Jean-Baptiste Chort

The military prison of Mauzac: an internment camp in Dordogne during the second World War

Abstract

In June 1940, after her defeat against Germany and the signature of the armistice, France is separated in two zones. One called «occupied zone» and the other called «free zone». Following the occupation of the territory by the Germans forces, the prisoners of the Parisian jails of the Cherche-Midi and La Santé are transferred to Périgueux, in Dordogne. They are then interned in the military camp of Mauzac. On the eve of the war, in Mauzac a gunpowder factory was built, that was part of an armament campaign decided by the French government. However, as France had been defeated, the gunpowder factory huts (which were used by the foreign workers who were building the gunpowder factory) became an internment camp. In this camp a lot of people considered as dangerous for national security were interned. That is to say communists, resistance fighters, foreigners, and even Jews waiting for a transfer to a concentration camp. So, the military camp of Mauzac was, during the period of the Second World War, a means of pressure and fight against the Resistance by the Government of Maréchal Pétain. Nevertheless the camp was liberated at the end of the war by the Resistance group «Cerisier» (cherry tree).

Keywords: «occupied zone», «free zone», internment camps, Pétain, Dordogne, French Resistance, strategic aspect, gunpowder factory, Parisian prisoners, communists, Gaullists, radical measures

When, in June 22, 1940 the Armistice was signed between France and Germany, the French territory was split in two parts. One part was called «occupied zone» and the other one «free zone». The French government was then seated in the city of Vichy and ruled by Maréchal Pétain.

However, in that part of the country free from German occupation, the French government policy was in support of the Nazis. Therefore, even if there were only a few concentration camps in the free zone, numerous internment camps existed. Indeed, These camps were not only for the French Jews waiting for their transfer into more important camps but also for French people critical of the new administration put in place by Maréchal Pétain. That is to say for all of those who were thought to be opponents to the political regime imposed by Vichy and thus threatening national security. They were communists, «Gaullistes» and on a larger extent, every person who could be suspected to participate in the activities of the French Resistance. There were also foreigners, especially Spanish republicans,
political refugees into South-West of France after fleeing from Spain following the Civil War (1936-1939) and Franco regime.

Among those camps in the South-West of France some were important because of their size and the number of prisoners interned and also because of the strategic role in the government collaboration policy.

However, we have noticed that on maps and in specialized bibliography, Dordogne doesn’t appear among the “free territory zones” containing major internment camps, except maybe the Sabloux camp, developed into the Sabloux castle, near the Fanlac village in Dordogne.

A quick reminder about Dordogne: This is a territory at the far west of the Free Zone, and crossed by the demarcation line. During the Occupation, it was under the administration of Limoges (in Region R5). Its “prefecture” is Périgueux. Even if the researches that have been done into French concentration camps and internment camps during the Occupation were almost never about Dordogne, the territory did then possess several military prisons and other places used for incarceration or to silence the more virulent, communists, Gaullists, Jews, foreigners, etc...

The purpose of this research is to do a study case on the Mauzac internment camp. Once placed in a broader context, it is interesting to see if the Mauzac military prison in Dordogne can be considered as an important French internment camp, like the Gurs camps.

We will, at first, study the strategic stake presented by the Mauzac camp and the internees profile, then we will concentrate on camp organization and living conditions. To finish with, we will see how important this camp was for the French Resistance through the study of an escape and the liberation of the camp at the end of the war.

From a gunpowder factory project to the internment camp

Dordogne: a refuge land and administrative withdrawal

Dordogne can be regarded as a land of refuge as well as place for administration and prison services withdrawn from other regions. Indeed, in 1943, there were about 16,000 refugees from Alsace-Lorraine in Dordogne, including a lot of Jewish people (we will come back to that later). Moreover, Spanish Republicans were taken in after their flight from Spain. The latters were part of the hundreds of foreign workers who took part in the building of what was going to be the Mauzac huts and then the internment camp.

