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The Polish immigration to Aquitaine from the 1930s to 1945:
From discrimination to persecution

Abstract

Relations between France and Poland are old and complex. For a long time, France was the favourite destination of Polish immigration. Attracted by the possibility of a better life, Poles including many Jews fleeing from persecution travel to the land of freedom. However, early on, the French state regulates this new wave of workers by controls and quotas until the Second World War. The controls are increasing in 1939, particularly against the Polish Jewish population. Deportations according to an agreement between the Government of Marshal Petain and Germany accelerate from 1942 to 1944. Many internment camps are emerging as camp Gurs in Aquitaine. The Polish population was severely affected by these raids: at the end of the war, there is no more Jew in the Gironde and Bordeaux.

Keywords: France, Polish immigration, horror of xenophobic laws, demonstrations against hiring foreigners, laws against foreigners, Vichy government, French internment camps.

Relationships between France and Poland are old. Thus, after the World War I, France becomes ally and defender of the young state. From then, the two countries will never cease to be closer by concluding a series of treaties, such as the formal treaty of alliance in 1921. Poland occupies a central place in the French system of alliance during the interwar years. Thus, during his visit to Bordeaux in January 1939, the Polish Ambassador Julius Lukasiewicz defined the European role of the Franco-Polish alliance, saying: “Our alliance, concluded in 1921, continued through a period of deep political changes, which we have witnessed over the past sixteen years. It is therefore certain that it will, in such form or another, become part of any system designed to guarantee peace in Europe...”

The commercial and military alliance between the two countries leads to a wave of Polish immigration unprecedented in France. Indeed, many Poles in search of a better life, settled in various French regions and particularly in Aquitaine, among them many Polish Jewish families attempting to flee the first anti-Semitic persecution in Poland. In France, these families will experience the

1 Archive municipale de Bordeaux, Série 4539 K 1, Visite de l’ambassadeur de Pologne à Bordeaux en janvier 1939.
horror of xenophobic laws right from the beginning of the 1930s, and then the internment in camps from 1940.

Therefore we can wonder under what conditions and why these families immigrated to France? How the first xenophobic laws and their repercussions were introduced? And finally what the fate of these families under the Vichy government?

First of all, we will study the Polish immigration in Aquitaine in the 1930s and the introduction of the first racial laws, and then we will analyze an example of an internment camp in South-West: Camp Gurs.

The Polish immigration in Aquitaine: a temporary destination?

It is difficult to quantify the Polish immigration in France. From 1921, the Polish immigrant became a category of its own. Previously they were included in the category “other nationalities”. Censuses show a steady growth of this motion from 1921 to 1946 with a peak in 1931 of 508,000 Poles. This population is mainly heading to the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, to mining towns.

The Polish immigration is present in Aquitaine and in particular in Bordeaux. Bordeaux is an original place for the Poles because it is far from their favourite destination which is the Pas-de-Calais. The Polish population is difficult to quantify. However, it should be noted that this population is sparse and scattered. It is rather an individual immigration: a man, a woman or a young couple. Indeed, in Aquitaine there is no immigration group as in the North of France.

The largest wave of Polish immigration in Bordeaux takes place mainly in the early 1920s as in the rest of France. The reasons for leaving Poland are many: The country suffers great poverty with precarious living conditions. Often they are modest people, young people without families or recently married, who decide to leave the country. In France, the country needs foreign workforce to fill the demographic deficit. In 1919, an agreement was concluded between the authorities of Paris and Warsaw to recruit workers in the sector of agriculture and coal mining. Quite often, this departure is seen as temporary, a way to earn money and then return to Poland, but this was rarely the case. This is the case for Mr. Walas, young baker, he decided to leave his country to earn enough money to open his bakery in Poland. He first worked in mines in the North before moving to Bordeaux. He never returned to his country.

The Aquitaine’s Polish population works mainly in agricultural regions of Dordogne, Gironde and Landes. Among the Polish arriving in France, many were Jews fleeing from the first anti-Semitic persecution in Poland. Persecutions in Poland are present in the early 1920s, with theft, humiliation and especially massacres such as Vilna, Krakow... These anti-Semitic excesses are maintained by

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intense propaganda by the right-wing press accusing Jews of treasons, speculations... These persecutions will lead to the departure of many Polish Jews towards the whole of Europe. But integration is difficult for Poles, they are considered by locals as foreigners, named „Polacks”...

The 1930s marked the beginning of the first xenophobic laws, in the context of the rise of xenophobia and anti-Semitism in France.

The 1930s: the danger is rising

From 1931, the public authorities halt immigration and encourage foreigners to go back to their original countries. With these measures, the number of foreigners is falling. The public eye does not perceive this decrease, demonstrations occur against hiring foreigners. In 1939, all tensions are focused on strangers, especially Poles. The idea that the reason for all problems is the excessive presence of foreigners on the French ground is spreading. On the eve of WWII, wild rumours are circulating: in the East station of Paris, some Polish would have insulted reservists, Poland would push for war because „most are of German descent”...

