

Urbès secondary camp: escape of 2 Russian deportees, Alexey Fomine and Sergey Michailow, on 18th April 1944, and their commitment to the maquis, called « Poteau » and « Peut-Haut ».



Alexey Fomine reunited with the family, that had saved him in Servance.

Alexey Fomine and M^{rs} Suzanne Philippe, married Martin, Villersexel in the French region of Haute-Saône.



45 ans après, l'instant des retrouvailles entre Alexej Fomine et les enfants de Henri Philippe, qui avait hébergé les deux évadés.

Biographical indications:

Alexey Fomine was born in 1920 and he was 24 years old, when he belonged with Sergey Michailow to the 3rd convoy composed of 2000 Russian prisoners divided into 2 groups; the first one was sent ahead to the secondary camp of Sainte-Marie- aux -Mines and the second one to the camp of Urbès.

Lieutenant in the Red Army, when he had been taken prisoner, Alexej Fomine came from Olonets, near Saint-Petersburg, and he worked there as a primary school teacher. He died on 1st January 2003, aged 83 years.

Sergey Michailow was a native of Byelorussia and he died in 1979. He never returned to Alsace.

Context of their evasion on April the 18th 1944:

At first 5, then 4 and finally 3, only Fomine and Michailow will succeed in escaping through a huge pipe and in reaching the nearest forest.

Indeed, the 3rd fugitive, Nikolai Tschetwekow will be shot by a patrol. Seriously injured, he will die the next day at the camp.

The 2 runaways took advantage of the drunken SS soldiers' slack surveillance; they were copiously celebrating ahead of time the Führer's Birthday!

During his visit of the tunnel of Urbès, on 18th September 1989, Alexey Fomine explained: *«Our biggest fear was to stumble on a protection grate at the exit. We only had an iron bar to assist ourselves (...)*

But we were lucky. No grate and 20m behind us, a drunken sentry who hadn't heard us ».

Various episodes of their perilous march towards freedom:

Both fugitives walked painfully along the upper sides of Storckensohn; they climbed to the Rimbach pass and then to the small valley of Mollau.

Fortunate turn of events for them: 2 Sunday walkers, M^r Emile Spetz, former Mayor of Storckensohn and owner of the Crown Hotel – which had been requisitioned by the Nazis as accommodation for the SS-men – together with his best friend Charles Neff encountered the 2 prisoners with a striped prisoner outfit.

One of them seemed to be very sick. It was Alexey Fomine, who suffered from a lung congestion, as a result of their escape through the icy water of the pipe.

Both walkers left the 2 fugitives in the care of local Resistance fighters and refugee smugglers, who took them to the other side of the Vosges.

They were intercepted and confided to “maquisards” or Resistance fighters hidden in the Vosges, in a place called Séchenat.

Then, the maquisards brought them to Henri Philippe's farm, in the hamlet of Evaudois, near Servance.

Dr Mathieu, physician of the local maquis, treated Alexey Fomine; he had been contacted by a transmitter hidden in the farm.

Suzanne Philippe also looked after him; she was a young woman being raised by her uncle and her aunt, both members of local resistance.



Reunion with M^{rs} Suzanne Philippe, whose married name was Martin, in Villersexel, Haute Saône, thanks to the perseverance and the luck of M^r Pierre Maurer from the association C.V.R. of Bussang, in 1989.

Alexey Fomine (the 3rd person on the left) surrounded by former Resistance fighters of Bussang.

Reunion with members of the Philippe family in Servance, on 20th September 1989.

The two runaways slept during 3 weeks hidden in a recess fit out in the hay. This gave Alexey Fomine the opportunity to recover and heal.

Then, they joined in a first time the maquis called “Poteau” and a little later the “Peut-Haut”.

A former maquisard from the Vosges remembers about both fugitives and comments: *“During the attack on the maquis, you had to see them fight. We did not have their experience of war (...)”* (press article, “Alexey Fomine meets again the woman, who saved him in Servance”, M^r Laxenaire, 1990).

After the Liberation, Alexey Fomine enrolled in the 151th Infantry Regiment of the First French Army.

Return to the detention places in Alsace and reunion with the Philippe family, 45 years later:

Alexey Fomine’s first arrival in France, on 14th July 1964, but in Saint-Raphaël on the French Riviera.

First return to the detention place in Urbès, from 15th to 18th September 1989, in the context of the ceremony in honor of the Memory of former deportees detained in the Natzweiler-Struthof camp.