However, Dordogne quickly became, after signing of the 22th June 1940 Armistice, the place to which the prisoners from Paris were transferred, after stopping at the Gurs camp.

The study of the Mauzac camp can only be understood, if we think about its strategic aspect for the country.
In order to do so, here is a brief presentation of the Paris prisoners journey, in order to understand how this village of Mauzac (itself part of the Lalinde district which only had about 6000 inhabitants) became of national interest.

On 10th June 1940, because of the German offensive operation in Paris, Georges Mandel, Home Secretary, had no choice but order the evacuation of 1865 prisoners from Parisian prisons „Cherche-Midi” and „la Santé”. After a long and troubled journey (hundreds of escapes and about 15 summary executions), 1.020 prisoners reached the Gurs camp.

It was decided at first that the military tribunals of Paris were translocated to Bordeaux. But, in an official statement from 29th June 1940 to the person in charge of the 12th military Region, followed by a decree on 5th July 1940, the Minister of War decided that the pending procedures of the four Parisian military tribunals were transferred to the court of the 12th military Region. While the headquarters were in Limoges, chief of the 12th military Region, the military tribunals are finally relocated in Périgueux. From September 1940, groups of accused were taken, under military escort, from the Gurs camp to the „Perlerie” prison of Périgueux, in order to be tried.

In a telegram from 6th November 1940, the commandant of the Gurs Camp gave an account of the prisoners leaving for Mauzac, that is to say „a total number of 420 supervisors, including escort, 5 officers, 120 guards”. Lieutenant Gros then became in charge of the „Paris military prison withdrawn in Mauzac”. He controlled 17 non-commissioned officers, including 4 accountants and 13 supervisors. There were 407 prisoners, including 60 condemned ones.

From that moment, the military prison of Mauzac became the main detention centre in Dordogne during the Occupation. We thus understand its importance on the national level since the prisoners were coming straight from Paris and from the two most important internment centres of the country before the German invasion. However, the prison of Mauzac was at first supposed to be a gunpowder factory. Thus, the space had to be rethought and transformed to become a prison.

From the gunpowder factory to the military prison

So it is during this period of tension of the international relations towards the end of the 1930s when it was decided to build in Dordogne, and more exactly in the municipality of Mauzac, a gunpowder factory. Indeed, at the beginning of 1939, the government decides to launch a vast campaign of armament. So, approximately one hundred hectares of the plains of Mauzac are requisitioned by the Ministry of the Armament, and is confided to the Central Service of Constructions of Powders. Actually, hundreds of workers (in particular immigrant workers), participate in the construction of this gunpowder factory during the journey and the night. But the armistice of 22nd June, 1940 came to stop the construction of this factory. The project of the gunpowder factory to the end of the war against Germany is abandoned. Then on the plains of Mauzac there are two
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The military prison of Mauzac is an internment camp in Dordogne during the second World War. The camps are called „North camp” and „South camp”, distant from approximately two kilometers from each other. On 28th September, Mauzac appears on a list of „hosting camps”. Finally, 16th October 1940, by telegram, the Head Office of the National Security asks the Prefect to take very urgently measures with the aim of the „immediate creation of a camp of unwanted French near Bergerac. (...) Number of internees to plan two thousand”. By „unwanted”, we understand the „dangerous individuals for the national defense and the law and order” (decree of 187 in November 1939) as well as those known for “communist, terrorist or subversive activities” (decree of 26th September 1939).

This arises the question to know if the camp of Mauzac can be considered as a “concentration camp”. We can look at this experience to try to explain why this internment camp left memories of camp of concentration, why it frightened so much the population of Dordogne.

