

Testimonies of former deportees in the camp of Urbès

Photo 2008 from François Wehrbach's book.



Louis MICHON - Number 9798

Louis Michon was born on July 22nd 1922 in Lattès, near Montpellier.

In 1939, he undertook training to become a mason. In 1942, he was appointed to youth building sites, that had been instituted on 30th July 1940 and made compulsory for all 20 year old men living in the Free Zone of France.

On 10th April 1943, Louis Michon was drafted for the STO - forced labour services instituted in France by the Nazis during World War II. He was transferred to Wiesbaden to the camp Willi where he worked in a foundry.

He endured a period of intense loneliness, homesickness and nostalgia for his wife and the whole family.

Was this the reason for which the quality of his work decreased ? He himself doesn't know.

The fact remains that the Gestapo arrested him on 3rd July 1943 for sabotage and he had was summoned to appear in a court in Frankfurt-am-Main on 25th January 1944, after having spent 6 and a half months in a prison in Wiesbaden.

Judged as « harmful to the German Empire », Louis Michon was sent back to France. The height of fate: instead of returning home to his native country as rapidly as possible, he was determined to say goodbye to his French companions in camp Willi! The following morning, the Gestapo arrested him a second time, and interned him on 28th January 1944 in Dachau.

At Dachau, he was given Number 65359 and was put in quarantine. One evening, after approximately 3 weeks of detention, the SS took 114 prisoners, among whom Louis Michon, put them in cattle wagons to travel to an unknown destination.

On 17th February 1944, Louis Michon arrived at the railway station of Wesserling, on foot and

surrounded by soldiers of the Luftwaffe, and from where the prisoners were led to the camp of Urbès.

Life and work at the camp and health problems:

Louis Michon found himself in Block 2, at the camp entrance, and was assigned to the smithy. He worked there as a smith, forging drill bits used for rock drilling but also forging various metal parts for the camp's factory.

Compared to the other inmates, Louis Michon considered himself fortunate, being able to work inside, a roof over his head and in the warmth during winter thanks to the heat radiated by the fire of the smithy. Moreover he did not have to work at night!

His biggest fear was to fall ill because he pertinently knew, that every prisoner that was seriously ill detained at the « Revier » or staying in the barracks for ill inmates, would be transferred to the main camp of Natzweiler-Struthof where he would never come back from!

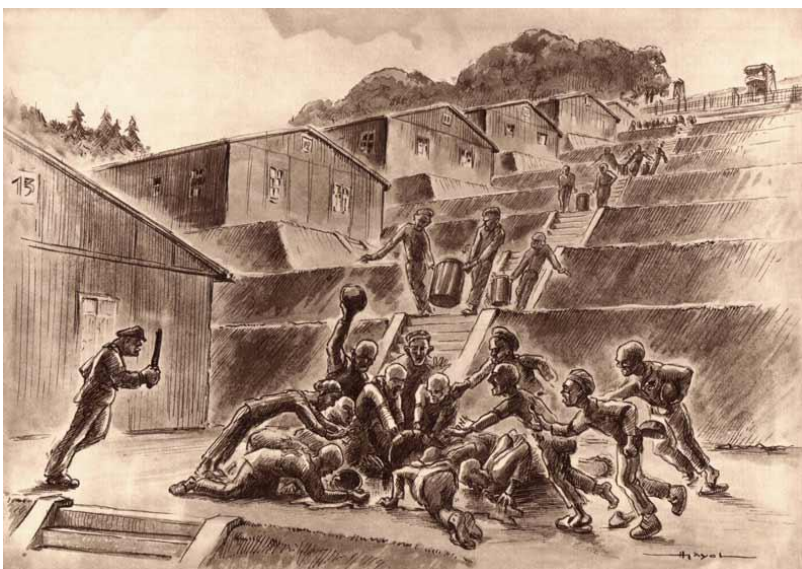
And yet, he found himself one day suffering from a phlegmon on one buttock. One of his friends, having some knowledge in medical care, treated him as well as he could. Thanks to a razor blade, he slit the skin of the abscess in a cross to drain it and made a bandage with a piece of paper bound with cloth torn from a shirt.

His companions also arranged a space for him to hide under cardboard boxes in a corner of the smithy, so that the SS guards would not find him.

Starvation at the Camp of Urbès:

Louis Michon mentions the fact that the inmates were genuinely starving. In the book written by François Wehrbach, he testifies (p 91):

« It wasn't the same for the Russian and Polish inmates. Their starvation was at the point that they would fight like animals for the soup which ended up on the ground and they thus had no choice but to eat the mud (...) ».



