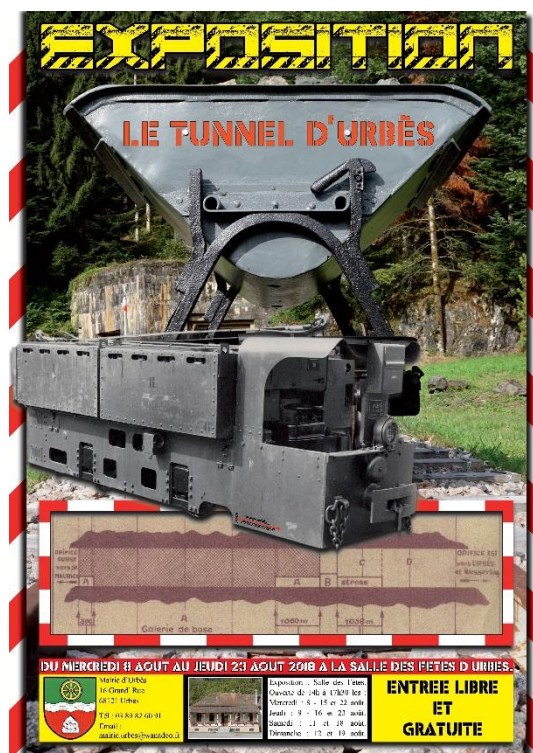


# **Raphaël Parmentier's researches about the building site of the unfinished railway tunnel in Urbès (1932-1935)**

## **1) Particularity of the tunnel in Urbès :**

The history of the tunnel in Urbès covers 2 distinct periods : during the first period (1932 - 1935), Alsace was French ; during the second period (1944), the region was German or more precisely a region de facto annexed to the III<sup>rd</sup> Reich of the nazis.

From 1932 to 1935, the Urbès tunnel was a vast rail-building site, which should have led from Alsace to Saint-Maurice sur Moselle, west slope of the Vosges, or more technically explained, it should have connected the head A of the tunnel in Saint-Maurice with the head B of the tunnel, on the east slope of the Vosges in Alsace.



The building project of this tunnel was part of the railway route with double-track line and it was considered with international interest. Indeed, this railway project had firstly the aim to shorten the distances to England, Benelux and North-East of France by 52km at the most, secondly to shorten the distances to Switzerland, Northern Italy and even to Austria. In the same occasion, this line had to connect Lorraine with Alsace via the Vosges, and in a smaller scale, the Moselle Valley with the Thur Valley.

Unfortunately this project became rapidly a financial fiasco and was definitely given up already in 1935, though the works should have been finished in 1937.

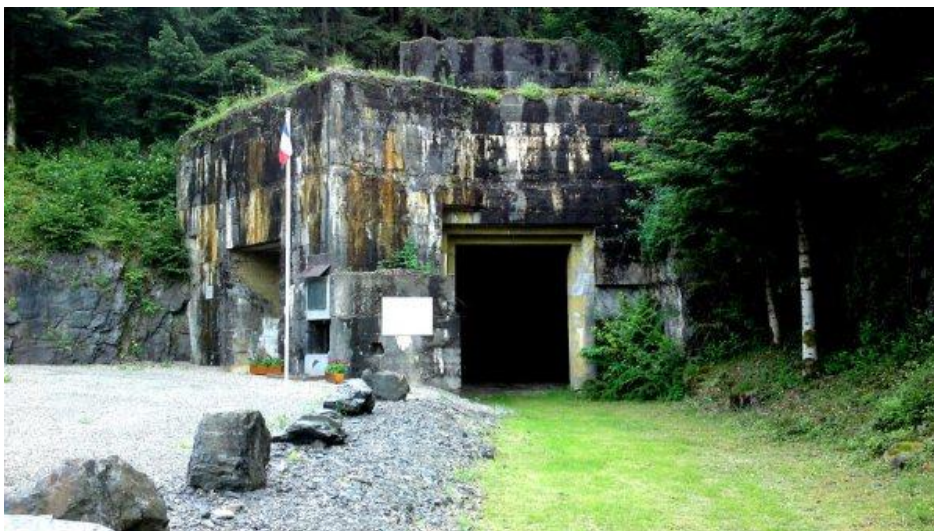
During the nazi period in Alsace (1940-1945), the unfinished railway tunnel was transformed, from March to mid-October 1944, into a secret underground

factory to manufacture diesel engines for DB-605 planes, in relation with the project called « Kranich » [crane] or « A10 » of the Jägerstab\*. It was within the context of an agreement between the German industrial group Daimler-Benz and the Luftwaffe.

\*Jägerstab was the name of the direction organ for the military armament of the “Luftwaffe”.

The nazi projects in relation with aircraft took the name of a bird, those in relation with the navy the name of a fish. That is why the secondary nazi camp of Urbès and the secret underground factory inside the tunnel were called « crane ».

The German industrial group Daimler-Benz had a subsidiary firm in Colmar from 1940/1941 onwards. Stefan Oser, the brother-in-law of the dreadful Gauleiter Wagner, took over the running of the firm already in January 1941.



**The bunker** at the entry of the tunnel in Urbès. Built by the camp prisoners, it officially became the **crypt of the Urbès Memorial**, since the inaugural ceremony of 11<sup>th</sup> September 2016.

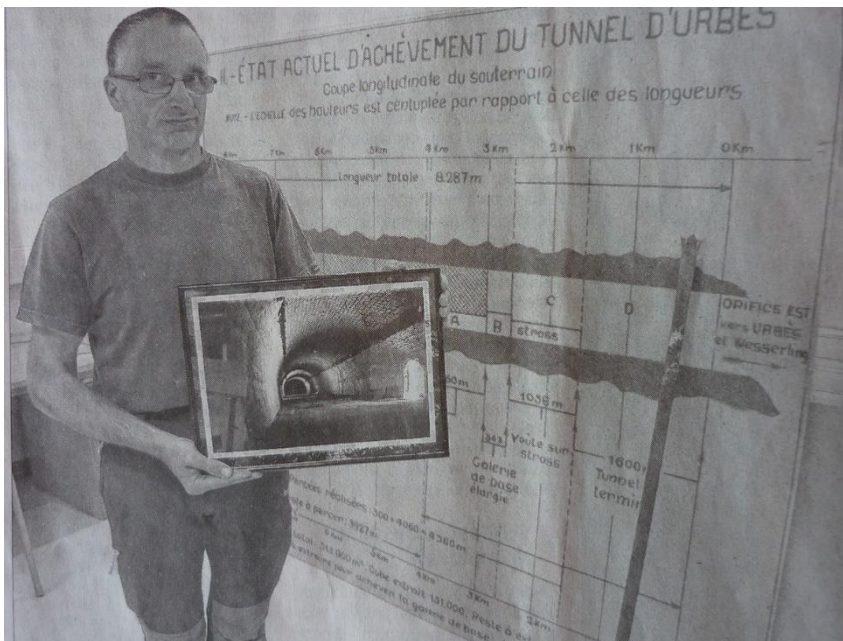
## **2) Genesis of the researches undertaken by Raphaël Parmentier :**

Raphaël Parmentier has a passion for nature, local history, as well as for technics. So he regularly organizes in Thillot or in other towns of the region exhibitions about several themes, among them the history of the unfinished tunnel of Saint-Maurice-Urbès.