Indeed, on 18th September 1989, Alexej Fomine visited the places, where he was detained in 1944, in presence of the Luxemburg Delegation of former deportees, including Ernest Gillen, representatives of Urbès town council, the Cantonal Committee of the “Souvenir Français” [French Memory], chaired by M^r. Charles Arnold and in presence of M^r. Robert Curien, survivor of the shooting at the Steingraben.



Sources:

Many thanks to M^{rs} Denise Arnold and to M^r. Gilbert Meny, curator of the Serret Museum in Saint-Amarin, for all the documents and photos, that have been lent.

- Article de l'Alsace du 17 septembre 1989.
- Article de L'Alsace du 20 septembre 1989.
- Article de L'Alsace par M. Laxenaire 1990.

Testimonies of former Polish deportees of the Urbès Camp



Zacheusz Pawlak



A former Polish deportee, who later became a physician.

Autobiography and testimony entitled "*I survived (...) a prisoner testifies about Majdanek*" Hamburg, 1979.

Pawlak was part of a Polish resistant movement; when the Gestapo wanted to arrest him in the night of the 25th to the 26th November 1941, he managed to escape.

The Gestapo took then his 2 brothers, Jan and Tadeusz hostage.

Pawlak, outraged by this despicable act, gave himself up to the Nazis in Radom, on 6th September 1942. There he spent 4 months in prison and underwent horrible interrogations and

torture. Exhausted, he wanted to commit suicide, but his fellow prisoners prevented him from doing it.

Despite the torture, he never broke the silence and never denounced any of his fellow Polish resistant fighters.

On 8th January 1943, he was transferred to the camp at Lublin-Majdanek, while he was very sick and exhausted by all the abuse he had to suffer.

Despite the appalling conditions of life in Majdanek concentration camp, Pawlak's wounds could heal and he managed to recover strength to survive. He was entitled to the latrine duty and his commando bore the evocative name of "Scheisskommando" or "shit commando"!

Certainly this chore was not very pleasant, but the prisoners in return had the right to do the dishes in the kitchen – less tiring work for a short moment during the day- and they sometimes even received small leftovers to eat.

Later he managed to work in the "Revier" or "Block" for sick prisoners, thanks to the complicity and support of Doctor Romuald Sztaba, co-prisoner.

In his autobiography in the form of a testimony about his life spent in different Nazi camps, including Urbès, Zacheusz Pawlak relates, that he was selected to be transferred to an unknown destination.

Indeed, he was one of the 500 prisoners transferred on April 1944 from the Lublin-Majdanek -KL to the camp of Wesserling-Urbès.

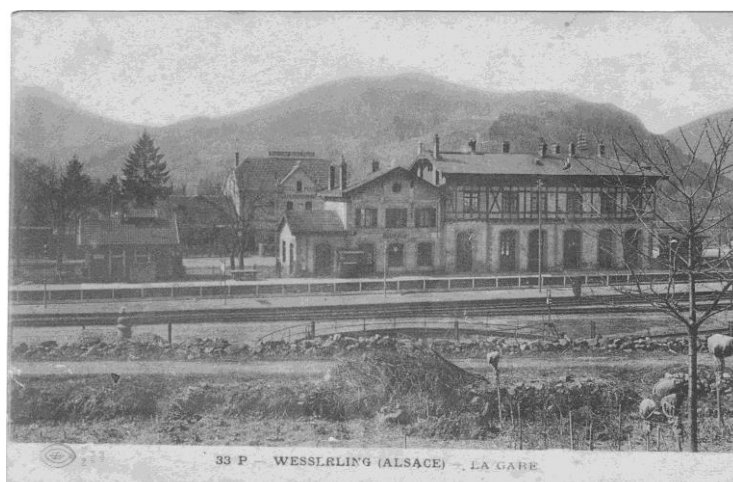
During his transport in cattle trucks, a group of 5 deportees, who had hidden a saw, tried to escape.

Unfortunately, they were caught and shot by the SS guards; among them, his best companion, Stefan Szpruch. Pawlak had been saved, because the SS's weapon had jammed! To set an example, the shot bodies were transported up to the end of the convoy.

His detailed and precious testimony about the working and survival conditions in the camp at Urbès, as well as his touching story about the generosity of the local population are set out in the explanatory texts 1 and 2.

As he could speak German, the SS of the camp wanted to give him the role of "capo" for a group of 50 Italian prisoners. To escape this, he bribed Anton Koehler, a German prisoner called Tony, who was capo and senior of the camp.

Pawlak succeeded in being affected to the commando at the railway station of Wesserling.