Drawing by Henri Gayot, « La Déportation ».

Museum, Natzweiler-Struthof.

At the smithy, Louis Michon and his companions would roast in the embers of the fire, potato peels that had been brought them in secret by one of the inmates assigned to the canteen.

Moments of pleasure and noble solidarity :

In François Wehrbach's work, Louis Michon also evokes the moments of amusement and laughter thanks to an inmate named Raoul Debernadi, who mimed Fernandel – a popular vaudeville actor - to such perfection that everybody laughed, even the sentry of the Luftwaffe!

Louis Michon also recounts, using very warm and grateful terms, the noble solidarity and the risky generosity shown by M^r. Robert Wolfesperger a civilian employee in the camp, as well as M^r. Léon Wassner, manager of the sawmill in Storckensohn.

Indeed, M^r. Wassner arranged to have Robert Wolfesperger clandestinely bring food to the prisoners.

Ernest Gillen, a former Luxembourg deportee, also mentions the « famous » Bastille Day cake on the 14th of July, clandestinely introduced into the camp by Robert Wolfesperger (cf. P3 about Ernest Gillen).

Furthermore, M^r. Charles Arnold, former president of the association « Souvenir Français » in the canton of Saint-Amarin, as well as M^r. Robert Kriepps, previous president of the Luxembourg Association of former deportees at the KL Natzweiler-Struthof and annex camps, mention in their respective speeches given on 18 September 1988 at Urbès - during the unveiling and inauguration of the commemorative plaque put at the entrance of the tunnel - the great generosity of the local population towards deportees : inhabitants secretly gave them cigarettes, a little bread or any other food, as regularly and often as they could; they did so through civilian employees, who worked inside the concentration camp. Others smuggled in clothes, medicines or food or even some little delicacies, if possible, in the same way.

Camp Evacuation and transfer of the prisoners from Urbès to the other side of the Rhine:

On 22 October 1944, Louis Michon was transferred to Neckarelz (Baden, Germany), then to the camp of Bad Rappenau, where he had to work in a salt mine at Kommando 50.

The working conditions were excruciating and dangerous because of the increased frequency of the air raids led by the Allies. The last hours of the day were often spent picking up the mutilated bodies of fellow inmates and deportees!

In early May 1945, the fighting moved closer.

On 2 May 1945, in an ultimate fit of cynicism and barbarism, the SS locked detainees - including Mr. Michon - up in a barn and set fire to the building using flamethrowers.

Despite the season, the large amount of snow almost miraculously extinguished the fire and

saved from an atrocious death, the unfortunate detainees locked up inside the barn. And yet, one of Mr. Michon's companions was shot by an SS hiding in a neighboring house just as the latter was waving a piece of white cloth, proceeding towards the Liberation troops!

His liberation:

Finally the eagerly awaited moment of his liberation came: on 2 May 1945, Louis Michon and his fellow inmates were liberated by the First Division of the American Forces.

His return to France:

At 8 in a Renault 4 Juva, abandoned in a ditch and using the leftover petrol from the jerry cans left lying along the roadside by the Americans, the group managed to cross the Rhine and get to Sarrebourg.

After an unexpected and serendipitous meeting in Sarrebourg with his wife's first cousin, Louis Michon made his way to Paris. On 8 May 1945, he took the train to Montpellier transiting through Tours and the Massif Central, all bridges spanning the Rhone having been destroyed.

Warned by the postman, his wife Yvette and the entire village welcomed him triumphantly on his arrival at Mireval, happy he had managed to stay alive.

Slowly, life resumed its normal course.

M^r Louis Michon died in 2008.

(Source : François Wehrbach' work, *Urbès 1944, un tunnel ferroviaire devait devenir une usine souterraine d'armement de la Luftwaffe* », « KL-Natzweiler-Block W, Baustelle U » / Editions du Colombier, p 86 to 99).

Anton Koehler, former German deportee and capo in the Urbès camp

He was born on 3 January 1912 in Marburg on the Lahn (Germany).

Arrested by the Gestapo for having falsified his military passport, refused the thought of becoming a soldier in the Wehrmacht. As such, he had to wear the green triangle of common criminals.

When he was transferred to Urbès, he was the eldest of the camp and was designated capo.

According to the testimony of other prisoners, he never behaved as a tyrant and he was well perceived by the other inmates and deportees.



He considered Josef Janisch as a real « scoundrel », while he saw Arnold Brendler as a little more clement or more « humane ».

Following the evacuation of the camp, Anton Koehler was transferred to the elementary school that had been converted into a camp in Neckarelz; a little later he was deported to Bad Rappenau, where he was capo once again.