He has already written 3 little books. The one in relation with the unfinished railway tunnel is entitled « *Urbès-St Maurice, le souterrain du col de Bussang* »

[Urbès-St-Maurice, the underground of the Bussang pass], published in 2007. The other ones had been written before ; One book relates about the ancient road tunnel situated on the Bussang pass ; it is called « *Bussang-Urbès, histoire d'un col* » [Bussang-Urbès, the history of a pass]. The second one is entitled « *Bussang, au temps du thermalisme* » [Bussang at the time of water cures]. In this book, Raphaël Parmentier goes back over the prosperous economic activity of this little town of the Vosges during last century. It was a place for water cures and vacation, which was very appreciated by rich town people, in search of fresh and healthy air, as well as of well-being by taking the waters.

- Which circumstances led Raphaël Parmentier to take an interest in the history of this tunnel, when it was a vast railway building site ?



Exhibition 2017 at the multimedia library in Le Thillot (Vosges)

Photo of Raphaël Parmentier, taken from the press article of Hervé de Chalendar, entitled « *Dans les ténèbres du tunnel d'Urbès* » / L'Alsace, 19<sup>th</sup> August 2017.

He began to research about the railway tunnel St Maurice-Urbès from 2001/2002 onwards. In the archives of the Society Vandewalle & Borie, the tunnel is officially called « **the underground of the Bussang pass** ».

At the beginning, he thought that the result of his researches would only constitute a chapter in the book about the road tunnel mentioned above and entitled « *Bussang-Urbès, histoire d'un col* ».

But the researches became more and more deep and voluminous. Now, they constitute the content of a book with detailed and technic explanations, thanks to the donation of many technic documents to the council of Urbès by M<sup>rs</sup> Rebeix, daughter of Roger Drouost, engineer in charge of the tunnel building. He worked for the Society Vandewalle & Borie, project manager of the building site.

On 27<sup>th</sup> August 2004, M<sup>rs</sup> Rebeix bequeathed to the Mayor of Urbès, Claude Ehlinger, an important number of documents, preciousy conserved by her father.

M<sup>r</sup>. Claude Ehlinger was conscious of this priceless gift and decided to register these precious documents to the « Archives Départementales du Haut-Rhin » [Departmental Archives of the Upper-Rhine], with the aim to ensure their sustainability.

This inestimable donation allowed Raphaël Parmentier to have access and to study thoroughly plans, drawings, topographic studies, technic reports of engineers... and to select plenty of pictures taken at the time of this vast building site in Urbès and Saint-Maurice.

So, the result of this immense work, which lasted a few years, became the content of Parmentier's third book entitled « *Urbès-St-Maurice, le souterrain du col de Bussang* », published in 2007, Edition House, Franche-Comté. The book is unfortunately out of print.

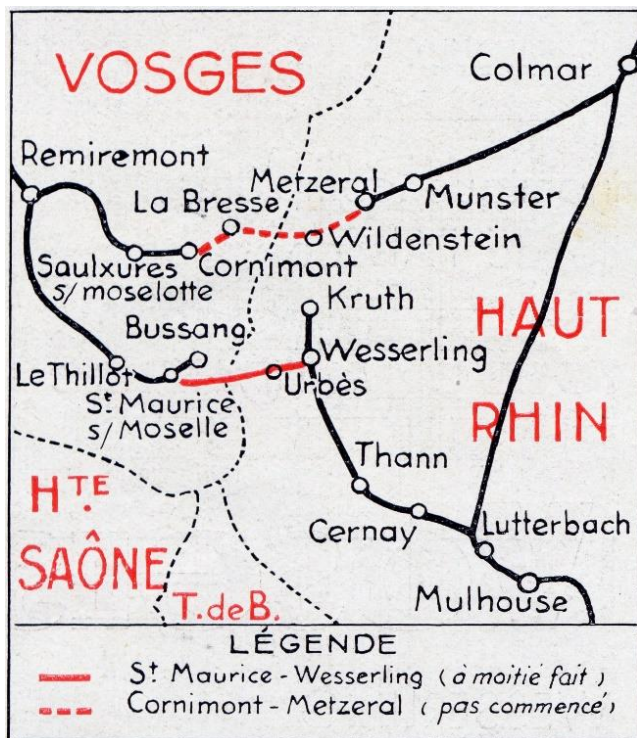
But a complete document with detailed technic explanations about the tunnel building site can be found on the Internet website of the Urbès village, in French and in PDF version, in the file « Travaux de Raphaël Parmentier / *Le tunnel d'Urbès, chantier ferroviaire inachevé* ». The website address : [urbes-alsace.fr](http://urbes-alsace.fr)

### **3) Why did the tunnel building site become a financial fiasco ?**

The rail line connecting Thann and Mulhouse was created in 1839. A little later, a first project of rail road to connect Epinal and Mulhouse via the Bussang pass was presented by the « Compagnie de l'Est » [Railway Company for East-France] already in 1867.

The full expansion of textile industry in Mulhouse, as well as in the Thur Valley and the Haute-Moselle Valley made rapidly conscious of the necessity to connect all these regions and to facilitate the increasing transportation of persons and goods.





Here a card showing the 2 piercing places in the South-Vosges : the first in Cornimont-Metzeral -never undertaken- and the second in Saint-Maurice-Urbès.

The Railway Company for East-France obtained the concession by the Act of 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1870 and it undertook in 1910 a feasibility study of the piercing possibilities in the South-Vosges.

