The food was bad and insufficient (...) »*

*“Because of the risk of typhus, all the camp had to be vaccinated, but we had only 2 or 3 syringes for this operation”.*

*« During the first weeks, we had very bad shoes: clogs. Many prisoners had to walk barefoot on sharp stones in the tunnel”.*

(Source : Mr. François Wehrbach's book entitled, *« Urbès 1944, un tunnel ferroviaire devait devenir une usine souterraine d'armement de la Luftwaffe »*, *« KL-Natzweiler –Block W, Baustelle U »*, Editions du Colombier).



Drawing by Ernest Gillen

The camp and the huts' location

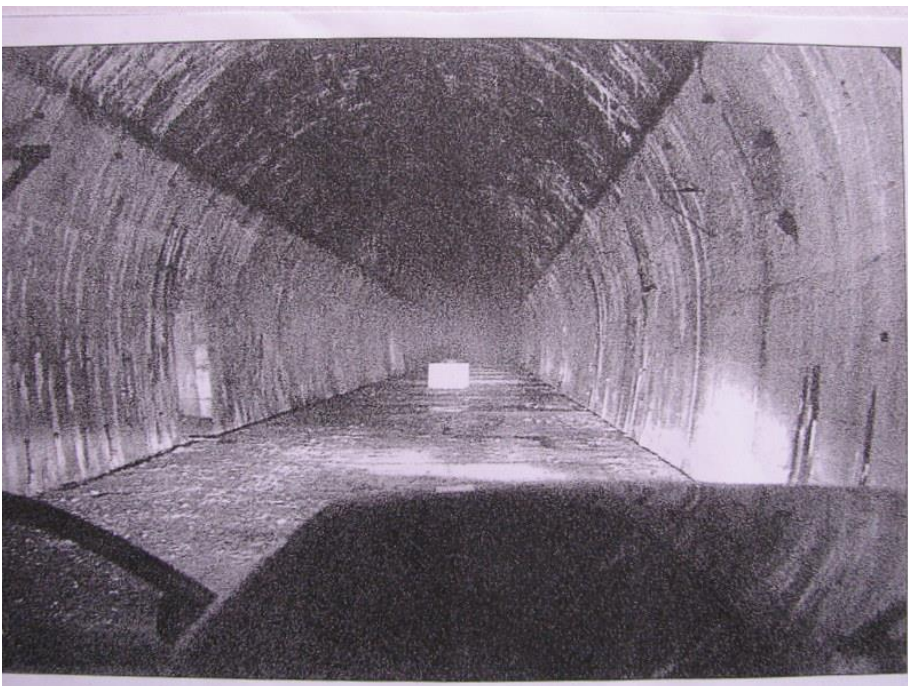


Drawing by Morgane Gwoziecki, 2015.

- **Hard labour – testimonies :**

Some examples of work realized in the camp by the prisoners, called « Bauhäftlinge »:

Construction of huts, of a concrete slab where the ballast and the rails inside the tunnel are, gallery for ventilation and water draining drilled through by the prisoners, 2 meters high, 2 meters wide and 100 meters long, building of a water reserve behind a wall, 1867 meters from the entrance of the tunnel away, in order to limit the water flow from the bottom of the tunnel.



Inside the tunnel: place for the machines; marks of the supports installed to hold up the asbestos ceiling, (Picture from Mr. François Wehrbach's book).

- **Positive events :**

**Ernest Gillen** tells: *“On 14th July, French deportees celebrated Bastille Day with a cake prepared by some inhabitants of the region which had been clandestinely introduced into the camp by Robert Wolfensberger”*

(Source: Mr. François Wehrbach’s book)

**Zacheusz Pawlak:** *« In our stabilized world today, cordiality and solidarity can’t compare with what we knew behind the barbed wire fence of the camp. Camaraderie, mutual aid and common actions constituted our moral code. Each survived day represented for us a common victory ».*

(Source: Mark Spoerer, Mercedes-Benz Archiv, Stuttgart)

