
Jews in Marseille (1939-1942), from Refuge to Trap

The 1943 Marseille Roundup and the Destruction of the Old Port¹

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A multicultural community composed of Comtadin, Sephardic, and Ashkenazi Jews

The Jewish community in Marseille comprised 10,000 individuals, within an estimated Jewish population in France ranging from 250,000 to 300,000 Jews. This community, more than half of which is foreign, is multicultural and not particularly political compared to the Jews in Paris. The Comtadins,³ Jews of the French Papal Estates,⁴ have been there for an extended time; they consider themselves fully French, having deep roots in the country. Many have been de-Judaized. The Jewish-Spanish Sephardic Levantines arrived in successive waves from the Ottoman Empire, particularly after the Great Thessaloniki Fire of 1917,⁵ and came from Italy as well. The “North African” Sephardic Jews (Tunisians, Moroccans, Algerians) are numerous and are married to Comtadins. The Ashkenazi Jews are comprised of Alsatian Jews who arrived after the War of 1870,⁶ along with Germans and individuals from Central and Eastern Europe. There will be more of them because of the debacle.

Refuge in the so-called free zone

Since 1933, Germans, and later Austrians, arrived; many of them were affluent Jews. They lived in the villas of Sanary-sur-Mer, in the Var *département*. France, a xenophobic nation, arrested foreigners and put them in the Milles camp.⁷ Marseille was crowded with many refugees and evacuees from all parts during this chaotic migration. In August 1940, American journalist Varian Fry arrived in Marseille with a list of 200 names and 3,000 dollars.⁸ He stayed in the city for a month. Delegated by the **Emergency Rescue Committee (ERC)**⁹ to organize the rescue and escape of writers, artists, scholars, and political figures threatened by Mussolini, Hitler, and Franco, he managed to help 1,200 individuals depart before being expelled from the country in 1941.

The law of September 20, 1940¹⁰ decreed that there was a “**surplus of foreigners, affecting the national economy.**” Jewish charities such as the JOINT (Joint Distribution Committee), the AIP (Association of Practicing Israelites),¹¹ the OSE (Children’s Relief Organization), and the ORT (Organization, Reconstruction, Work), and non-Jewish organizations such as the YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association) provide aid to the refugees. Jewish organizations are subsequently forced to merge into the UGIF (General Union of Israelites of France).¹²

The activities in the port of Marseille plummeted, leading to the cancellation of some routes. The war did not stop maritime traffic, which resumed from late 1940 until November 11, 1942: most notably the sea routes to Algeria, Morocco, Palestine via the Suez Canal, and even to Shanghai. Legal emigration paths for those seeking exile are evolving based on the countries at war. The HICEM,¹³ with financial support from the JOINT, had permission to send ships to the United States, Mexico (this was the case of Jewish-German writer Anna Seghers),¹⁴ the Dominican Republic, or to Cuba, via Casablanca and Lisbon. Some even went as far as Shanghai before the maritime route was closed. The Eridan ship, on which the Adler family embarked in 1941, was forced to turn back from Dakar, as the Indochina route was blocked. The HICEM also facilitated

departures through Spain and Portugal. Despite numerous difficulties, this organization effectively facilitated the emigration 20,000 individuals.

The Trap

The Jewish community is deeply troubled by the implementation of antisemitic policies. One such example is the second anti-Jewish Law, which resulted in widespread unemployment among Jews due to economic and professional Aryanization. Another instance is the law enacted on October 4, 1940, which requires the internment of foreign Jews in designated camps.

Additionally, the reversal of the Crémieux Decree¹⁵ on October 7, 1940, has further exacerbated their distress. Twenty percent of Jews in Marseille are classified as indigenous. The CGQJ (Commissariat-General for Jewish Affairs)¹⁶ is established by Vichy in March 1941 to oversee the implementation of these measures. Jews are required to participate in a census in June 1941 and are also required to declare their assets to facilitate economic Aryanization. Jews who are loyal to France declare themselves out of civic duty. Chief Rabbi Hirschler organizes aid for the community. Non-Jewish associations like Cimade, a Protestant organization, and the Quakers, provide assistance to Jews who have lost their jobs due to the Statute on Jews. The ORT teaches them manual skills to help them find artisanal work. Others enroll in GTEs (foreign worker groups). The OSE shelters children.