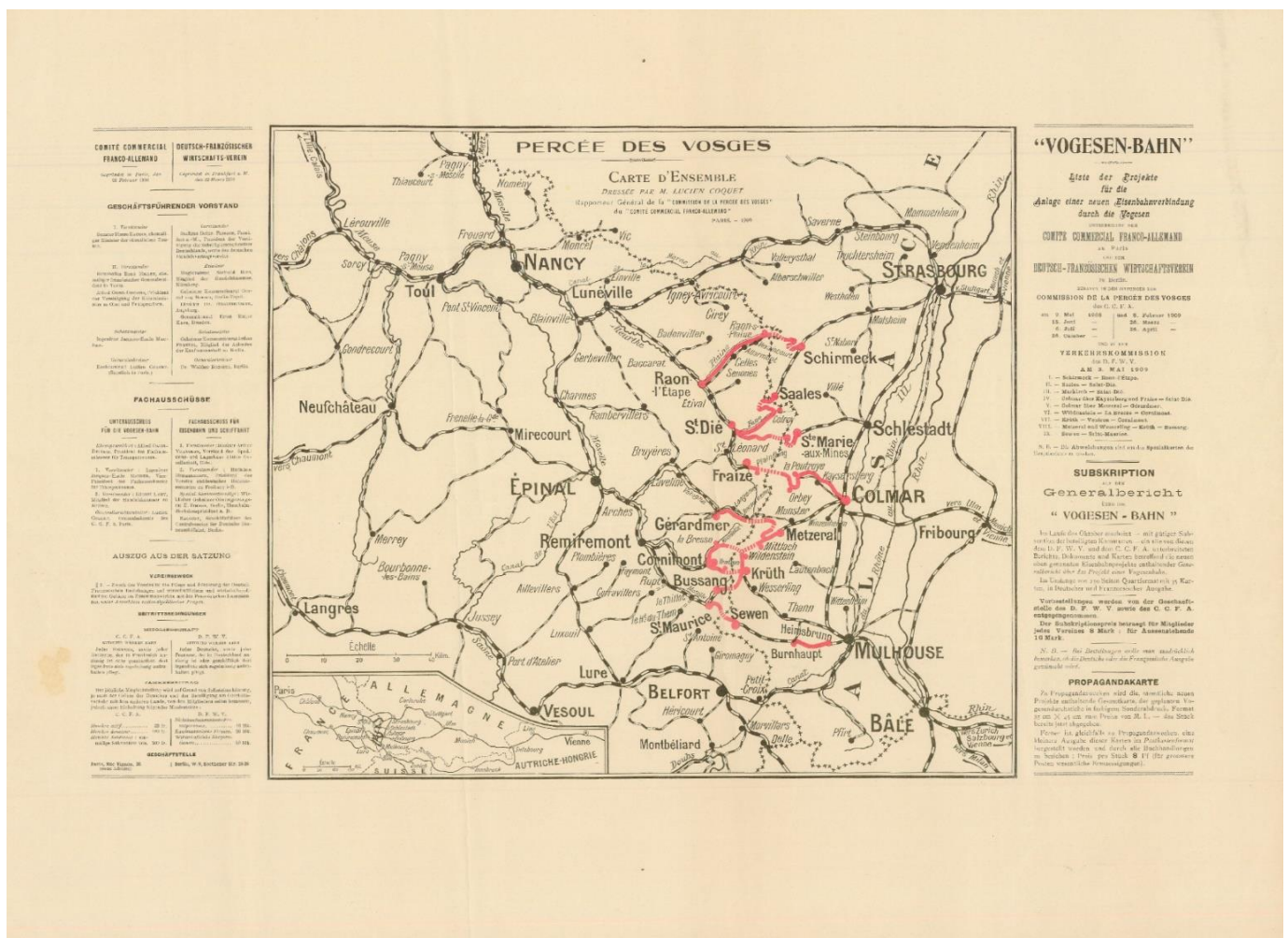
At that time, the rail road Saint-Maurice sur Moselle-Wesserling presented an international interest !





Furthermore, the rail line Epinal-Remiremont was brought into service from 10<sup>th</sup> November 1864 onwards, and then extended to Saint-Maurice in 1879. Bussang was only connected to the rail network from 17<sup>th</sup> October 1891.

The pilot-study of the Remiremont-Mulhouse rail road (with section to Wesserling) was presented in March 1919. It was necessary to wait at first for the vote of the Act, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1920, so that the Saint-Maurice-Wesserling line could be declared of public interest.



Card from 1908-1909.

After many discussions and negotiations, the building site could start in 1932, at a time, where Alsace was a French region. According to plan, the tunnel should be **8287 m long** and it was scheduled to become one of the longest tunnels in France !

The works of the vast building site were confinded to the Society **Vandewalle & Borie** on behalf of the « Chemins de Fer de l'Est » [Railway Company for East-France].

**The first tunnel piercing knock was given on 19<sup>th</sup> October 1932 and the building site needed 1100 workers, who took turns to work in teams. It was scheduled, that the tunnel should progress by 2 km each year !**

The Society Vandewalle & Borie evaluated the work costs at **87 millions francs**, while **the official estimation** reached a total amount of **130 millions francs**. Did the society straightaway underestimate the real costs, to get this procurement contract at any price ?

In any case, this titanesk project at that time was unique in the region. Unfortunately, it rapidly became a big financial fiasco.

In 1932, the building site operations could not be the same like today, compared with the modern technics of working. The mechanization of work was limited and this kind of building site needed an important workforce. The employees had to make all kinds of works in hard conditions.

Furthermore, the security measures existed barely and the workers operated without helmet, security shoes and without any protection against the infernal noise on the building site.



Photo of workers inside the tunnel.

Security measures seemed to be in that period an unknown notion.

2 telescopic hammer drills, « Ingersoll R.51 »

Weight : 25kg.



The 1100 employees were housing in huts, near to their working place in Urbès (the same place will become in 1944 the secondary nazi camp). Some huts were provided with a little garden and they were fit out, depending on the workers, if married or single.



