

M^r François Wehrbach, Pioneer of the historical researches about the Urbès camp.

Thanks to M^r François Wehrbach's book, « *Urbès 1944, un tunnel ferroviaire devait devenir une usine souterraine d'armement de la Luftwaffe* », « *KL-Natzweiler-Block W, Baustelle U* », Colombier Edition, [a railway tunnel had to be transformed in an underground arms factory to the advantage of the Luftwaffe], pupils from the High-School Scheurer-Kestner in Thann could undertake from 2014 to 2017 a historical work in 3 languages about the secondary camp of Urbès, under the supervision of their German teacher, Marguerite Kubler.

The study of M^r Wehrbach's book has been completed by historical researches concerning archives and nazi documents, testimony books of former camp prisoners written in French, German or in English, as well as precious documents, press articles or photographs provided by the Museum Serret of Saint-Amarin.

François Wehrbach, the cover page of his book

« *Urbès 1944, un tunnel ferroviaire devait devenir une usine souterraine d'armement de la Luftwaffe* »



« KL-Natzweiler- Block W »

« Baustelle U »

Editions du Colombier (2009)

Deliberately, François Wehrbach didn't end the last sentence of his book with a point, because he wished, that other testimonies would be added. Thus, he didn't want the content of his book becoming stiff.

The pupils and their German teacher express their sincere gratitude to M^r. Wehrbach for his immense historical work.

Indeed, François Wehrbach is the first person, who has collected documents about the Urbès camp and who undertook to write a historical book, gathering testimonies of former camp prisoners and memories of inhabitants, who had to live the nazi period in the Valley of Saint Amarin.

Let us notice, that François Wehrbach is the great-grandson of François-Antoine Robichon, a well known teacher and writer in Alsace. He was francophile and used to speak intentionally French even in a period, where Alsace became German after its annexion to the II. Reich, from 1871 to 1918. Germans didn't always like his attitude !

M^r. Wehrbach doesn't live in Alsace, that's why he heard for the first time about the Urbès camp in 2003, when he began to work about the genealogy of his family living in Alsace and when he got in touch with M^r. Maurice Robichon, grandson of François-Antoine. He also met M^r. Julien Haas, who was 14 years old in 1940 and who was ready to testify about the nazi period.

The decisive moment, when François Wehrbach really became aware of the necessity to collect testimonies and memories, before all witnesses would be dead, was April 2007. He came for a week to Alsace in company of his friend, **André Berkover**, rescapee of Auschwitz. He absolutely wanted to visit the Natzweiler-Struthof camp.

M^r. Wehrbach's book consists in 4 big chapters

In the first chapter, he remembers the main political lines taken by the nazis in Alsace during the Occupation.

Our region and the Moselle were annexed de facto to the IIIrd Reich, soon after the armistice signature on June 22nd 1940.

This grim and painful period in Alsace is irremediably in relation with the fearsome and by all people dreaded Gauleiter Wagner. This period remembers also the multiple decrees and draconian measures taken by the Gauleiter to « germanize » our region as rapidly as possible.

The population in Alsace and Moselle had to be rapidly brought to heel and young people as well as adults had to be quickly indoctrinated.

For opponents or recalcitrants against the nazi ideology, the safety camp of Schirmeck-Labroque opened on September 15th 1940 was an « ideal place » to reeducate them and to bring them again on « the right track » !

Already in 1941, the nazis created the RAD (Reichsarbeitsdienst) or forced labour, the « HJ » or « Hitler Jugend » to indoctrinate young boys, the « BDM » (Bund der deutschen Mädel) for young girls, as well as the KHD (Kriegshilfsdienst), decree of June 25th 1942, which obliged young men in Alsace and Moselle, as soon as they were 17 years old, to take an oath to Hitler and to recognize their adherence to the Reich.

M^r. Wehrbach also evokes the problem of the forced entlistment into the Wehrmacht or Waffen-SS for many young men, particularly the class 1921 to 1926, after the decree promulgated on August 25th 1942 by the Gauleiter Wagner. This decree caused a major upheaval in Alsace and Moselle and the drama of the « **Malgré-Nous** », who were sent to the Russian front to fight for the Germans. This drama caused a real wrench in many families.