On July 2, 1942, an agreement between Vichy general secretary René Bousquet, Nazi SS general Carl Oberg, and Nazi Security Police commander Helmut Knochen regarding the deportation of foreign Jews puts an end to legal emigration. At **Les Milles Camp**, foreign Jews are detained, and women and children are separated from men. The camp serves as an assembling and screening center, an internment camp, and a transit point for sending Jews to the Drancy or Compiègne camps. Hotels such as the Bompard and the Terminus are repurposed for this operation. The antisemitic press is established in Marseille. The “Émancipation nationale” a newspaper (by Doriot)¹⁷ fuels antisemitism by publishing caricatures.

With the invasion of the unoccupied zone, Marseille becomes a mousetrap. After November 11, 1942, the Germans enter Marseille. In December 1942, the word “JEW” is stamped onto identity documents. The Gestapo and the Milice¹⁸ hunt down Jews.

The roundup and the destruction of the Old Port

The Marseille roundup

Following attacks on soldiers, the Germans seek retaliation. They push Vichy authorities to evacuate the old port. Between January 22-29, 1943, numerous police operations took place in various parts of Marseille. 400,000 identity checks were carried out by law enforcement. In the Old Port, City Hall, Saint Jean, and Panier districts, 25,000 residents were ordered to evacuate their homes. 12,000 were taken to the Fréjus camp... Around 6,000 Jews and non-Jews were screened by a commission at Les Baumettes.¹⁹ Suspects were sent to the Arenc train station for deportation by French police and German soldiers, then to the Compiègne concentration camp. Of the 20,000 rounded up, 5,000 were allowed to return to Marseille.

1,650 people, including 782 Comtadin, Levantine, Sephardic, and Ashkenazi Jews were handed

over by the French police, and were sent in cattle cars to the Compiègne, Drancy, and Sobibor camps. One in five Jews was deported from Marseille.

870 young people were deported to Sachsenhausen.²⁰

“80 years ago, Marseille's city center was the hub of the "Old Port Roundup". Planned between January 13 and 14, 1943 by French and Nazi authorities, Operation Sultan was launched on January 22. 10,000 to 12,000 French police officers, under the supervision of 4,000 German SS officers, initiated the assault on the Opéra district and its environs. In this first phase, it was the Jewish community that was targeted.”

“Marseille received the reinforcement of 12,000 officers from the French municipal government, including 1,200 inspectors, fifteen squadrons of Mobile Reserve Groups (GMR),²¹ relocated from Lyon, Paris or Toulouse.”

Destruction of the Old Port

The neighborhood of Vieux-Port was exploded using dynamite by the Wehrmacht German military. 2,000 houses were destroyed, according to the demolition perimeter of the Beaudoin plan²². Streets disappeared.

Testimonies of **Gabriel Benichou** and **Francine Champlon**:

Gabriel Bénichou was born in Tlemcen, Algeria, in 1927. He studied at the Lycée Saint-Charles in Marseille, where his sister lived. His parents came to visit them, then returned to Algeria. He did not join his brother on vacation in Algeria, as he needed to take an English exam. As a boarding student, he often stayed at the school because of the roundups. That Thursday, he snuck out to visit his sister. On **April 8, 1943**, the Gestapo knocked on his door. He was imprisoned at the Saint-Pierre prison, transferred to Drancy, then deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau on convoy N°57, on July 18, 1943. He was one of the few survivors of the death march. He was one of the Warsaw Ghetto's “cleaners,”²³ before ending up at the Dachau camp, where he once again took part in the death marches before being liberated.