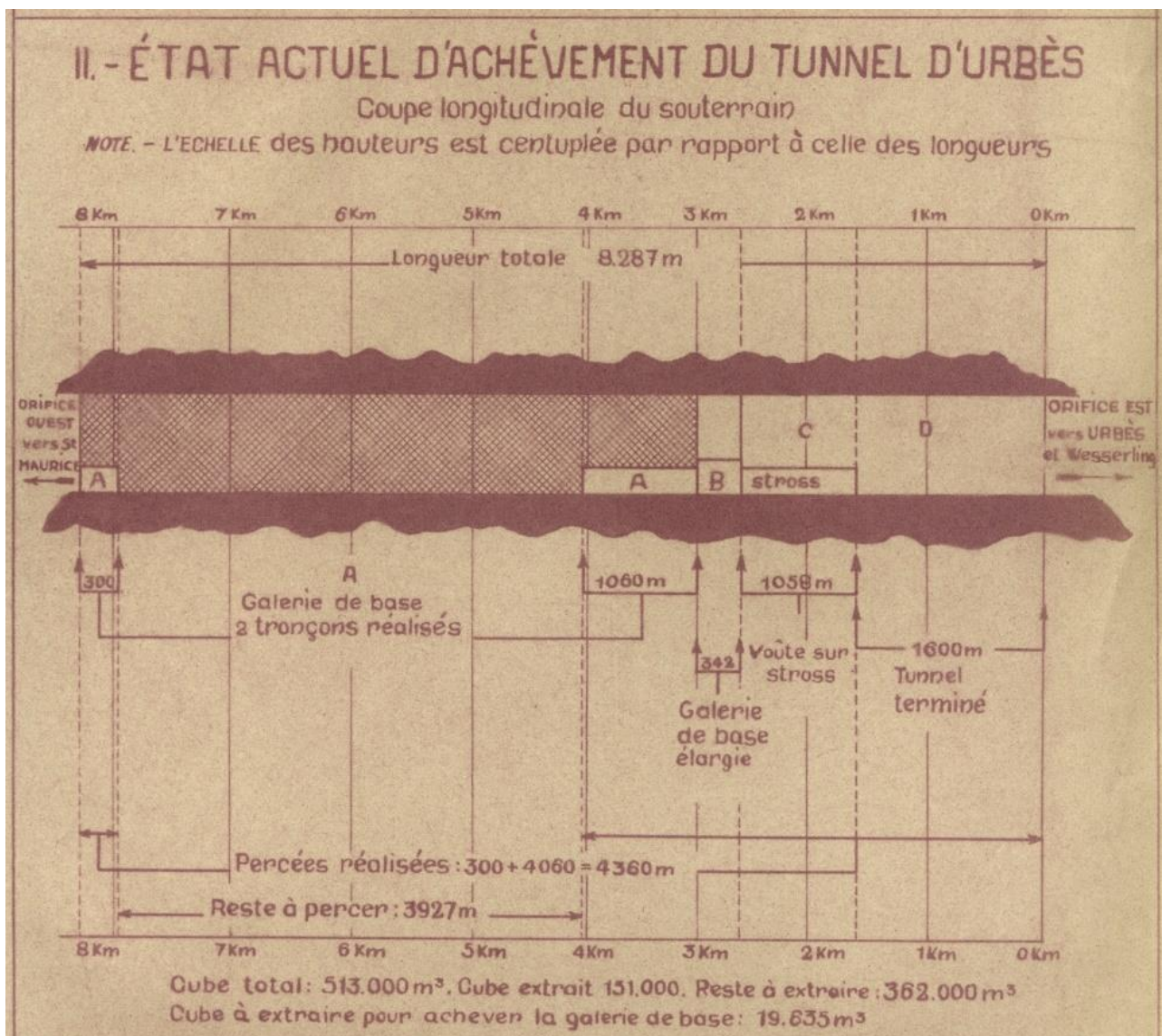
Photo from 15<sup>th</sup> June 1933,  
Serret Museum in Saint-  
Amarin

The reasons put forward to justify the giving up of the building site :

The Society might have been soon confronted with technic problems. Among the reasons given as a pretext to slow down the work in a first time and to stop it definitely a little later, were : the gradient difference between the side of the Vosges and the Alsatian side of the mountain, the important percolation of water, the extrem rock hardness, and so on. All these unexpected problems might have generated sizeable additional costs.

Were such arguments well-founded ? This question remains open. In any case, the building site became clearly slower from 1935 onwards ; the works were considered rightly or wrongly as too expensive. The firm agreement was cancelled.

**On the 8287m initially scheduled, only 4060m were actually bored on the Alsatian side and 300m on the other side of the Vosges.**



### Reaction produced by this irrevocable decision :

The political and administrative decision to give definitely up the building of this railway tunnel soon produced disappointment, frust, even anger and indignation, as much among the staff of the workers, who put a lot into their hard and tiring work, as among the engineers, who were confident and convinced, that this unusual project in that time would become successful.

The local population and an important number of local councillors totally disapproved this decision too, because for them it was a real nonsense.

For the most people, the giving up of this building site was synonym of incomprehensible and unacceptable waste, even a political scandal, in a period

where Alsace was a French region. Yet, the French President Poincaré promised during a visit in Alsace in 1921, that the region had to be connected urgently to the French national rail network and be provided with « as many borings in the Vosges as bridges on the Rhine » !

- Consequences due to the giving up of this project :

- These unfinished works had cost the French taxpayers the tidy sum of 60 millions francs, at a pure loss ! They even contributed to finance the dismantling costs, as well as the evacuation of all the equipment !
- The life in the Thur and Haute-Moselle Valleys might have been indisputably transformed, if the rail tunnel would have been brought into service.
- This line brought into service would have indeniably had a positiv impact on the economic and industrial activity in the region, though the road leading to the Bussang pass operates an important and busy link concerning the both slopes of the Vosges.
- In reality, it is difficult to evaluate the real impact, that the giving up of this abortive project could have presented on the economic life of the both valleys.
- Can the giving up of this failed rail project be the only reason of the decline in the textile industry in our valleys, even of the industrial desertification in our region ?
- Did the development of major trunk roads, as well as of the transportation by lorries become a too big competition for the rail networks already in that time ?

- Fate of the unfinished tunnel after the definitely giving up of the building site in 1935 :

- Although the « **Comité des Percées des Vosges** » [Committee for piercing in the Vosges], had been founded in Thann on 12<sup>th</sup> December 1936, counting many members from the both slopes of the Vosges, the case concerning the building site was definitely closed by the French government in 1962.
- The tunnel, like mentionned above, was used by the nazis and transformed into a secret underground firm and the former place for the



housing of the building site workers became the concentration and hard labour camp from March to mid-October 1944.

- In the sixties, the tunnel might have become a mushroom bed, but that kind of project has been given up, thanks to the opposition of the association « Souvenir Français », in respect for all deportees, who had to suffer from the nazi tyranny in this place of Memory.
- In 1982, the council of Urbès bought the tunnel from the SNCF for the modest sum of 1000 francs.
- In the background of the tunnel, there is now a water reserve for the supply of Urbès and neighbouring villages ; that is why the visit inside the tunnel is not allowed for the public. The other reason is the implementation of the « Vigipirate plan », since terrorism acts in France.
- From 11<sup>th</sup> September 2016, date of the inaugural ceremony, the bunker at the entry of the Urbès tunnel became the Memorial crypt of the secondary camp of Natzweiler-Struthof and of the Urbès Memorial Path.

Even if its history was stormy, the tunnel of Urbès remains a place of collective Memory, concerning the period, when Alsace was French, as well as, when it was German or more precisely a de facto annexed region to the III<sup>rd</sup>. Reich (1940-1945).