Among the vast number of decrees and measures taken by the nazis, one is rather funny and is in relation with the ban on the wearing of the Basque beret, considered by the nazis as a « *Gehirnverdunkelungskappe* » (a headgear, that darkens and addles the brain of the person, who is wearing it) !

The first chapter of the book allows to better understand the reaction of the Alsatians against the nazi dictature and ideology.

The second part of the book is devoted to testimonies of people from the Valley of Saint Amarin, who hadn't been deported into nazi camps, but who had suffered under the nazi dictature, when they were child or adult. Some of them speak about the forced and sometimes ridiculous « Germanizing » in Alsatian village schools, as well as about the stratagems, they used, « to pretend to... », with the purpose to shy away from the indoctrination by nazi teachers.

Other persons relate their forced entlistment into the Wehrmacht or the entlistment of their brother and the devastating drama caused in their family.

Maurice Robichon was 9 years old and **Julien Haas** 14 years old in 1940 ; both of them deliver precious indications about that grim period. On one hand, they describe with much humor the atmosphere, which reigned in the Elementary School of their village with nazi teachers; on the other hand, they relate about tragic events, that hardly shook their respective family.



Example of a propaganda poster illustrating the forced « germanizing » in Alsace during the nazi period.

The third chapter begins with precious indications about the Urbès secondary camp, that's to say one of the 70 secondary camps belonging to the main camp of Natzweiler-Struthof.

François Wehrbach explains the circumstances of the opening and the closing of Urbès camp, the number of the camp prisoners according to the different convoys, as well as the various categories of deportees, the conditions of their detention, the camp planning in support of the drawings and plans secretly realized by the former camp prisoner from Luxemburg, Ernest Gillen.

M^r Wehrbach also evokes the reasons why he undertook such historical researches and work about the secondary camp of Urbès.

In September 2006, Thierry Berkover, André's son and president of the association AFMD for the region of the Seine-Saint-Denis (AFMD = association in memory of the deportation and resistance) talk with him about the national competition in relation with the French Resistance and Deportation ; the subject was : « *the hard labor in nazi camps* ».

François Wehrbach undertook then a big work about the history of the Urbès camp, looking for photographs, documents about the facilities inside the tunnel, the installation of an underground arms factory for the manufacturing of Diesel engines for DB-605 planes in favour of the Luftwaffe, as well as about the hard labor concerning the 2 categories of prisoners, the « Produktionshäftlinge », Jewish prisoners assigned to the production inside the tunnel and the « Bauhäftlinge », prisoners for the constructions inside the camp.



From left to right

M^r. Louis Robischung, André Berkover, his son Thierry Berkover and François Wehrbach.

François Wehrbach decided to organize an appeal for testimonies in the Valley of Saint Amarin with the help of 2 journalists from the regional daily paper « l'Alsace », Albert and Gérard Mura.

He also solicited the Mayor of Urbès, M^r. Claude Ehlinger, who accepted to organize with the participation of M^r. Roger Bringard, the current president of the association « Souvenir Français » in the district of Saint Amarin, an exceptional visit inside the tunnel on April 19th 2007, though the entry into the tunnel is normally not authorized for the public because of security measures.

On Sunday, 15th April 2007 happened the first meeting between Louis Robischung, witness and former « Malgré-Nous » and André Berkover, rescapee from Auschwitz.

On Thursday, 19th April 2007, the Mayor of Urbès, M^r. Claude Ehlinger, invited a group of nearly 25 persons to visit the inside of the tunnel.



The third chapter of the book contains in this way precious testimonies of former « Malgré-Nous », forced recruits into the Wehrmacht, accounts from people of the Valley, as well as testimonies of former prisoners in the Urbès camp.

Louis Robischung had a extraordinary fate : he had to fight under 2 enemy flags, in 2 enemy armies, in 2 enemy camps and 2 sides. Three times he was made captive by French, by Allies and by Germans; his biographical account illustrates on one hand the complexity of the forced recruitment of young Alsatians into the nazi army and on the other hand the tactics used by some Alsatians to elude the entlistment.