On 4 March 1945, during his internment in Bad Rappenau, he was hurt by the explosion of a device that had been hidden inside the camp. Four of his mates were killed.

Injured, he was transported to the military hospital of Bad Rappenau, then interned at the camp of Bad Wimpfen, from which the American Army liberated him.

After the war, Anton Koehler lived in Bad Rappenau, where he died in 1994.

(Source: Arno Huth's book entitled « *Das doppelte Ende des KL Natzweiler auf beiden Seiten des Rheins* », Neckarelz 2013, edited by Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, Baden-Württemberg, p 8 and 9).

Georg Neutz, former German deportee with a green triangle:

He was born in 1911 in Heilbronn-Frankenbach (Baden, Germany).

He worked at the engine factory called NSU Motorenwerke AG in Neckarsulm (Germany).

According to some sources, he had been arrested by the Gestapo of Heilbronn for having maintained too cordial links with French and Russian prisoners working alongside him in the workshop. He had secretly give them bread and food.

On 2 February 1944, he was transferred to the Natzweiler-Struthof camp as a prisoner in temporary custody or in Nazi jargon « Krimineller zwecks polizeilicher Sicherungsverwahrung ».

On March 1944, he was moved to camp at Dachau and on 25 March 1944, he was deported to Urbès and interned the camp as part of the first convoy.

During the summer of 1944, he returned to the main camp of Natzweiler as part of a selection process to join an SS Division; he was then transferred to the camp of Darmstadt, from whence he managed to flee on 9 November 1944.

Until the end of the war, he lived in hiding in the neighborhood of Heilbronn.

This is his testimony of his detention at the camp of Urbès:

« We spent the first night in the village hall. The following day, we were dispatched into 3 huts; these huts were located on the outskirts of the villages of Wesserling and Urbès (...) next to a tunnel. During my detention in Urbès 8 to 10 more shuts were added.

The camp was surrounded by barbed wires spanned at some height. The SS-guard lived in a stone house outside the camp. The staff in charge of running the camp was housed in private quarters as well as in the hotel Tannenberg in Storckensohn.

When I left the camp, there were about 800 to 900 prisoners.

At the beginning, one could count approximately 30 SS-guards but this had increased to 120 men by the time I left.

The staff consisted of SS men, but also of soldiers of the Luftwaffe. During my internment at the camp, the prisoners had to build an access road to the tunnel. Moreover, the tunnel was destined to become an underground factory and prisoners carried out all the work including electrification and excavation work for ventilation galleries.

The Kommando at the station of Wesserling was assigned to load the material arrived by train on trucks.

As soon as the fitting out of the tunnel was finished, SS-men ordered the machines intended for the manufacturing of diesel engines for planes DB-605 to be installed.

However, the production at the time of my transfer to Natzweiler hadn't begun yet.

At the beginning, we were approximately 5 to 6 German prisoners; at the end we were about 20. The other prisoners had various origins; there were mainly Russian, Polish, Czech, Italian and Luxembourgish deportees ».

Georg Neutz still remembers the eldest prisoners in the camp, Harry Hoffmann, the capo assigned to the kitchen, Hubert Könen, the capo Anton Koehler, Martin Seyfert who was a Jehovah's witness and a real « fury », and finally the inmate Klein.

Georg Neutz was the overseer: « *My duty consisted in training different Kommandos and in assigning tasks* ».

He specifies that the leader of the camp was the « SS-Untersturmführer » Arnold Brendler, who gradually eradicated corporal punishment by kicks and beatings – which had been the usual punishment at Natzweiler-Struthof.

Moreover, he remembers the horse dealer and « Hundeführer » or « dog master », Albert Leute who came from the region of Freiburg im Breisgau. He was presumably responsible for reporting and capo commander. He also remembers Josef Janisch, native of Austria and perhaps 40 years old at that time. He says about him:

“Janisch was a plenipotentiary leader for the region Alsace – Lorraine and responsible for managing the camp, overseeing the work in the tunnel, the assembly of the machine-tools as well as the following production. Everybody, be it the prisoners or the guards had an absolute respect for Janisch. Nevertheless, he made sure that the prisoners received some milk and wine in addition to their daily food ration. He often said, that if the prisoners had to work, they needed to be fed and treated correctly”.

However, Georg Neutz knew, that Janisch didn't say this out of humanitarian concern!