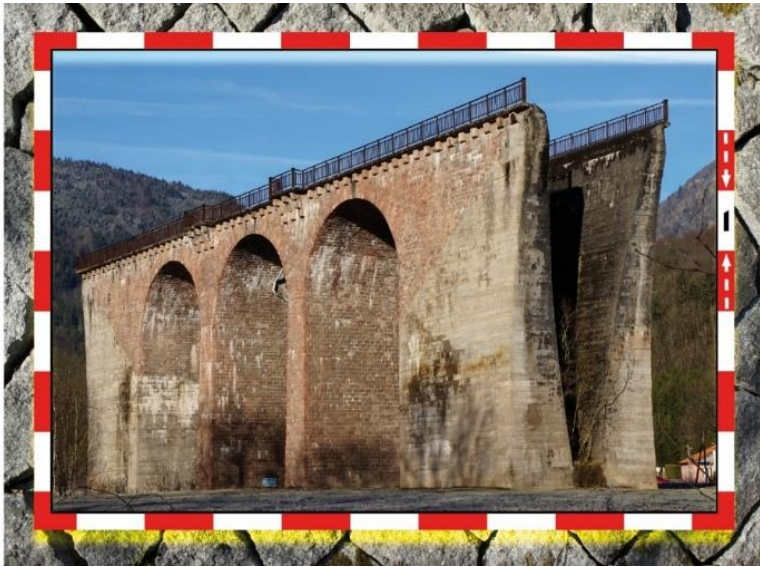
But the tunnel of Saint-Maurice-Urbès is not only the history of an abortive project, neither only the history of an ephemeral nazi camp, but it is also the history of all those men, who had to work hardly in this tunnel. In a first time they were confident, but later they were very disappointed, full of bitterness, when the building site was given up. Some years later, the tunnel of Urbès became the place, where camp prisoners had to endure starvation, diseases, suffering and even deshumanisation.

All these men deserve to be considered with gratefulness and respect ! they will never have to be forgotten !

**M. Claude Ehlinger, current Mayor of Urbès, likes to say, that Urbès is certainly the only village in France to possess 2 useless tunnels : the ancient road tunnel at the Bussang pass and the unfinished rail tunnel !**

And moreover an unfinished viaduct, also useless, which should have led to the tunnel !

In 1958 the viaduct was threatened to be dynamited !



The unfinished viaduct in Urbès.

Photo taken by Raphaël Parmentier.

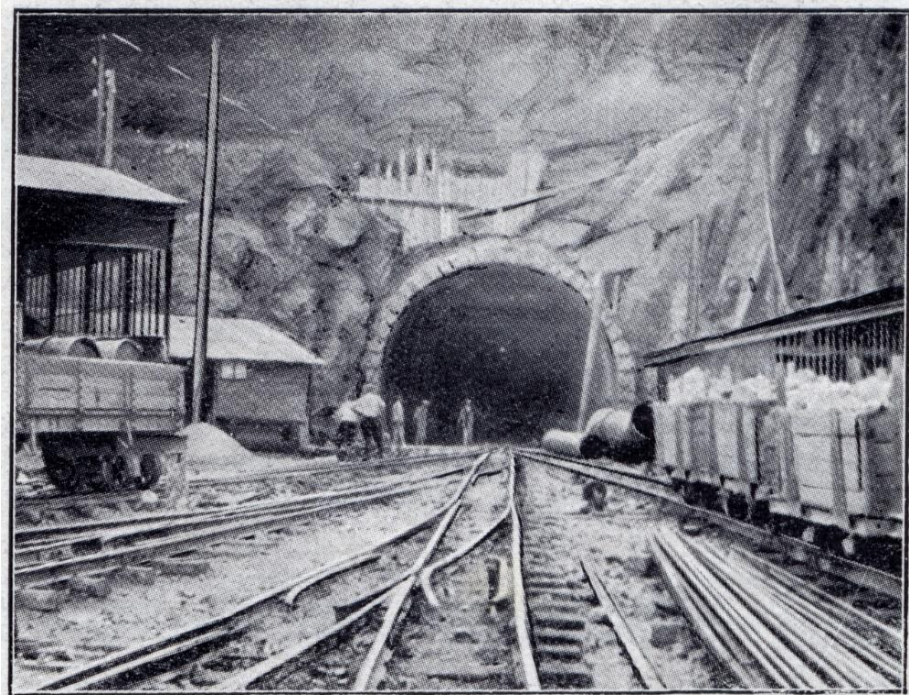


The Mayor of Urbès in « his » tunnel !

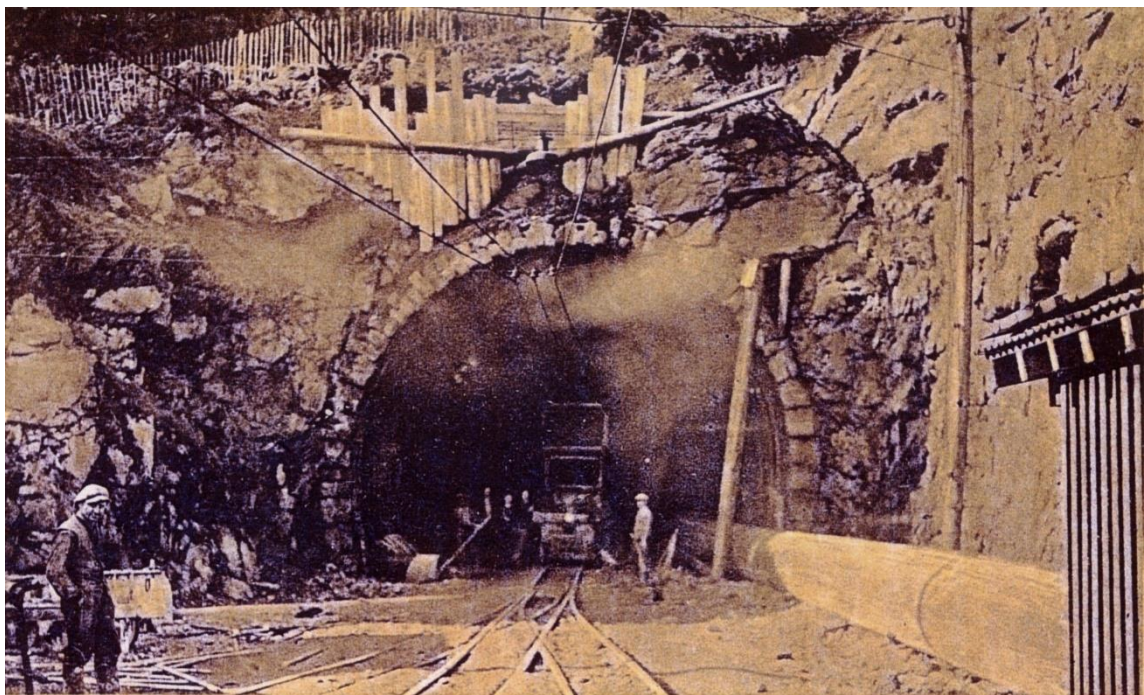
Photo taken by Raphaël Parmentier.