M. Louis Robischung

Julien Haas was a young boy at the nazi period and he lived near the little railway station of Wesserling. So he could deliver interesting information about the frequent and regular comings and goings of camps prisoners, about their activities at the railway station of Wesserling in relation with the workcommando outside the camp.

Moreover, he tells about the tragic end of his 2 brothers, Pierre and René, both forced recruits, the first died at the front in the Ukraine, the second fell in the Normandie.



The third chapter of the book also contains precious testimonies by former camp prisoners or former civilian employees inside the tunnel of Urbès.

Ernest Gillen, a former prisoner from Luxemburg, could secretly draw plans about the camp planning. These precious documents give detailed information about the layout of the Urbès camp. Furthermore, he gives a heartbreaking account about the hard conditions of living in the camp, even if the functioning period of the camp was short, from March to mid-October 1944.



Etienne Kotz, was a young tinplate worker living in the surroundings of Mulhouse and a civilian employee inside the tunnel. He testifies about the facilities ordered in 1944 by the nazis inside the tunnel, with the aim to install machines and to make Jewish deportees from East Europe work on them. These Jewish prisoners were called « Daimler-Benz Jews » or « Produktionshäftlinge ».



M^r Kotz also describes the very hard survival conditions of the camp prisoners in 1944.

Etienne Kotz and **Alfred Roess** at the entry of the Tunnel in Urbès in 2009.

Alfred Roess was in 1944 a civilian employee and skilled work man inside the tunnel of Urbès

The Daimler-Benz firm in Colmar, where he was working, sent him in 1944 to the underground factory in the tunnel of Urbès. He had to work as a foreman and was responsible for the good quality of work concerning the Jewish camp prisoners assigned to work on the machines.



He too describes the very hard work conditions of the prisoners inside the dark and damp tunnel ; the air was suffocating and the period of work was long for weakened and starving men. He saw some ill-treatments of prisoners by the nazis, as well as some incidents, but he was not allowed to react or to show solidarity towards the prisoners.

Louis Michon was a French deportee from Lattes near Montpellier. He had to work at the smithy. His testimony delivers precious information about the various activities the prisoners had to do there.

M^r. Michon also evokes the life, the activities of the other camp prisoners and the incidents that occurred inside the camp of Urbès.



M^{rs} Maria Gié, born Meyer, was employed at the Daimler-Benz firm in Colmar, in the frame of the RAD or forced labor for young people in annexed regions. In a punitive way, she was transferred in July 1944 to the Urbès camp, because she dared to defy the banning of her forman to attend a mass in memory of her brother, Paul. He was a forced recruit into the Wehrmacht like many other young men in Alsace, he died at the Russian front at the beginning of July 1944.



Her testimony confirms the presence of women at the Urbès camp, nearly 50. They were assigned to check and to assemble pieces of measure apparatus for planes, just beside the entry of the tunnel. Each contact with any other prisoner was severely forbidden.

These women, punished by the nazis and deported to Urbès, didn't live in barracks inside the camp, but in a hotel requisitioned by the SS in Saint Amarin.

In the third chapter, M^r. Wehrbach also emphasizes the secret help brought to the unfortunate camp prisoners by civilian employees inside the camp, in particular by **Robert Wolfesperger**, called Robi.

The cake for the Bastille Day on July 14th, that he managed to smuggle into the camp, became in the eyes of the prisoners, who could eat a piece of it, a real myth !

Antoine Andrès, a teenager in September 1944, relates the dreadful frights, that he was seized with, in company of other 4 schoolfriends of the same age, during a ride with the school : the group of the 5 teenagers didn't follow the teacher and the rest of the form ; the curious boys absolutely wanted to look a cement mixer in operation not far away from the camp. They paid no attention to the warnings of an SS guard, who ordered them to go away.

They only went away, when his voice took a threatening tone. Unfortunately, a second SS guard arrested them not far away from the first SS and confined them into an exiguous barracks during one hour and a half.