- **Generosity of some inhabitants of Wesserling, at the risk of their life:**

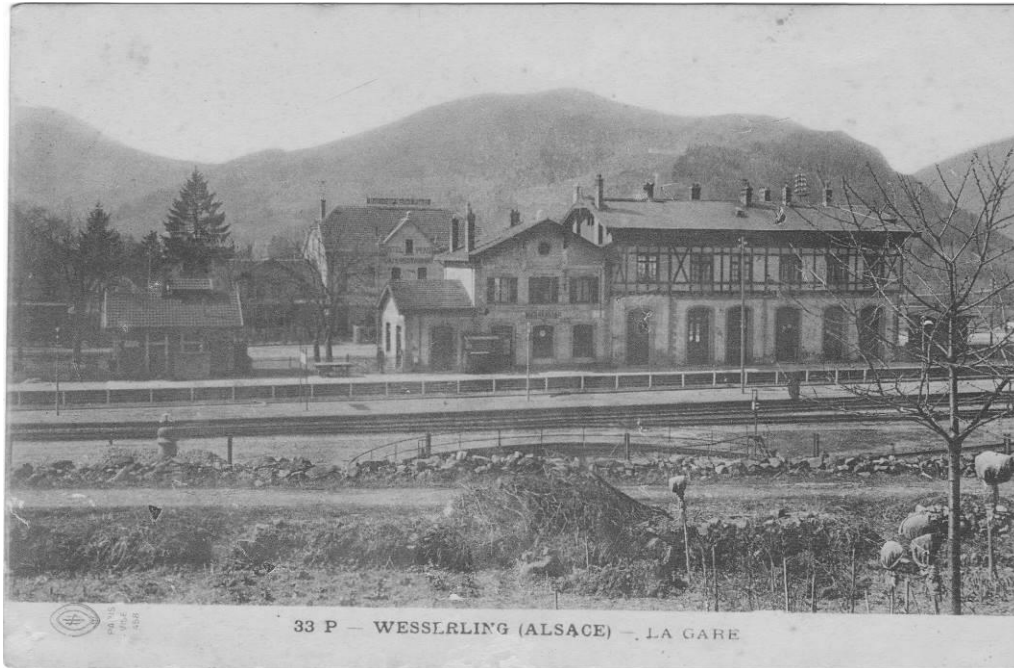
Mr. Julien Haas, inhabitant of Wesserling (19 years old in 1944) tells in Mr. François Wehrbach’s book:



*« My parents had next to their house a little garden, where they grew vegetables along the track. From this garden, they could soon see the chief guard take once or twice times a day the prisoners to the meadow behind the shed where fabric samples from the textile industry in Wesserling were stored. There, the men were allowed to sit down and rest for some minutes. We could see how they were eating grass and snails from hunger (...). Sometimes, we could secretly throw to them some chunks of bread (...). Mother sewed a shopping bag for them*



(...).When father went to the garden with his snack, he put the shopping bag under the gooseberry bush and pretended to forget it. As soon as nobody was in the garden and the prisoners had a break, the goods inside the shopping bag were taken and very quickly eaten (...).



The railway station in Wessrling, place where Pawlak had to work.

**Zacheusz Pawlak**, former prisoner of the camp of Urbès testifies in his autobiography entitled « *I have survived...a prisoner testifies about Majdanek* », Hoffmann und Campe Verlag. Hamburg 1979.



« Nearby the railway track in Wessrling, there was a little garden near a small house in a remote area. There was living a woman of about 40 years (...) with her 14 year-old son (...). The next morning, before I went to work, I took a look in the stash. I found 2 slices of bread with margarine, 2 lumps of sugar and a boiled egg, carefully wrapped in paper.

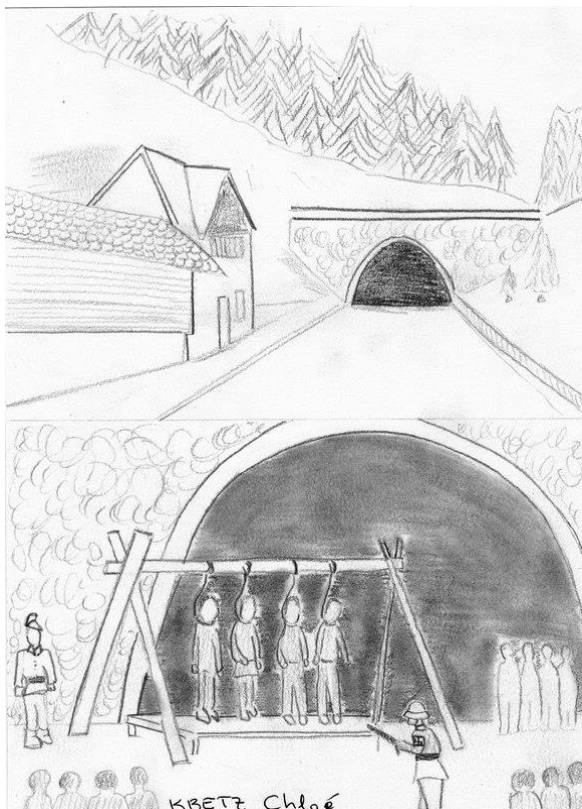
I was moved to tears. A woman, who was absolutely unknown to me and who had put the life of her entire family in danger, daily left me now

