

# The Rivesaltes Camp Memorial: *the institutionalisation of a memoir*

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In 2015, the Rivesaltes Camp Memorial [MCR in French] was inaugurated in the Pyrénées-Orientales department of France, several kilometres from the Franco-Spanish border. This inauguration marked the patient construction of the memorial process of a camp that had been omitted from the collective memory for a long time. This camp was originally a military camp, built in 1939 for the colonial troops from Senegal, Madagascar and Indochina. However, from 1939 to 2007 Spanish refugees fleeing the Franco regime, foreign Jews, French gypsies, prisoners of war from the Axis countries, collaborators, colonial auxiliary soldiers from the French army and civilians fleeing postcolonial nations, illegal immigrants... were grouped together and detained there. Although the MCR today stands as a pilot site of the most recent policies on remembrance, its construction was complex, from absolute oblivion to the citizens' movement claiming it, to its eventual establishment.



1 | 2 | 3. Rivesaltes Camp Memorial.  
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## Social phenomenon and citizens' movement

In the aftermath of the war, the permanence of the use of the site on the one hand and the general remembrance of political deportation on the other, explain **why the camp was not given much attention**.

Thus, when a conference was held in Rivesaltes in July 1945 by former internees from Buchenwald they urged the former political internees of Rivesaltes to join the Society of Deportees of the Resistance. However, there was no internment here, and, on the other hand, no mention was made in the post-war period to issues relating to the place and to racist deportation. The demonstration by the guards organised by the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) two days before the camp was due to close is another very evocative example of the gap between the way the camp is remembered today and the way it was remembered at the time of the Liberation<sup>1</sup>. Likewise, following the legislation adopted by the Federal Republic of Germany concerning "compensation for national-socialist persecutions" (1956), the German ambassador in France received requests to compensate Spanish refugees who had been in Rivesaltes in the spring of 1940. He contacted the prefect of the Pyrénées-Orientales department, to obtain information to be able to process these cases. The process between social memory demands and legal innovation is striking, but the prefect's response asserted that the Groups of Foreign Workers, made up of Spanish internees, "comprised almost the entire population of the Rivesaltes military camp", disregarding the other internments and, in particular, the special camp that housed 7,148 Jews<sup>2</sup>. On this subject, false information was circulated for a long time, arising from the first memorial institutionalisation.

The first attempt to understand the history

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1 Letter from the camp major to the prefect of the Pyrénées-Orientales department, 13th December 1945, Departmental Archives of the Pyrénées Orientales Department (ADPO) 38W66.

2 Letter from the prefect of the Pyrénées-orientales department to the ambassador of the RFA, 12th April 1968, ADPO, 1260W68. Alexandre Doulut, *Les Juifs au camp de Rivesaltes : Internement et déportation (1941-1942)*, Paris, Lienart, 2014.

of the Rivesaltes camp was by the president of the Departmental Committee of Liberation (CDL), Camille Fourquet. He undertook to write a series of reports for the Second World War History Committee, an inter-ministerial body linked to the Presidency of the Board, founded by decree (17<sup>th</sup> December 1951). However, on the second page of his document, Fourquet wrote that he did not believe there were any survivors from the conveyors that left Rivesaltes. This statement was constantly repeated, until the early 2000s, by the management of the Rivesaltes memorial project – which subsequently financed the works of the historian Alexandre Doulut, demonstrating that there were 84 survivors. Thus, the storytelling of the place is simultaneous to its mythification.

However, there is **no social memory of the place**. A scandal led to the revelation. Under the signature of journalist Joël Mettay, the Roussillon daily newspaper *L'Indépendant* of 8<sup>th</sup> May 1997 revealed that a private individual had found bundles of original documents relating to Jewish internees from the Rivesaltes camp at the Perpignan waste disposal site. In its context, this revelation is all the more significant because it was preceded by the "Jewish file" scandal in 1991. Serge Klarsfeld revealed the existence of such an object that had been kept after the war. The affair turned out to be false, but stirred up public opinion to such an extent that in 1997 it became known as the "Rivesaltes Jewish file affair". Similarly, in 1993, the local elections in Perpignan, prefecture of the Pyrénées Orientales department, were marked by the desecration of the town's Jewish cemetery, which the National Front (FN; the largest city to support Le Pen since 2020) denounced as a plot to undermine it – according to the discursive strategy model used during the anti-Semitic desecration of Carpentras in 1990 which launched a wave of profanation in France and beyond. The prefect conflated the desecration and discovery and stated that the journalist was part of a plot to destabilise the election. After claiming that the documents were false, he pursued the journalist for concealment of files, with the support of the ADPO. In fact, the investigation by the

Judicial Police revealed a lengthy malfunction in the archive services that had led to the documents being disposed of.

Nevertheless, the very day Joël Mettay's article appeared, the writer Claude Delmas decided to launch a petition entitled "*Mémoire ou amnésie collective*" ["Collective memory or amnesia?"], **calling for the creation of an MCR**. The document was quickly co-signed by national political and artistic figures. A collective was set up; its principle declaration stated that the MCR should be "multi-community", as it constituted a "civic" project in the face of the return of "fascism". The collective pulled out all the stops. It organised a screening in Perpignan of Swiss director Jacqueline Veuve's film *Le Journal de Rivesaltes* (1997), based on the diary kept by the nurse, Friedel Bohny-Rieter, who worked to save many Jewish children from the Rivesaltes camp. The article in the local press describes the reactions of the public: "How could such horrors have happened there, on the land that our parents crossed to go to the vineyard... How is it that these events have been hidden for so long?"<sup>3</sup>.