Francine Champlon

The family dispersed during the exodus, and some were unable to cross the demarcation line,²⁴ as the Occupied Zone was forbidden to Jews. In Marseille, in April 1941, the teacher asked if there were any Jews in the class. When the time came to declare oneself Jewish, the family had to obey Marshal Pétain. In November 1942, with the occupation of the so-called free zone, the family tried to leave Marseille. On January 22, 1943, two French inspectors entered the apartment and asked for their identity cards. Her mother made a fuss about being a war widow. The inspector told her to get dressed. Glancing at the papers, the inspector, who had come for another name, spared them. But part of the family had been arrested and taken to the Compiègne and Sobibor camps. They were very scared. They managed to leave Marseille.

Gabriel Benichou. *L'adolescence d'un juif d'Algérie*, L'Harmattan, 2004, 182 pages.

“At Compiègne, on March 8, 1943, 804 Jews from Marseille were transferred to Drancy. From there, two convoys, on March 23 and 25, took the Jews from Marseille to the Sobibor extermination camp. They were all murdered there, and none returned.”

See “Gabriel Bénichou, a Jew from Algeria” <https://www.cercleshoah.org/spip.php?article133>

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Notes

¹ All annotations are the original work of the translator, unless otherwise noted.

² Note from the original article. Renée Dray-Bensousan is the author of the thesis “Les Juifs à Marseille pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale, 1939-1944.”

³ The Comtadins were inhabitants of the historic region of Comtat Venaissin in southern France, primarily known for its association with the Papal States during the Middle Ages and early modern period. Yves Bruley, “Histoire et mémoire des « Juifs du pape ».” *France Mémoire*, 10 Jan. 2024, <https://www.france-memoire.fr/histoire-et-memoire-des-juifs-du-pape/>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2024.

⁴ Kenneth R Stow, “Moulinas’ ‘Juifs Du Pape.’” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 73, no. 4, 1983, pp. 394–96. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1454549>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2024.

⁵ In 1917, a massive fire devastated the city of Thessaloniki, Greece, which was home to a large Sephardic Jewish community. Devin E Naar, “A Century Ago, Jewish Salonica Burned. It Was Rebuilt, Only to Be Destroyed Anew.” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 18 Aug. 2017, <https://www.jta.org/2017/08/18/ideas/a-century-ago-jewish-salonica-burned-it-was-rebuilt-only-to-be-destroyed-anew>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2024.

⁶ In 1870, the Franco-Prussian War broke out between the German Confederation and France, lasting six months until 1871. This conflict led to the downfall of the Second French Empire and the formation of the German Empire. “The Franco-Prussian War, 1870-71.” *Chemins de Mémoire*, Ministère des Armées, <https://www.cheminsdememoire.gouv.fr/en/franco-prussian-war-1870-71>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2024.

⁷ Les Milles camp held foreign Jews before their emigration or deportation to German concentration and death camps. “Les Milles Camp.” *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/les-milles-camp>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2024.

⁸ Equivalent to \$66,928.29 USD as of March 2024. CPI Inflation Calculator. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, <https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl?cost1=3000&year1=194008&year2=202403>. Accessed 5 Apr. 2024.

⁹ In France, a collective of 200 influential Americans and Jewish refugees banded together to establish the Emergency Rescue Committee (ERC). This private American relief organization was formed to save intellectuals in danger. “Varian Fry.” *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/varian-fry>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2024.

¹⁰ The anti-Jewish law of September 20, 1940, enacted by the Vichy government led by Marshal Philippe Pétain, imposed discriminatory measures on Jews in France, limiting their rights and barring them from various professions and public roles based on discriminatory criteria. (*Loi du 27 septembre 1940 Étrangers en surnombre dans l'économie nationale (Rassemblement dans des groupements d'étrangers, sous l'autorité du Ministre de la Production Industrielle Et Du Travail*) 5197).

¹¹ Note from the original article. The Association of Practicing Israelites was an organization created for practicing Jews in France. It was directed in 1936 by Rabbi Zalman Schneerson (also spelled Chneerson). “Les Juifs à Marseille (1939-1942), du refuge au piège; la rafle de Marseille en 1943 et la destruction du vieux port.” *Cercle d'étude de la Déportation et de la Shoah*, 7 Sept. 2011, <https://www.cercleshoah.org/spip.php?article133&lang=fr#nb1>.