*something to eat; she certainly had deprived her son of food because of me. In addition to the bread with lard or jam, I also found some potatoes, sugar and sometimes even a piece of cake (...).*

**M. Etienne Kotz** testifies: « *There was a second occurrence on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1944 in the morning (...). The Polish man acting as my translator came up to me and he discreetly told me: “The Allies landed this morning in Normandy”.*

*It was amazing, this man held captive in horrible conditions, permanently at the mercy of capos or SS, informed me and gave me this news (...). Another polish prisoner approached me and took out of his pocket a big match box, I don't know where it came from. He opened it and showed it to me; inside was a whole electric system composed of 2 little copper coils: it was a tiny galena radio. Can you imagine that!!! They had a radio inside the tunnel (...)! Since this event, I am each year and each 6<sup>th</sup> of June deeply moved when I think back about this man, who informed me about this good news (...).*”

(Testimony by Mr. Etienne Kotz, extract from Mr. François Wehrbach's book)



Drawing by Chloé Kretz, 2015

- **Incidents which occurred in the Urbès camp :**

**14th April 1944:** a Russian deportee escaped, but was caught and killed by an SS officer during the reconstruction of his escape attempt.

**15th April 1944:** collapse of scaffolding inside the tunnel; several prisoners and civilian workers were injured.

First death of a prisoner, Vitasso Carlo, Number 10153.

**16th April 1944:** 4 Slavic prisoners were killed by Janisch, SS-Hauptsturmführer.

**18th April 1944:** second escape attempt of 4 Russian prisoners, namely Alexej Fomine, Sergei Michailow, Nikolai Tschetwekow and G. Zwanzow, leaving the camp through water pipes. The first and the second deportees managed to join the Maquis in the Vosges.

Death of Nikolai Tschetwekow on 19th April 44 and death of a guard during the search operation of the escapees.

**25<sup>th</sup> May 1944:** the mutiny operation “**Red Cat**” organized by Russian prisoners failed.

**20<sup>th</sup> June 1944:** execution of 4 Russian prisoners by hanging, at the entrance of the tunnel. Mandatory presence of all prisoners.

**Beginning of July 1944:** escape of a Polish Kapo with the help of an Alsatian civilian driver or employee.

**June-July 1944:** several escape attempts ended tragically + typhus cases at the camp; sick prisoners were transferred to the KL Natzweiler-Struthof; they never came back.

**Beginning of August 1944:** arrival of Italian war prisoners and deportees from the East, called “Ostarbeiter”.

**25th August 1944:** the Alsatian foreman, Tschol, was killed inside his car by a SS guard. He failed to present his papers, when entering the camp. His secretary and his draughtsman, also in the car with him, were slightly injured.

**1<sup>st</sup>, 9th and 26th September 1944:** evacuation of the camp, in several convoys, towards the secondary camp of Neckarelz – region of Baden, Germany.

**10th September 1944:** death of a Jewish prisoner after escape bid.



**15<sup>th</sup> September 1944:** failed escape attempt by a Jewish prisoner hidden in a package; brought back to the camp, but without serious sanction.

**24th September 1944:** execution of 5 Alsatian Resistance fighters at the site called « Steingraben », near Urbès. Shooting heard at the camp, but interpreted by the prisoners as a fight between Nazis and French Resistance fighters or Allied vanguard.

**25th September 1944:** 5 boys of Urbès were interned in the camp because they came too close to it. Outcome: a good beating and back home!

The 5 unwise boys were Antoine Andrès, Edmond Bitterly, Alphonse Eckert, Georges Ritsch and Georges Walch.