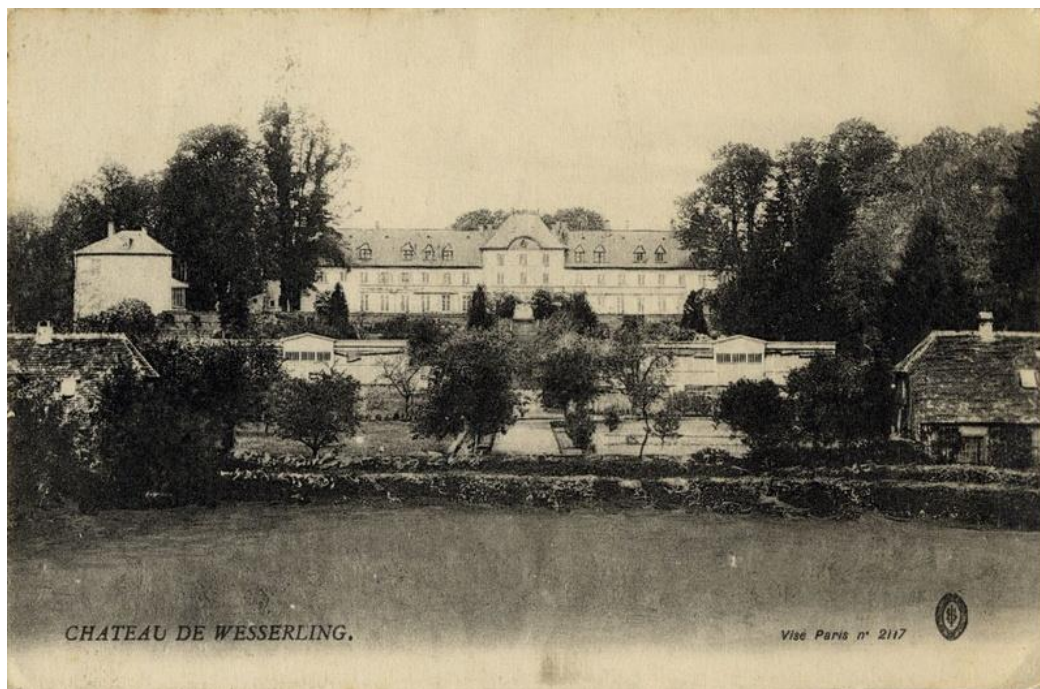
During his stay at the Urbès camp, Pawlak suffered repeatedly from kidney problems, jaundice and typhus, becoming increasingly weak.

Thanks to the solidarity of Polish prisoners, Pawlak resisted and in July 1944 he was assigned to the commando responsible for the maintenance of Wesserling's castle and park.

Some other fellow Polish prisoners, like Stanilaw Figura and Bolek Marchewka belonged to this commando.

Indeed, the Waffen-SS had transformed part of the castle into a "Genesungskompanie", that's to say into a convalescent home for German soldiers, who had been wounded and who were recovering.

The castle and grounds of Wesserling.



That's why it is interesting to dwell on, what Pawlak has to say about Wesserling's castle and park.

Within the park, lived some families of textile workers; they occupied typical Alsatian houses, that Pawlak found charming.

At one of the balconies, a pretty girl - about 16 years old – watched at the prisoners for hours, smiling at them. She was called Valentine.

Some days later, Valentine's brother came by; he was carrying a basket, in which he had hidden a bottle of red wine and food enveloped in linen fabric.

Not very skillful with his hands, he took the bottle of wine and the packet out of the basket. After ensuring himself, that no SS-guard was watching, he offered them the wine, as well as toasts with butter and some fruits.

Since this day, Zacheusz Pawlak and his Polish companions were daily given delicacies by the boy, for which of course they were very grateful. Valentine's brother could circulate freely inside the park, because the SS-guards had given him the permission to collect the vegetable waste of the SS kitchen, to feed his rabbits with.

One day, Zacheusz Pawlak succeeded in putting the hand on a document, that had been classified top secret; he had discovered it in one of the numerous crates piled up in the cellar of the castle. It was about a secret plan of massive deportation of Slavs. This document contained maps with big arrows indicating the exact places of relocation and establishment of Slavs by the Nazis.

He hid this document into the wall of the hut, where he slept.



Recent photos of the castle and grounds.

Constantly tormented by hunger, Pawlak even accepted to sew a few odd things in exchange for a little food.

He also managed to work with the Persian deportee, Ashur Barhad, physician in the “Revier” or “Block”, which had been newly opened for sick people inside the camp. The prisoners, who were most seriously ill, were transferred to Natzweiler-Struthof- camp, where none ever returned!

About September 10th 1944, the evacuation of the Urbès camp began.