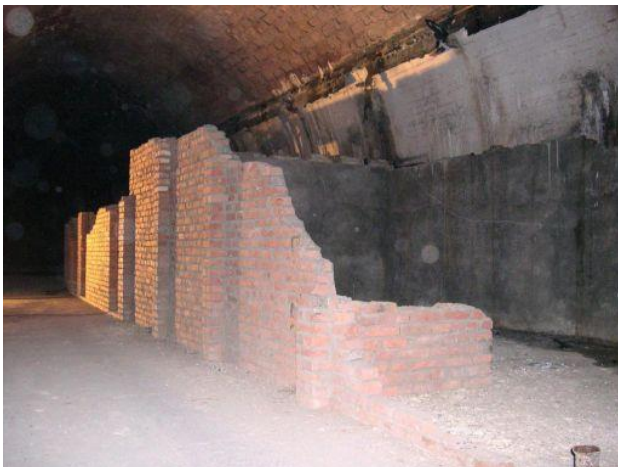
The group was composed of Antoine Andrès, Edmond Bitterly, Alphonse Eckert, Georges Risch and Georges Walch. They expected the worst. Finally, the 5 teenagers were given a good hiding, not only by the SS guard, but also by their teacher with an extra strong sermon, and grosso modo they got the same punishment by their parents !

All things considered, such severe punishment was better than a possible internment into the safety camp of Schirmeck or into the Urbès camp !

The fourth chapter of the book contains the account illustrated by many photographs concerning the visit of the tunnel, on April 19th 2007.

The photos in relation with the tunnel of Urbès, when it was a railway building site from 1932 to 1935, are provided by the Museum Serret of Saint Amarin.

5 cars were needed to drive the group of 25 persons to the far end of the tunnel, where is the present water reservoir of the Urbès Village and its surroundings.



Inside the tunnel : wall rests, place for machines and marks of the supports installed to hold up the asbestos ceiling.

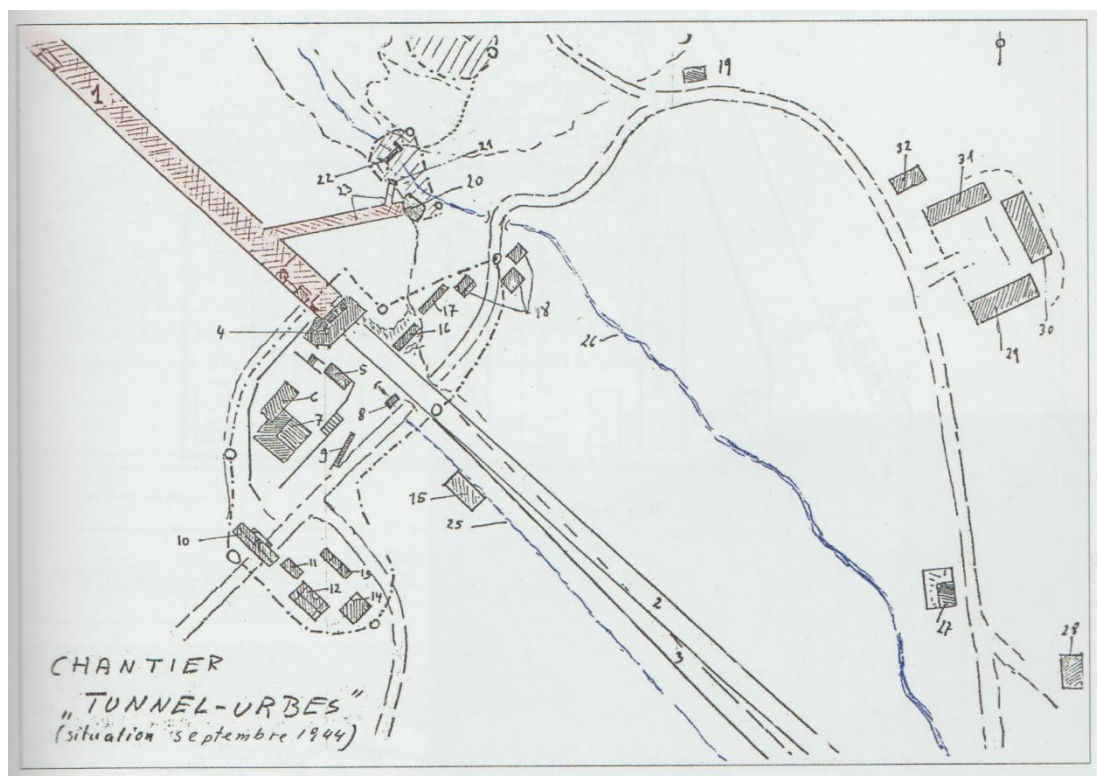


Rests of premises, just at the entry of the tunnel :

Was it the place, where M^{rs} Gié and the other women had to work in a punitive way ?