## Remembrance policies

**The collective received high-profile political support** (Simone Veil), but first it had to oppose local political projects. The town council of Rivesaltes wanted to create a large area for spreading the sludge from the area's water treatment plant. The block where the administrative detention centre for illegal immigrants (CRA) is still located would be surrounded by this sludge, as well as blocks J and K, both of which had participated in the special camp used to round up Jews before being sent to Drancy for Auschwitz.

However, the **citizens' movement found support in the president Christian Bourquin**, a socialist, who became head of the Departmental Council in 1998. The Departmental Council set up a "Remembrance Commission" bringing together

various associations and began the process of setting up the MCR.

This participatory nature is currently being highlighted by the MCR, which has set up a virtual reality experience, the scenario for which was created by classes of secondary school students from Rivesaltes, while the next edition of the collections of testimonies will be chosen by the Remembrance Commission.

In 2005, the department launched a tender for projects for the building. 46 projects were submitted. Five teams were interviewed, with very different proposals. **Rudy Ricciotti's** team was selected, proposing a large concrete block level to the ground at the entrance, but gradually sloping upwards to the sky without ever going higher than the roof of the barracks. The building has enormous corridors and is windowless, illuminated only by the patios, and thereby echoing the testimonies of the internees narrating their wandering through the camp with the sky as their only escape.

The surrounding barracks are not affected, as the MCR is buried in the heart of the former assembly square. The annotations left by a member of the jury on the copy of the file in our possession show the points of enthusiasm: "finally!", when an educational area is mentioned, "yes", when it is stated that the site should contain artistic productions by members of the various "communities" that passed through the camp in order to show human resistance to violence. While the emphasis on "communities" was highly valued in the prefiguration of the site, it was subsequently set aside in favour of a **universalist conception**.

On the other hand, since the MCR opened in 2015, the care taken in the artistic and cultural productions has proved to be a permanent feature. It is also worth noting that the idea of a windowless building is reminiscent of a note produced for the citizens' collective by August Bohny, the husband of Friedel Bohny-Rieter. In it, he suggested that the MCR should be a "windowless building on the Perpignan side, a high wall without windows". The jury's final report chose the project, highlighting how it "has a quality of simplicity and adds

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<sup>3</sup> *L'Indépendant*, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1997 ; archives of Nicolas Lebourg.



remarkable integration: it is mimetic. It follows the existing traces of history and the structure of the space. It has a very beautiful shape. This project is indisputable in its respect for the horizontal nature of the site. It is in keeping with the site thanks to its remarkable aesthetics. It is a reflection of the site, which makes it an appropriate project.”<sup>4</sup>.

Because of its imposing size (230 metres long and 20 metres wide), its discrete colour that mimics the ground, and the way it is buried into the ground, the building provokes a unique effect in visitors (more than 50,000 in 2019). In fact, it is **the first object of cultural mediation on the site**. The aim is not just to help to remember, but to become **a tool to raise political awareness, around a sensitive project based on memory and exile, built and experienced with a scientific, cultural and artistic programme that seeks to go beyond the only known history of the place, now rewritten in the permanent exhibition that covers 1,000m<sup>2</sup>**.

It must be **a tool that creates a link with the territory from a cross-border perspective**, and can

contribute to regional planning by pooling synergies, on both sides of the border.

**The concept of an MCR as the humanist flip side of the place of ostracism that the camp was is at the heart of the building’s current project, running from 2022 to 2027.** As a way of learning from our mistakes as a country, the MCR must turn the camp's excluding structure into an integrating one. The fact that it opened in the year that France was hit by the jihadist attacks of January and 13 November makes sense in terms of its duty to prevent radical thinking – judicial stakeholders such as the *Protection judiciaire de la jeunesse* [Youth Protection Office] have been visiting with increasing numbers of clients in recent years.

2015, when it opened, was also the year of the Syrian refugee crisis, transformed into moral panic by the far right. On the first day of lectures at the site, in 2007, one of the authors of this article was challenged by a member of the audience on the inhumanity of people in 1939. In response, he asked what he would think if 475,000 refugees once again asked to return to France, as they had in February 1939. This person seemed to find such a remark

<sup>4</sup> Archives from the MCR.



totally incongruous. But that is what the MCR is all about: **reminding people that tragedy is always within easy reach, and that actions count.** 2023 began with a temporary exhibition on the genocide of the Yazidis.

## Conclusion

**In the 2000s, once the memoir had been completed, the Rivesaltes camp became part of the local youth entertainment circuit.** Rave parties, paint-ball sessions and life-size role-play games were held there. All these activities were free of charge, and were sometimes part of a real method of appropriating and using the site – for example, the first Grandeur Nature events were held there on account of the space available.

However, from 2007 onwards, the organisers were creating a history of the site and incorporating it into their scenario. This was a **sign of acceptance, even resilience.** This process is not yet complete.

The MCR has not yet reached maturity. Like the memory of the place, this public establishment for

cultural cooperation is slowly taking shape.

Born of a **citizens' project**, made possible by the political will of local institutions, it seeks to preserve its civic roots, participate in local and transnational ecosystems, while also wanting to grow and be useful to the European societies it serves.

**The challenges are vast:** incorporating colonial history, the subject of so much tension in present day France, is one of the major challenges. Rehabilitating the history of all those whom France has relegated as undesirables, by inserting this rigidity into the history of reactions to globalisation, is a future challenge.

**Producing historical knowledge is a decisive step forward.** Walter Benjamin spoke of how the city becomes a landscape that opens up to him and a parlour that encloses him. **Today, the MCR is a parlour or chamber of memories: it only makes sense if it opens up a historical landscape, in other words, one that holds past, present and future tensions.**