1) Survey in images of the technic researches made by Raphaël Parmentier in relation with the tunnel

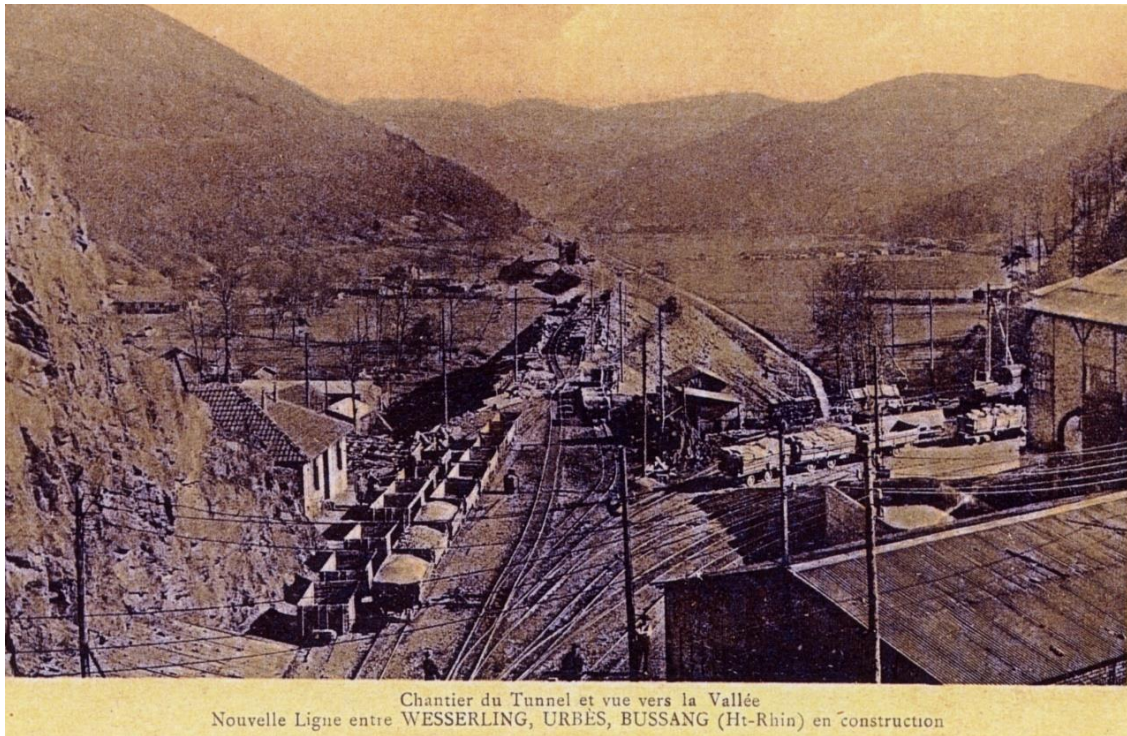


Cl. Glory.  
Le chantier du tunnel d'Urbès pendant qu'on y travaillait.



Nouvelle Ligne entre WESSERLING, URBÈS, BUSSANG (Ht-Rhin) en construction  
Le Tunnel, longueur 8 km.





2 ancient postcards of the vast building site in Urbès.



13<sup>th</sup> January 1933 : view of the building site with its various halls, sheds, offices and housing huts for the workers.

« Comessa » tipper lorries used on the building site in Urbès.





Photo of the vast building site in Urbès, dated the 4<sup>th</sup> April 1933.



Some other sheds or halls of the building site in Urbès.

Photo dated the 13<sup>th</sup> January 1933.



Photo dated the 15<sup>th</sup> June 1933

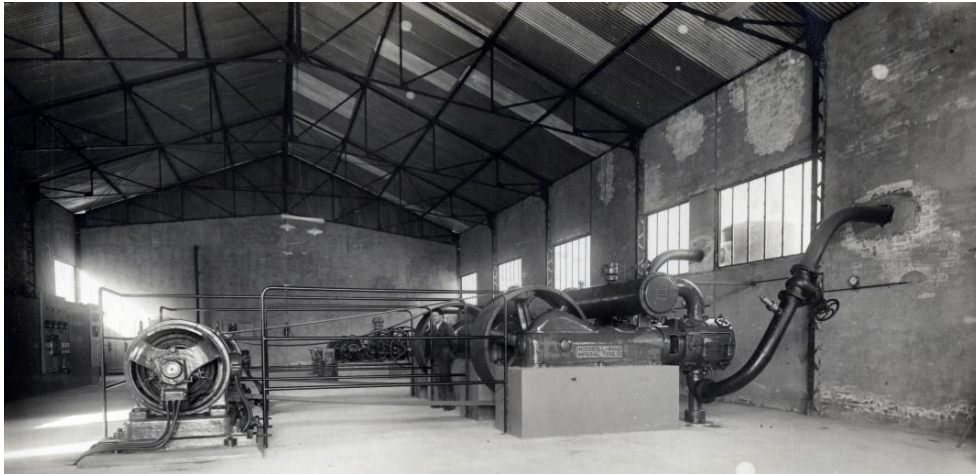
On the right, the office of the « Compagnie de l'Est » [Railway Company for East-France].

On the left, the compression hall.



The compression hall had 2 compression machines « Ingersoll » with a power of 250 HP and 3 machines with a power of 60 HP.

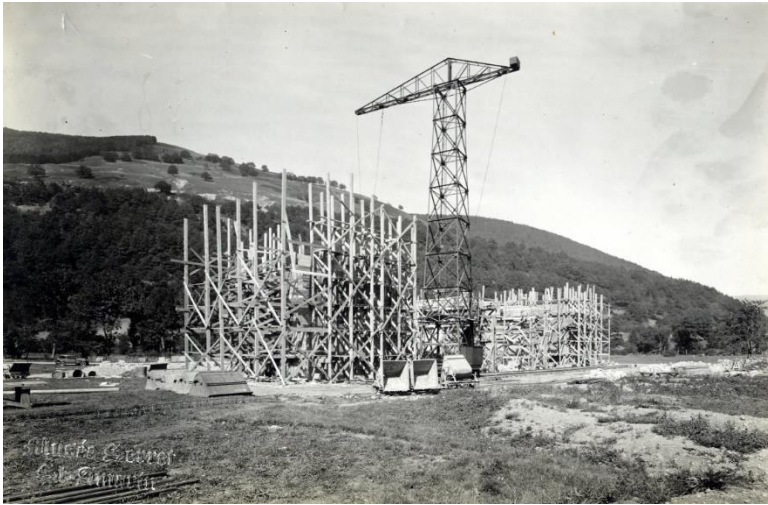
Photo dated the 4<sup>th</sup> April 1933.