The difficult life conditions of the internees

The internees of the Mauzac camp

The prisoners of the Mauzac camp were above all ordinary prisoners, those who came from the Parisian prisons but there were also communists, Gaullists and other active members of the Resistance. There are many who testify that the Resistance fighters who did not have any political preferences, had to suffer treatments generally rougher than the political prisoners. While the political prisoners seemed to be a little better treated. Indeed, the physical condition of the political prisoners was generally a little better. „If they undergo the same regime as the other prisoners, generally, they received from their families more parcesles and the agreement existing between them, every parcel is shared between companions, what supplies them a supplement of food really precious”, we can read in a report. Actually the political, communist and Gaullist prisoners, showed a big solidarity. Jean Pierre-Bloch, delegated SFIO of Aisne, charged with offence against national security, is transferred to Mauzac with some members of the SOE (British Secret Service of Action in France). They came from Périgueux (Beleyme prison). Bloch delivers his first impressions, after his arrival to Mauzac: „The regime is not identical for all. It is very hard for the ordinary prisoners. The communists, also, are badly treated, quite as the officers condemned for Gaullism. [...] Our group benefits almost of a political regime. [...] we can sleep normally, we have enough water, and finally, incredible luxury, we have the right to speak, to receive parcels, letters, visits. On the other hand, the show which offers the conditions of detention of the „common law” is horrifying. Some of them, starved, go as far as eating the grass of the camp and stuffing themselves with dirty waters of the kitchen. When the truck of provisioning, loaded with swedes or beets, arrives in the camp, prisoners fight to seize some garbage fallen on the ground.”
The prison of Mauzac also allows the authorities to possess a centre detention to intern the members of the Resistance in Dordogne. Indeed, the active Resistance operated in Périgord against the regime of Vichy through the groups armed in particular with those of the AS (Secret Army) and the FTP (Francs Tireurs Partisans). The prison, situated in the middle of the South sector of the Secret Army is thus a strategic point to fight against the Resistance.

In addition to the above described prisoners we have to mention foreigners, mainly Spanish people and German Jews, who came in large numbers waiting for transit to other camps. In spite of the heterogeneity of the prisoners, the camp of Mauzac could show itself hostile for everybody.

**The camp organization**

In 1945, the prefect Maxime Roux described the camp of Mauzac this way: "It is a central prison organized in the countryside in the huts of a former camp of Vichy, surrounded by barbed wires and conceived on the model of a stalag".

As we have already said, the prison of Mauzac was built as a matter of urgency to be ready to receive Parisian prisoners recently transferred to the camp of Gurs. Thus, because it was a question to build a gunpowder factory in Mauzac, the camp needed some "improvements" to reach the "stalag" at this model as Maxime Roux evokes. Indeed, on 10th February 1942, Captain Chevalier, leader of the appendix of the military buildings of Bergerac, addressed commander of the military prison of Mauzac in these terms: "I have the honor to send you in communication a sketch of construction of mirador, not requiring the employment of bolts, which are at present impossible to find in sufficiency in the business. Posts are tree trunks from 0.16 to 0.25 of diameter. An intermediate "enture" can be made if the length of trunks are insufficient ...".

Thanks to a report of the General Information of 15th February 1943, it is possible to make an idea of the question: "the huts of the camp are built on structures of cement and slightly heightened. They constitute perfectly installed, enlightened, and airy premises in a satisfactory way. However, heating is restricted, every rather vast shed receiving only 8 kilos of wood a day for the supply of a unique stove. On the other hand, a briefly installed infirmary exists in the camp, as well as a steam room of disinfection. All the prisoners are forced to the following regime: awakening at 7 am, work till 10:45 am, first soup at 11 am. Work from 12:30 am till 4:30 pm, new soup at 5 pm the prisoners. The various works to which are forced consist mainly the clearing and the stake of culture of about fifteen hectares attributed to the military prison." From this report of the General Information having taken place in February 15th, we can already note that the main breach noticed by an authority to the service nevertheless of the Vichy government, is the lack of heating for prisoners, even in winter. But, more than the cold and the season, it is the hunger which got the internees. Indeed, another report of the General Information dating 4th March, 1943 testifies it: "all the
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prisoners complain about the incapacity of food and almost totality concerns the face the stigmas of the hunger: excessive thinness, eyes pushed in the orbit, the high cheekbones, the big paleness of the face. [...] the case was me quoted of a man of 1m80, who at the moment of his liberation did not weigh more than 45 kilos and was in such a state of weakness which he was not able to take only in the car. »

If this testimony is the one of an „official” member of the General Information, thus the French authorities, it is even more striking as it is given by a man outside the camp not having to undergo the treatment in the „camp” which imposes him(it) on prisoners.