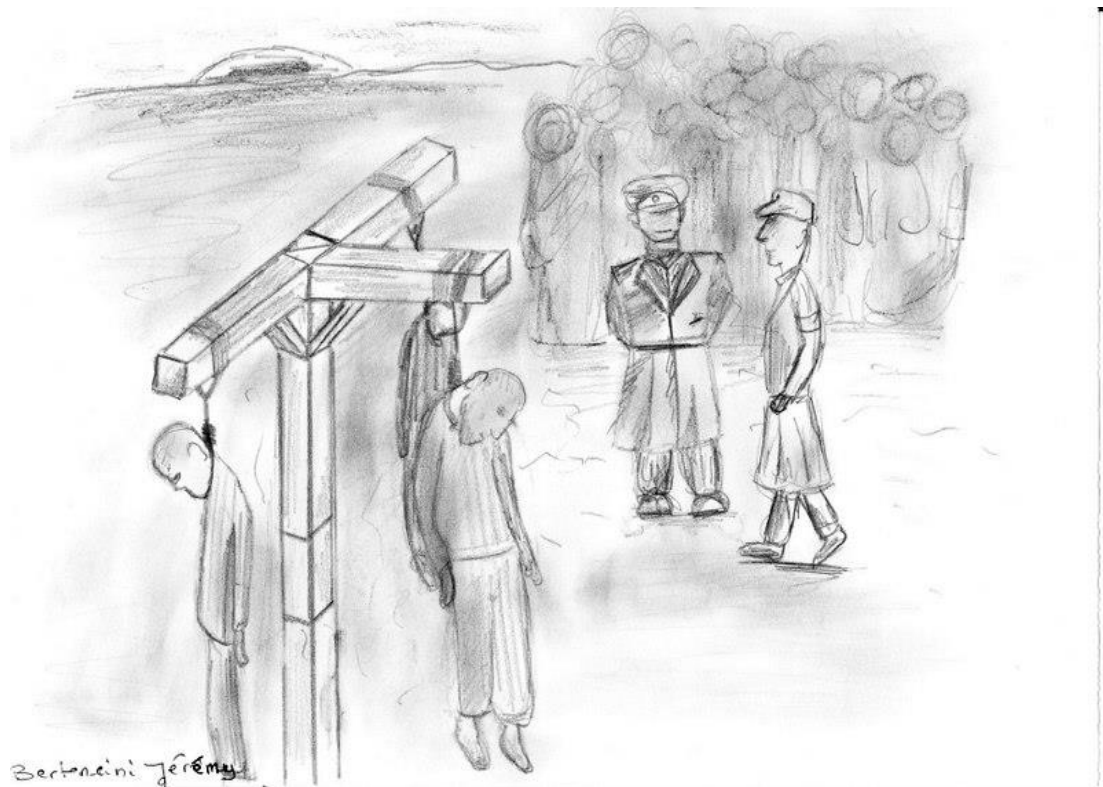
**4th October 1944:** shooting heard at the camp, execution of 7 Alsatian Resistance fighters at the “Steingraben”, near Urbès.

**15th October 1944:** evacuation of the last prisoners; dismantling and transfer of the machines from the underground factory towards Wiesenstieg, near Göppingen, into the motorway tunnel of the Lämmerbuckel - region of Baden-Württemberg.

Dismantling of the huts.

**2nd December 1944:** Liberation of Urbès and vicinity by the regiment of Algerian infantrymen.

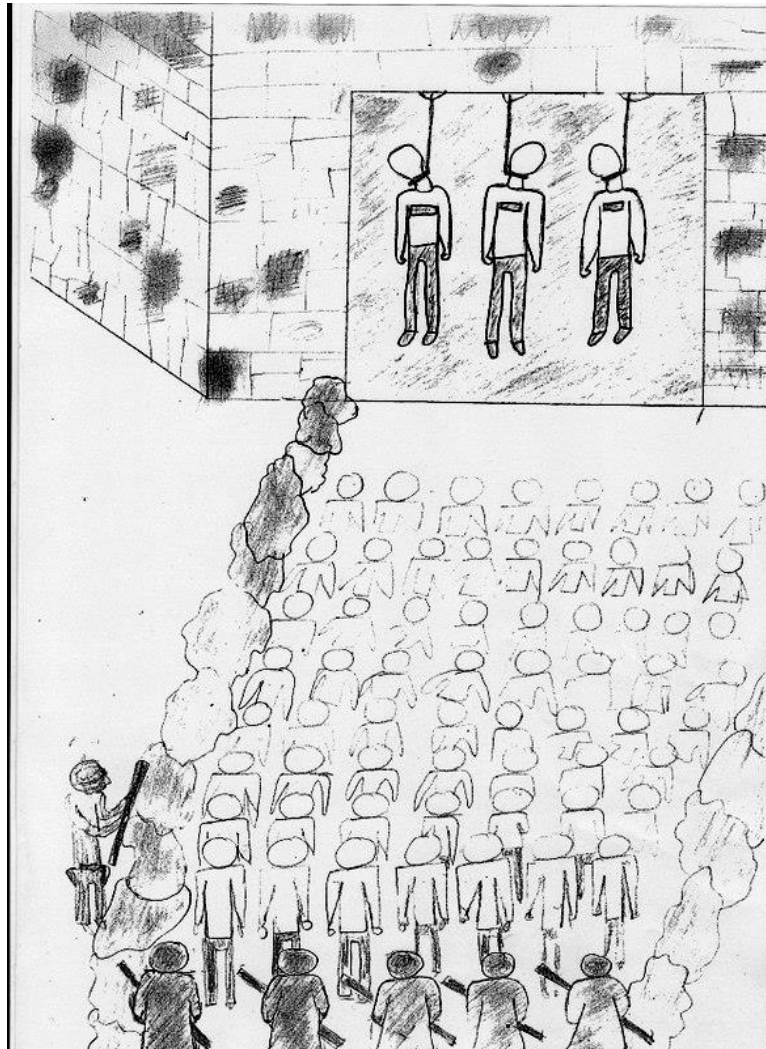
(Source: Mark Spoerer, conversation with Ernest Gillen / 11th. September 1989 / Mercedes Archiv, Stuttgart).