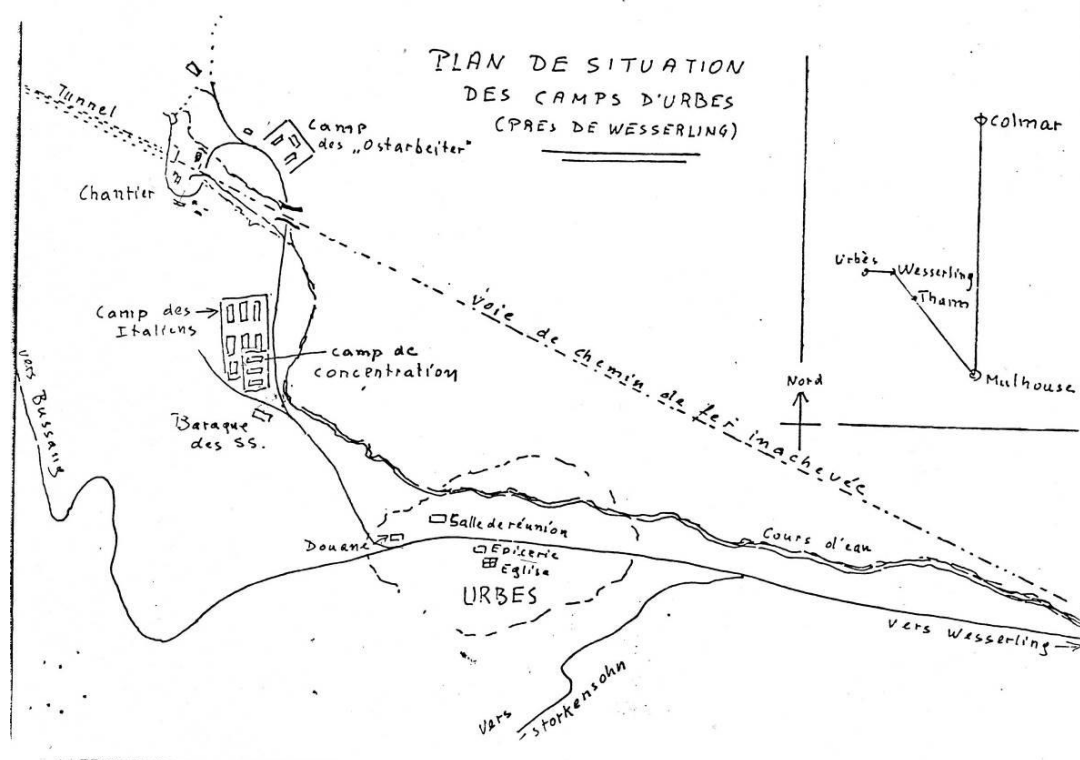
Or was it rather an SS office inside the tunnel ?