Loaded into cattle wagons, a convoy of 500 prisoners was transported from Wesserling via Colmar, Strasbourg, Ludwigshafen, Mannheim and Heidelberg to Neckarelz, near Heilbronn.

Like Ernest Gillen and other deportees in the Urbès camp, he felt the hidden joy of German debacle and of the advance of the Allied Forces, but also the constant fear of a collective death of all prisoners, before being discovered by the Allies.

And as many other inmates of Urbès, he suffered during several death marches, following the evacuation of Neckarelz and Bad Rappenau camps, notably this towards Dachau, München-Riem and Bad Tölz.

He was finally liberated by the American Forces on 2nd May 1945.

Sources:

- « Polnische Zwangsarbeiter im Elzmündungsraum. KZ-Häftlinge und Arbeitskräfte in Landwirtschaft und Industrie. Polen Dokumentation der KZ Gedenkstätte Neckarelz“, 2008, Arno Huth and Georg Fischer (p 117 à 126).
- „Das Natzweiler Außenlager Wesserling als A- Projekt des Jägerstabes“, Arno Huth, Gedenkstätte Neckarelz.

Jozef Moranski

He was born on 11th February 1924 in Kraminkawilka. He was arrested in 1941, suspected sabotage act on a locomotive engine in the repair workshop, where he worked as a solderer. Indeed, the engine was full of sand!



of

At first, he was imprisoned in Tarnow, where he underwent horrible interrogations with torture. Then, he was transferred to KL- Auschwitz, and later to the Urbès camp.

Jozef Moranski's memories concerning his detention in Urbès are relatively vague, compared with his testimonies about life in other concentration camps. As soon as he arrived to Auschwitz, Moranski was put in quarantine at the "Todesblock 11" or "death block 11" installed in the cellar and fitted with a wall called "Todeswand" or "death wall", where the condemned prisoners were lined up before being shot down.

For Moranski this was a real trauma.

Then, he was assigned to the commando called "Holzkopfkommando" or "woodheadcommando" composed of about 110 prisoners, who had to cut wood for the kitchen with an ax, but also to shape beams for the formwork of graves, always under the constant threat of being beaten with a stick, as soon as the pace of work decreased.

A little while later, Moranski contracted typhus, so that he weighed no more than 38 kilos and he became blind.

A Jewish doctor, co-prisoner, made every effort to keep him alive.

His transfer to the Urbès camp:

At the beginning of April 1944, 550 prisoners, including Jozef Moranski, were selected to be transferred to an unknown destination.

On 6th May 1944, they reached the railway station of Wesserling.

At the Urbès camp, he was given the number 16 624 (number of the KL -Natzweiler-Struthof).

Moranski testifies very little about this period of detention in Alsace.

However, he was sure, that he was sent on 7th August 1944 to the camp at Neckarelz, where he had to work in gypsum mines. More precisely, he had to reinforce old galleries in the Obrigheim mines, with the aim of transforming them in underground factories for the Nazis.

In his testimony, Moranski tells a beautiful anecdote about a Christmas crib: indeed, an Alsatian site engineer asked him, shortly before Christmas, if he could manufacture a crib. Jozef Moranski accepted with pleasure, in condition that the Alsatian employee would give him the required materials and propose him a hidden and quiet place to realize the crib. The Alsatian got his crib in time and when he came back to the camp just after Christmas, he brought a huge quantity of potatoes and tobacco. Moranski shared these gifts with his fellow prisoners.

Death march towards Dachau:

Jozef Moranski lived with other inmate prisoners in the School of Obrigheim.

One day, the deportees had to leave the camp and to walk escorted by soldiers, on motorbikes or in cars.

During this death march towards Dachau, the prisoners terribly suffered from hunger, thirst and exhaustion.

Moranski tells, that some deportees were so weak, that they had to abandon their blanket, because they didn't have enough strength to carry it!

Often it was the civilian population that gave them some food and water.

Sometimes, they stopped near a forest; as soon as the prisoners saw a hedgehog or another animal, they caught it, killed it and ate it raw!

The same occurred with a dead horse lying on the road, after the Allied bombings.

Some deportees, too weak and sick, were left behind, at the moment of pursuing the march and were shot then by the SS closing the march.

The tired and starving human column finally arrived at a small station, where the SS piled the prisoners into cattle wagons bearing the mark of the Red Cross.

However, the convoy was bombed, and at the arrival at Dachau, out of the initial 2000 deportees only 1500 remained.

Upon arrival at the camp, an SS commander showed them the chimney of the crematorium, which gave off a thick smoke. He told them in a threatening tone: *"Thousands like you have already gone through"*!