Transformer hall close to the compression hall.



## The various stages of the viaduct's building site, leading to the tunnel.



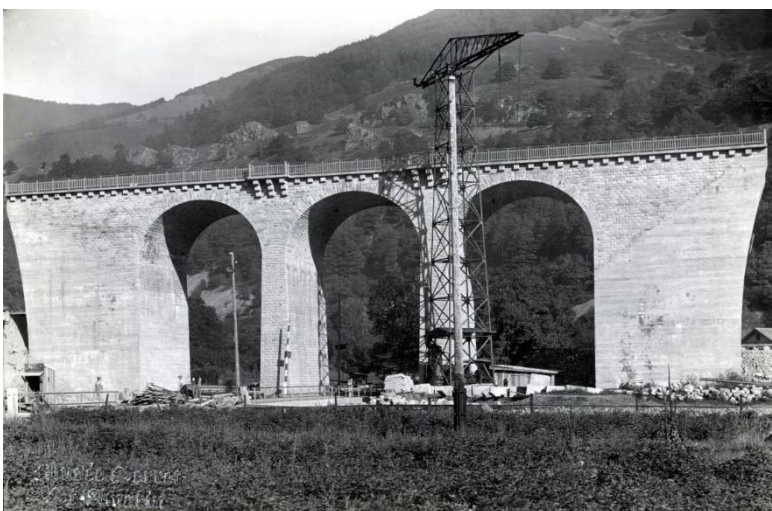
Building site of the viaduct, period between 8<sup>th</sup> July 1933 and 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1934.

3 Photos from the Serret Museum, Saint-Amarin.



Sizes of the viaduct :

20m high and 37m long.



3 arches with an opening of 10m.



The entry of the tunnel / 8<sup>th</sup> July 1933 and the inside of the tunnel / 4<sup>th</sup> April 1933.



Extracting, timbering and excavation works inside the tunnel

Photo dated the 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1935.



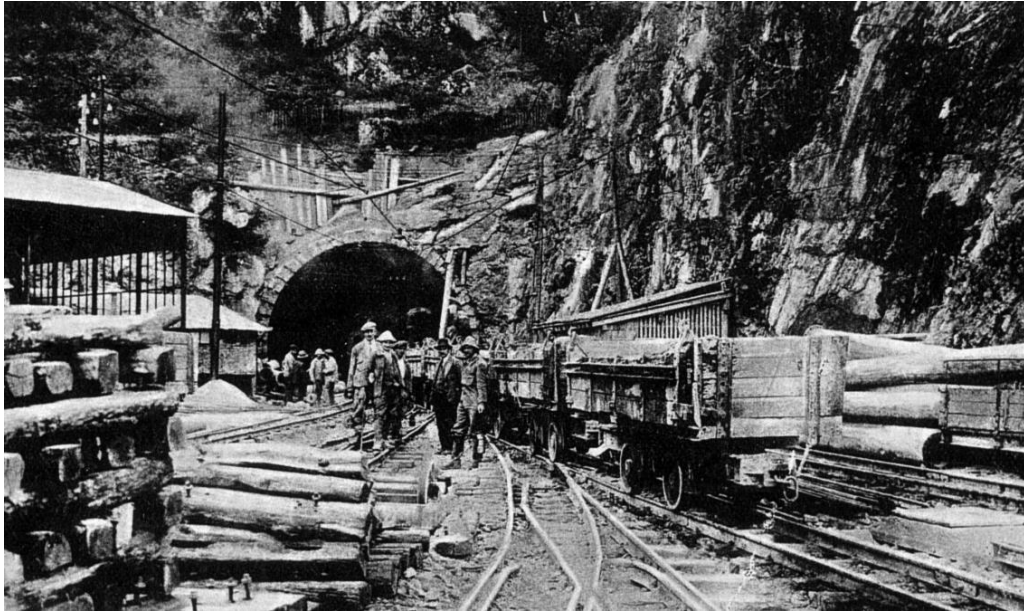


Photo dated the 8<sup>th</sup> July 1933. Train loaded with wood pieces for timbering works inside the tunnel.



Photo dated the 26<sup>th</sup> February 1935.

2 boring machines, « Ingersoll S.70 »,  
with water injection.

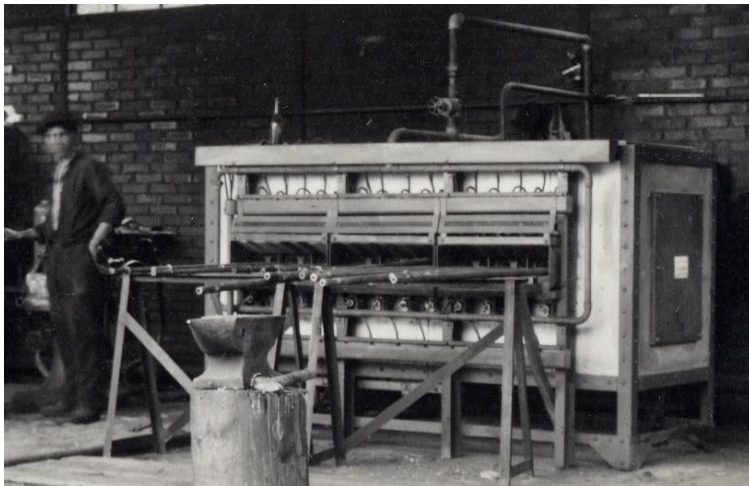
Weight : 84kg !





Photo dated the 8<sup>th</sup> July 1933

Foil smithy hall with several machines and ovens.



Model of an electric smithy oven.

Production of 2000 to 2400 foils within 24 hours.

Photo dated the 5<sup>th</sup> October 1933.



Opencast excavation works

Photo dated the 13<sup>th</sup> March 1934.



Photo dated the 5<sup>th</sup> October 1933,

Excavation works on the Urbès common land.