The records of Bordeaux show the measures taken against foreigners on the eve of war. Thus, since 1939 foreigners are identified and are under surveillance. The decree of the 20th July 1939 ordered the counting „of foreigners without nationality or having the right of asylum”. An advertising campaign is launched in the city to encourage foreigners to report spontaneously. After a period of 20 days, official notices are sent. In September 1939 a decree stipulates that foreigners must carry special identity cards to move around in towns near to their residences. Apart from these districts, they must carry identity cards and safe-conducts. These measures are intended to give a greater knowledge, but also a greater surveillance of foreigners. On November 21, 1939, a „secret” circular from the prefect is sent to the sub-prefects, mayors and the police superintendent. The Interior Department wants to quietly count the Polish who entered France since August 20, 1939. Indeed, the Polish community of Bordeaux is closely monitored. On October 31, 1939, a circular from the Interior Department to the prefect, asking to perform a survey of Ukrainian and Polish communities. The Interior Department is concerned that some Ukrainians of Polish nationality encourage Polish not to join the Polish Legion. The report of the Chief Inspector Cloutrier to the Security Chief did not identify any pressure on the Polish community. For that, the inspector investigated among the Polish community of Bordeaux. Mention is made of the Consulate of Poland, the „Friends of Poland” and the Assistance Centre for Poles in Bordeaux. So we can see that the Polish community is not negligible and is structured with these organisms. In his report, the inspector explains that the majority of Poles chosen to enlist in the Foreign Legion and not

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2 Archive municipale de Bordeaux, Série 6020 H1, Les étrangers bénéficiaires du droit d’asile en 1939-1940.
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the Polish Legion, to obtain benefits such as the French nationality. There is thus a real desire to be integrated and to settle permanently in the region. Laws against foreigners are present from the beginning of the 1930s. It is about monitoring the population through surveillance and counting. These laws show the fear and the suspicion aroused by foreigners among French. Throughout the 1930s, France lives among rising xenophobia and anti-Semitism. The tensions rising, reaches its peak with the arrival in power of the Vichy government. Indeed, the defeat of 1940 increases even further xenophobia and anti-Semitism in particular. The image of France, a major power collapses. There is a need to find responsible to this: foreigners and especially Jews. On the introduction of the Vichy government, measures are taken to prevent any further arrival of foreigners. On 5th July 1940, Adrien Marquet, then Interior Minister and Mayor of Bordeaux, close the borders „so that foreigners can not disturb public order”*. With the coming to power of Marshal Petain, the first French internment camps appear. Actions against French and foreign Jewish populations are taken. In October 1940, the „Jewish status” is established with the obligation to wear the yellow star, and the exclusion of all Jews working in Public Services. Bordeaux and the Gironde experienced several raids from July 1942 to May 1944, arranged by the French authorities, for the Germans. Finally, over 1,600 Jews were deported to death camps. For Vichy, it was about „cleaning up France” by separating the Nomads from the citizens. After the War, the Jewish population has disappeared from Gironde and Bordeaux. Indeed, in France, including Aquitaine, internment camps were built to intern all foreigners, Jews but also political opponents as well.

An example of a French internment camp: Camp Gurs

Gurs camp is one example of an internment camp on French territory, symbolizing the cooperation of the French government with the Nazi regime. The camp is located in the Southwest, near Pau. Built between March and April 1939, the camp has a capacity of „hosting” up to 18,500 people, which makes it one of the largest in France.

From 1939 to 1940, the camp was built to intern the Spanish Republicans who fled Franco’s regime and the Internationals (Poles, Hungarians ...) who fought in Spain on their side. In spring 1939 about 950 Poles were interned at Camp Gurs. The presence of Poles fighting in Spain is not surprising. Since 1926, the dictatorship is in power in Poland. There is a connection between the Polish dictatorship and the struggle against Franco. Internationals arriving in Spain to fight, are mainly from non-democratic countries, such as Eastern Europe, or Latin America... For them, it is about fighting against all forms of non-democratic governments in Europe. The large number of Poles is due to the fact that from

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* Archive municipale de Bordeaux, Série 6020 H2 : Situation des étrangers en 1939-1940.
1936 they are called together, with the French, to swell the ranks of the Brigades fighting in Spain. In 1940, the group of Internationals is moved to camp le Vernet. It leaves space for „undesirables” of the Vichy government which are foreign populations, like Poles, or Czechs living on French territory... There are men but also women and children, mostly Jews.

From 1940 to 1943, the camp hosts mainly French and foreign Jews. On 4th October 1940, a decree says that „foreign citizens of Jewish race may, at the date of enactment of this Law, be interned in special camps, by the decision of the prefect of the department”. During three years, the camp contains 18,185 internees, 2,470 of whom were Poles. The Polish population is the second biggest in the camp. The majority of the internees are Jewish, 11,255 for 11,825 internees on 1st January 1941. Polish population consists mostly of agricultural workers or traders, so it is a low-income population. Internees are living in harsh conditions, fighting against misery. The wooden barracks provided for a temporary period, are deteriorating rapidly. The Gursians are living overcrowded, in damp, dirt, splashing in the mud, suffering from hunger... Many will die of hunger, but also of diseases caused by the lack of hygiene, the graveyard testifies these losses.

The deportations from the camp began in August 1942 and continued until March 1943. Six convoys went to Auschwitz, to have a total of 3,907 Gursians. National groups most affected are the German and Polish Jews. Few survived the horrors of the extermination camps.

The Polish population in Aquitaine is difficult to quantify, in spite of the fact that it is present in Bordeaux in a structured community. Coming to France to seek better living conditions, and for some refuge from persecution in their country, they will experience discrimination. Indeed, the 1930s is a period when xenophobia and antisemitism are rising. Thus, laws restricting the freedom of foreigners will be applied by 1931. These xenophobic measures accelerate in 1939 at the beginning of WWII, with the counting and monitoring of all foreigners. The arrival in power of the Vichy government marks a turn. Racial laws are enacted, internment camps are emerging and raids are increasing in 1942, as in Bordeaux. The Polish population of Aquitaine is severely affected by the raids, because they are mostly of Jewish origin. After the war, the Polish population is decimated; there are no more Jews in Gironde.

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