Despite that, the deportees were hoping for only one thing: their imminent liberation by the Allies!

Jozef Moranski had the opportunity to return, shortly after his release, to Dachau, but this time as a visitor and witness.

During many years, Jozef Moranski bore a grudge against Germans, or more specifically against Nazis. His heart was haunted by bitter feelings.

He admitted having suffered from nightmares for a long time. He had to learn again, how to rebuild his life, as well as possible. That took a lot of time.

Source:

« Polnische Zwangsarbeiter im Elzmündungsraum. KZ-Häftlinge und Arbeitskräfte in Landwirtschaft und Industrie. Polen Dokumentation der KZ Gedenkstätte Neckarelz“, 2008, Arno Huth and Georg Fischer (p 127-130).



Tadeus Szwed:



He was born on 22nd August 1925 in Sosnowitz and he died on 13th March 1999.

He had been arrested on May 1942, at the age of 17, because he refused to work in Germany during the Second World War (RAD), and he had committed a sabotage in a factory in his native city. Indeed, he had been caught by his work colleagues putting sand in running appliances.

At the request of the criminal police of Sosnowitz, he was imprisoned in Myslowitz on 13th or 15th June 1942.

Victim of torture, he had trouble, talking about it, even long time after his liberation.

He had been deported to KL-Auschwitz, on 3rd January 1943.

In Auschwitz, he was assigned building railways, but he was injured twice. He even became deaf on one ear, after having received violent blows.

Thanks to the support and help of the senior prisoner in the Block, he was selected to be transferred to Alsace.

Thus, he arrived among 550 other deportees at the railway station of Wesserling, on 6th May 1944, after a hard journey of 2 days and 2 nights in cattle wagons and in painful conditions.

During his detention at Urbès, Tadeus Szwed was assigned to set down rails leading to the tunnel.

His detention and the survival conditions in Urbès were less painful than in Auschwitz. The attitude of the SS-men was a little bit less cynical or barbaric.

Moreover, there were no daily selections like in Auschwitz. That gave him a little more hope and strength to endure his sorrow.

His evacuation to the camp at Neckarelz:

During the railway convoy to Neckarelz, on 9th August 1944, Tadeus Szwed had to clear the dead prisoners, after the Allied bombing near Karlsruhe.

The shock was so hard for him that he fainted. His fellow companions had to hide him behind a wagon, so that he could not be seen by the SS!

In Neckarelz, he was affected to work in old gypsum mines. He needed to pull out big gypsum blocks and to carry heavy railway sleepers, with the aim of building an underground factory for Daimler-Benz.

Luxury for Tadeus Szwed: in Neckarelz he could wear clogs and a striped winter coat!

The death march after the evacuation of Neckarelz camp:

At the beginning of April 1945, the deportees, who were healthy enough to walk – the Nazis called them “die Gefähigen”- began a 3 day and 3 night trying and risky march, because of the permanent threat of Allied bombings. A part of the way to Dachau was done by train, but it was bombarded and the prisoners had to make the rest of their way on foot.

Like a lot of other deportees of Urbès, Tadeus Szwed was part of the second death march, which had to take them to the airport of München-Riem.

At the end of April 1945, he ended up with people, who were exhausted and starving, on the road toward the Alps, without knowing, where this march would lead them.

Tadeus Szwed will finally be free thanks to the American Army, on 1st May 1945.

Yet, he remained for a long time at the location of his release, because a German family had offered him clothes, hospitality and work.

With another Polish survivor, he wanted to enroll with the Americans in the war against the Japanese. But, the end of the war against Japan made this intention unnecessary.

Back to Sosnowitz:

Tadeus Szwed returned to live in his hometown, where he worked as an electrician. From his first marriage he got two children.

He tried, like all Nazi camp survivors, to rebuild somehow his life and to forget bit by bit the hell, he had experienced in the camps.

But during many years, Tadeus Szwed suffered from trauma experienced during his life in concentration camps.

Indeed, he frequently had nightmares and woke up suddenly at night, by behaving as a deportee.

He died on 13th March, 1999.



Wikipedia image, concentration camp, detail of the Bittermark Mahnmal, Dortmund, Germany.



2 deportees drawn by
Walter Spitzer, camp at
Buchenwald (internet,
image).

Source:

« Polnische Zwangsarbeiter im Elzmündungsraum. KZ-Häftlinge und Arbeitskräfte in Landwirtschaft und Industrie. Polen Dokumentation der KZ Gedenkstätte Neckarelz“, 2008, Arno Huth und Georg Fischer (p131-132).

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