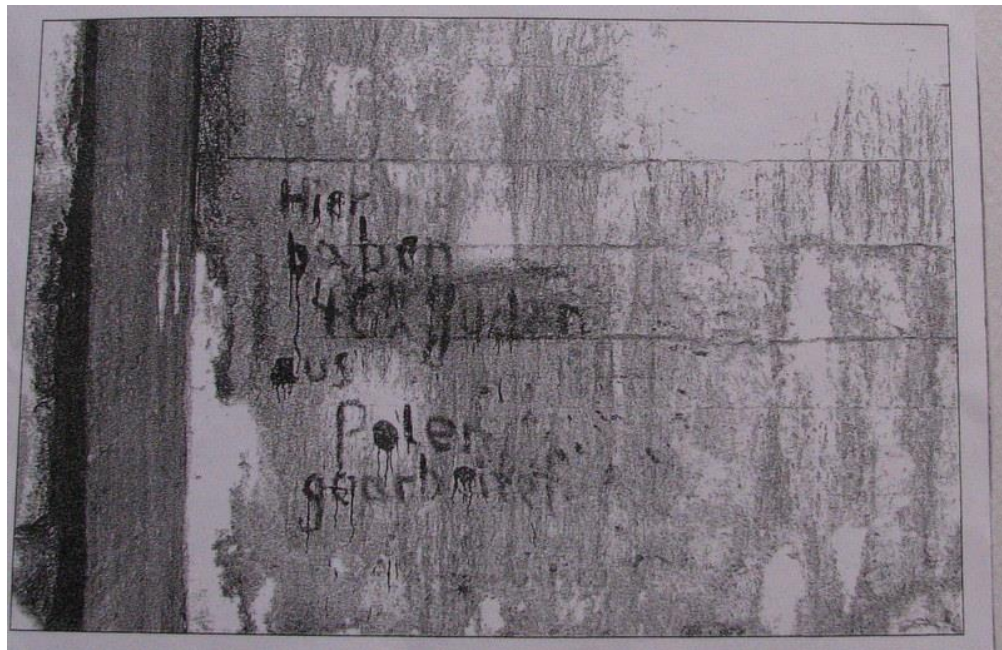
Drawing by Jérémie Bertoncini, 2015



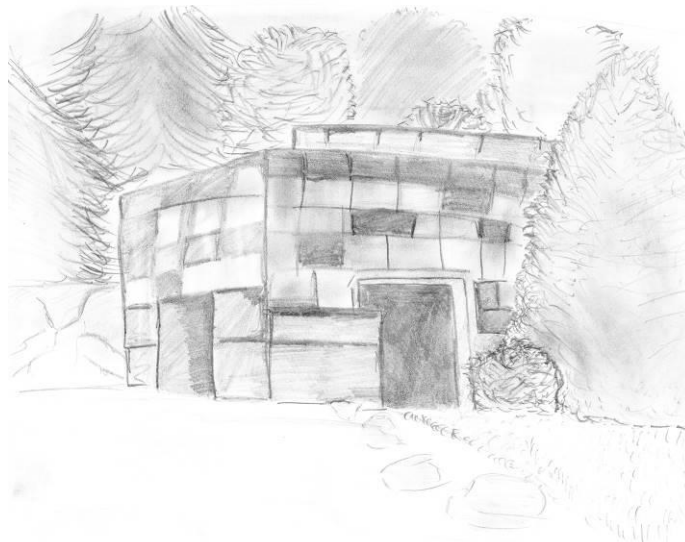
Drawing by Noémie Diby, inspired by this of Henri Gayot - 2015



Drawing by Camille Ragondet, 2015



Inscription left by a Jewish prisoner from Poland on a wall inside the Urbès tunnel: “Here worked 462 Polish Jews”



Le blockhaus d'entrée.

DEBRUT Sarah

Drawing by Sarah Debrut, 2015

Many thanks to Mrs. Isabelle Kupek for her rereading and correction in English.



High-School Scheurer-Kestner, TS3, Thann, 2015.  
German course, Marguerite Kubler.