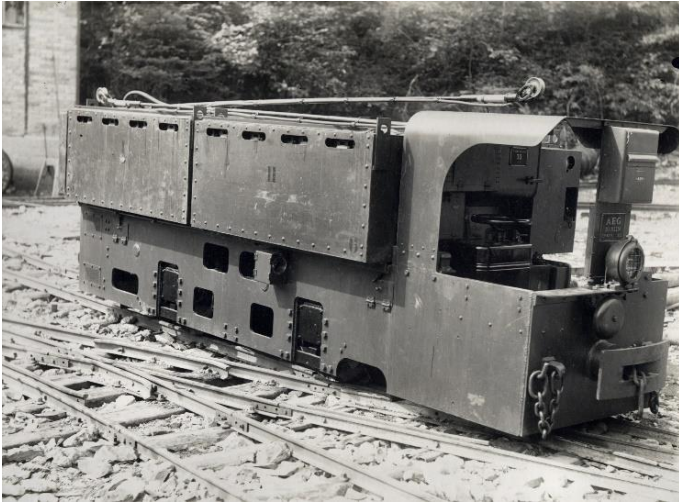
Works of a retaining wall on a scree-covered slope on the common land of the village Fellingering.

Building period from 26<sup>th</sup> April 1932 to mid-1934.



The finished masonry work in 1934.





Model of an electric locomotive AEG used on the building site in Urbès.



Inside the tunnel, in the background a « protecting wall » built by the nazis against dampness.



A tool found inside the tunnel.

A foil is a steel rod with sharp or pointed end, used for boring the rock and fixed on a pneumatic drill.



**Some pictures of the building site of Saint-Maurice sur Moselle (West slope of the Vosges)**

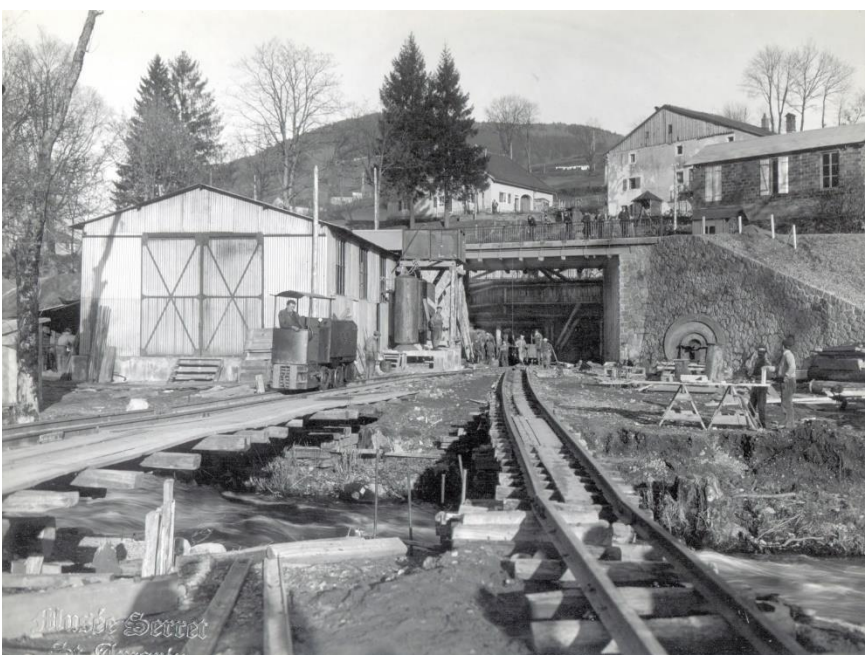
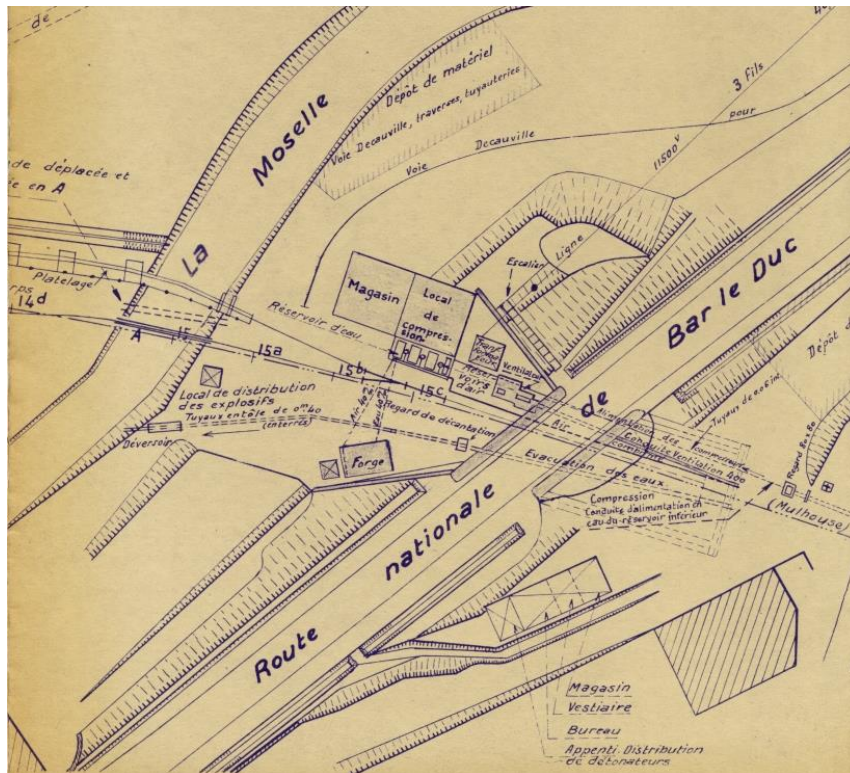


Photo dated the 21<sup>st</sup> February 1935 ; East entry of the tunnel, placed under a bridge.

The finished bridge became the place, where the road RN 66 is now going.



Photo taken during winter  
1933/1934

Building site of a bridge across  
the Moselle.



Works for the diversion and the  
lowering of the Moselle's bed,  
near to the railway station in  
Saint-Maurice.



A little locomotive « Deutz 24/26 horsepower »  
used on the building site in Saint-Maurice.





Raphaël's 2 sons, Corentin and Thibault, beside the boundary stone situated in Saint-Maurice sur Moselle, at the place called « Lait ».

This marker served for the lining up on the tunnel's west head.

Photo made by R. Parmentier.

**Great thanks to Raphaël Parmentier for his excellent work and researches about this unfinished tunnel, which was a vast railway building site from 1932 to 1935.**

All illustrations and photos are taken from his book about the tunnel of Urbès-Saint-Maurice.

If you are interested in more detailed technic explanations about the building site of the tunnel, please have a look on the document in French and in PDF version about Raphaël Parmentier's technic researches, on the Internet website of Urbès : [urbes-alsace.fr](http://urbes-alsace.fr)

Text written by Marguerite Kubler

June 2018.