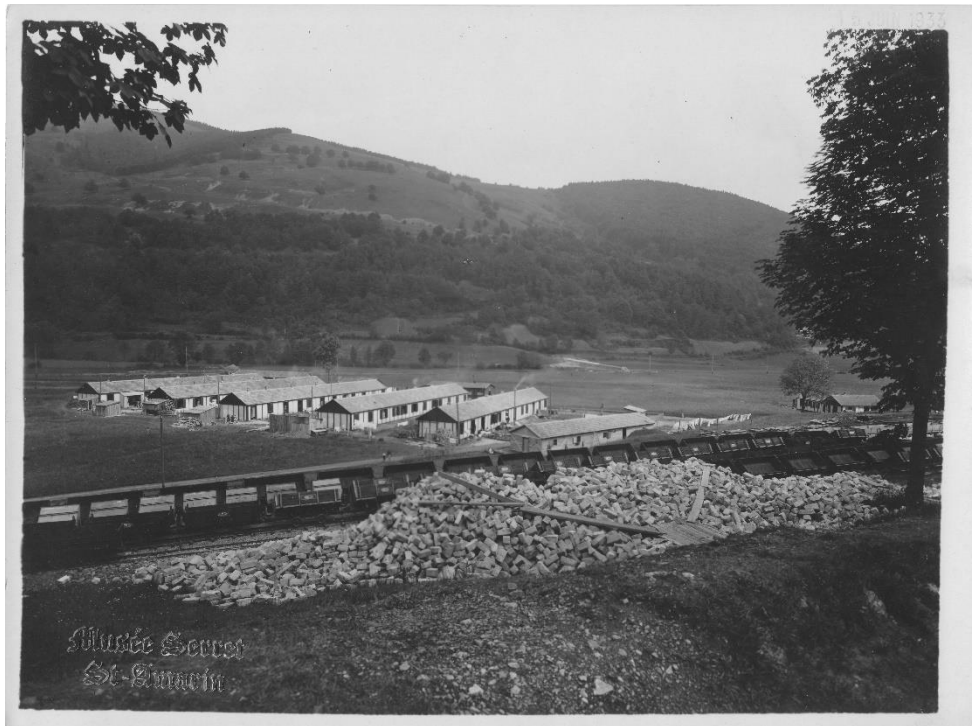
In this chapter we will also find precious drawings and plans realized by Ernest Gillen, a former camp prisoner from Luxembourg.



Chantier d'Urbès - Situation septembre 1944

1	Tunnel
2	Voie de chemin de fer inachevée
3	Voie d'accès
4	Entrée de tunnel fortifiée
5	Réservoir d'eau
6	Installation à carbide
7	Transformateur, AEG
8	Latrines
9	Fosse de réparation des locomotives diesel
10	Bâtiment administratif
11	Direction du chantier -Bauleitung-
12	Bains, douches et désinfection
13	Déchets
14	Forge
15	Station d'épuration
16	Bâtiment administratif
17	Maison de Bintner
18	Scierie
19	Maison Biassini
20	Chauffage et fortification
21	Sortie de secours
22	Pont
23	Couloirs latéraux -chauffage et aération-
24	Cantine
25	Eaux sortant du tunnel
26	Ruisseau
27	Cuisine des détenus du camp de concentration
28	Maison privée
29	Baraques du camp des 'Ostarbeiter'
30	Baraques du camp des 'Ostarbeiter'
31	Baraques du camp des 'Ostarbeiter'
32	Cuisine des 'Ostarbeiter'





The huts or barracks of the building site in 1933 were used by the Nazis in 1944 as a concentration camp, dormitories and offices. Picture provided by the Museum Serret, Saint Amarin.

At the beginning and the end of the book, M^r. Wehrbach added a list of prisoners from the Urbès camp mentioning their prisoner number and their birthday.

The great historical work accomplished by M^r. Wehrbach contributes to carry on the collective memory, to preserve precious testimonies and accounts from people, who endured the barbarousness of the nazi régime, either as Alsatians or as prisoners of the Urbès camp.

In a few time no witness will be anymore in live.

The history of the secondary camp in Urbès was for long time unknown and even neglected.

That is why such historical works are very important.

Unfortunately, the book is out of print.

Yet, you will find the content of the book in French on the present site in « Travail historique de M. François Wehrbach » in form of several PDF documents.

Moreover, you can read in the English version in the present site in « Recherches historiques » many detailed indications and complete information about the content of M^r. Wehrbach's book in the different lessons written in 3 languages by pupils of the High-School Scheurer-Kestner in Thann, the book is often mentioned as source or reference.



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Marguerite Kubler

Nota Bene : all pictures illustrating the present article are in M^r. Wehrbach's book.

Other book of the same author : « *André Berkover, matricule A16572, Auschwitz III-Monowitz* », Editions du Colombier, 2007.