¹² The UGIF (General Union of Israelites of France) was established on November 29, 1941 by the Vichy government's Office of Jewish Affairs in response to German demands to consolidate the Jewish organizations of France into one single unit. “Union of French Jews.” *SHOAH Resource Center*, Yad Vashem, <https://www.yadvashem.org/odot/pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205897.pdf>.

¹³ Formed in 1927, HICEM facilitated the emigration of European Jews. “HICEM.” *SHOAH Resource Center*, Yad Vashem, <https://www.yadvashem.org>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2024. Also, from the original article: HICHEM was an organization created through the collaboration of l'HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) and JCA (Jewish Colonization Association).

¹⁴ From the original article. See Anna Seghers, *Transit*, Livre de Poche, 2004.

¹⁵ The Crémieux Decree granted citizenship to Jews from Algeria. “Frequently Asked Questions | What Were the Main Anti-Semitic Laws Applied in France During the Occupation?” *Mémorial de La Shoah*, <https://www.memorialdelashoah.org/en/archives-and-documentation/what-is-the-shoah/frequently-asked-questions.html>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2024.

¹⁶ The CGQJ determined Jewish status, registered Jews and inventoried their possessions, ultimately excluding Jews from the French economy and deporting foreign and French Jews. “Commissariat Général Aux Questions Juives (AJ 38).” *Collections Search*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn508331>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2024.

¹⁷ Jacques Doriot was a former leading member of the French Communist Party. Later, however, he turned to Fascism as the founder and leader of the *Parti Populaire Français* (PPF), the French Popular Party. “Jacques Doriot.” *Oxford Reference*, https://doi.org/10.1093/oi/authority.2011080309_5727332. Accessed 1 Apr. 2024.

¹⁸ The Milice was a Vichy paramilitary organization. Barac, Terezina. Conversation. 28 Feb. 2024.

¹⁹ Built in 1931, Les Baumettes is a prison in Marseille, that, during World War II, processed those rounded up by the SS police. Jean-Lucien Sanchez, “La Prison Des Baumettes : Un Modèle Pénitentiaire à l’épreuve de l’histoire.” *Cahiers d’études Pénitentiaires et Criminologiques*, Ministère de la Justice, https://www.justice.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/migrations/portail/art_pix/Cahiers_etudes_penitentiaires_et_criminologiques_n53_octobre2020.pdf. Accessed 1 Apr. 2024.

²⁰ Sachsenhausen was a concentration camp north of Berlin, established by the SS as the main concentration camp for the Berlin area. “Sachsenhausen.” *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/sachsenhausen>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2024. Also, from the original article: See Alèssi Dell’Umbria, *The Universal History of Marseille: From the year 1000 to the year 2000. (Histoire universelle de Marseille. De l’an mil à l’an deux mille)*. Agone, Marseille, 2006, 756 pages.

²¹ The Groupes Mobiles de Réserve (GMR) were the Vichy authority’s national police units. “Organization: Groupes Mobiles de Réserve.” JDCRP Pilot Project: The Fate of the Adolphe Schloss Collection, <https://pilot-demo.jdcrp.org/organizations/groupes-mobile-reserve/>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2024.

²² The Beaudoin plan was French architect Eugène Beaudoin’s plan to reconstruct Marseille’s Vieux-Port. Sheila Crane, “Digging up the Present in Marseille’s Old Port: Toward an Archaeology of Reconstruction.” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 63, no. 3, 2004, pp. 296–319. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4127973>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2024.

²³ At the end of the summer of 1943, “cleaners” were used as forced labor by the Germans to clean the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto after its liquidation. “Clearing the Ruins of the Ghetto.” *Voices from the Inferno | Holocaust Survivors Describe the Last Months in the Warsaw Ghetto*, Yad Vashem, https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/warsaw_ghetto_testimonies/gesia_camp.asp. Accessed 1 Apr. 2024.

²⁴ La Ligne de Démarcation marked the border between the German-occupied and unoccupied (“Free”) zones of France. “La Ligne de Démarcation.” *Chemins de Mémoire*, Ministère des Armées, <https://www.cheminsdememoire.gouv.fr/en/la-ligne-de-demarcation>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2024.