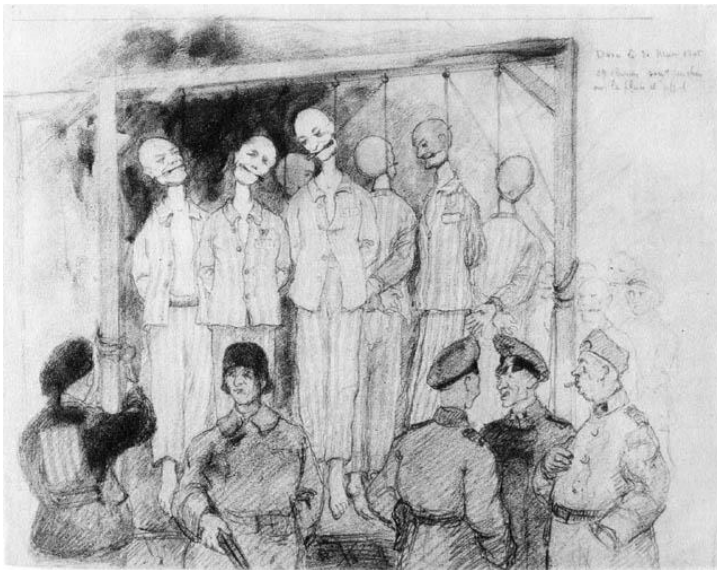
He also speaks about a barracks fit out into a “Krankenrevier” or “Block” for ill prisoners and run by a Polish deportee male nurse, Zacheusz Pawlak, who became a physician after the war. Medical care of the prisoners was entrusted to the Iraqi physician, Ashur Barhad. Only slight illnesses were treated in the camp; seriously ill prisoners were systematically transferred to the camp of Natzweiler-Struthof.

Georg Neutz also adds that during his detention in Urbès, 3 prisoners died from Typhus, another from his grave injuries, after being shot while trying to flee.

He relates as well, like other witnesses, the hanging of 5 [4] Russian prisoners in April 1944 at the entrance of the tunnel in mandatory presence of all camp inmates.

He is convinced, that this punitive action had been ordered by the SS Josef Seuss and the SS Franz Berg responsible for the running of the Natzweiler-Struthof camp.

“Probably, among the [5] Soviet prisoners 3 were from Urbès who had tried to flee a second time but caught again”.



(Internet, drawing)

Source: Arno Huth's book intitled: « *Das doppelte Ende des KL Natzweiler auf beiden Seiten des Rheins* », Neckarelz 2013, edited by Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, Baden-Württemberg, p 23 to 25.

Ashur Barhad, Iraqi prisoner and physician:

Was he born in 1914? In 1918? In Mossul (Iraq)? Nothing was confirmed.

Nevertheless, the Gestapo arrested him at the hotel Hohenzollern in Freiburg im Breisgau (Germany) for espionage.

He was then interned at Dachau, on 24 December 1942, given Number 41514 and was appointed to nurse ill prisoners at the Block.

On 13 May 1943, he was transferred to the annex camp of Schömburg, given Number 14903 and was registered as a French common law prisoner or as a « Schutzhäftling » in Nazi jargon.

On 22 May 1944, Ashur Barhad arrived at the camp of Urbès assigned to nursing ill prisoners.

When the camp had to be evacuated, he was moved on 10 August 1944 to Neckarelz (Baden, Germany), on 6 October 1944 to Mannheim-Sandhofen and finally on 23 December 1944 to the sick prisoners' Block in the camp of Vaihingen.

According to information from different sources, the Iraqi physician died in April 1945 at the Vaihingen camp, victim of a gangland slaying between inmates.

According to another source, he was transferred to Dachau, during the evacuation of Vaihingen, without any further information or detail being available.

Source: Arno Huth's book intitled, « *Das doppelte Ende des KL Natzweiler auf beiden Seiten des Rheins* », Neckarelz 2013, edited by Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, Baden-Württemberg, p 25.



The Memorial of Neckarelz (Baden, Germany) inaugurated in 2010.

Inside the Memorial.



Memorial Path, the « Goldfischpfad » in Neckarelz.

Elementary School in Neckarelz, in the middle of the little town; this School was rapidly transformed by the deportees into dormitories and Nazi camp in 1944.

Photo from the Memorial's website of Neckarelz.



Watercolours and drawings by Deborah Edwards.

Exhibition at the Struthof Memorial, 2015.

Photos taken by Hans-Peter Goergens, member of the Offenburg-Rammersweier Memorial.



Many thanks to M^{rs}. Margot Roullier for her rereading and correction in English.

Scheurer-Kestner High-School in Thann,

Terminale Euro Class

2016 / 2017.

German Teacher, Marguerite Kubler.