However, the winter 1942-1943 came to mark a positive change in the life of the camp. From February 1943, the commanders of the military prison of Mauzac made the prisoners cultivate 15 hectares for the kitchen. So, from the summer 1943, the situation of the prisoners is appreciably and gradually improved, thanks to kitchen gardens on one hand and on the other hand, thanks to parcels that prisoners receive from their families and friends.

However, it is not this „improvement” which urges the prisoners to settle in „South camp”. Indeed, Pierre Bloch, former deputy SFIO, together with some of his companions, prepared an escape attempt with the help of his wife, eventually makes a success and allows eleven prisoners to escape.

The escape of the Mauzac camp

A prepared escape

The protagonists of this escape are, for the greater part, important characters of the Resistance. We find: Georges Bégué, Pierre Bloch, Jean Bouguennec, John Hayes, Marc Jumeau, George Langelaan, Jean Le Harivel Philippe Liewer, Robert Lyon, Raimond Roche and Michel Trotobas. As we have already evoked it, the political prisoners often enjoy the possibility of having contacts with their families outside. This allows them to observe the rounds and the functioning of the camp better. Inside the camp, the principle is simple: on one hand, the „eleven” take advantage of their outings and various outdoor activities to analyze the situation. It is necessary for them to calculate spaces between buildings, the shadows, the passages of rounds and the movements of the lights of miradors. On the other hand, the action which can not apparently be made without internal complicity of the camp, is a question of „corrupting” certain guards. It is at this moment that the outside help comes into play. Indeed, Gaby Bloch, the wife of the prisoner played a determining role for the implementation of the operation. Installed in the small inn of Mauzac „Chez Desmartin”, she brings food to prisoners very regularly, and so frequents the guards of the prison. Finally, she succeeds in convincing two guards to close eyes on the escape. The operation was finally a success and the escapees were able to join London.

If this escape which took place in the small village of Mauzac made a lot of
people of the region speak (a movie entitled “Adieu Mauzac” was even shot and was on Channel 1 on 25th April 1970), it is an excellent tool of analysis of behaviour and mentalities during the war. Indeed, if we evoked the ill-treatment that prisoners had to undergo, we especially saw the distress which resulted from it. Now, if the general testimonies on the prison of Mauzac present it as a cruel place of dehumanization, it is maybe interesting to note that it is possible, towards these events, to have a less Manichean vision of things. That is, in this case, guards of the prison risked their lives to allow the escape of these eleven prisoners. Pierre Bloch writes about the guard Velten: “He was odiously beaten up. Under the torture, he continued to assert that he ignored everything of our escape. (...) I doubtless owe him the life”. We thus touch here a sensitive point of the study about the Occupation, namely the fact that during this period the population was not cut in two between collaborators and Resistance fighters.

The answer of the French authorities

The escape of the Mauzac North camp in this night of July 1942 gave rise to a chain reaction of the authorities.

Two weeks later, on 30th July 1942, the major ordering temporarily the district of Bergerac writes to the sub-prefect of Bergerac. In his report he says he has suspicion about characters out of the prison who would have played a role in the escape. Indeed, at the night of 24 – 25th July, in a café of Mauzac of which the manager “would be of Spanish origin”, wives of prisoners were gathered in the presence of certain prison guards, as well as the mayor of Mauzac. Actually, the rumour circulating that the woman of Pierre Bloch would have participated actively in the organization of the escape, the Commander states several propositions of new measures to be set up: 1th: Prisoners’ women cannot stay any more in the district of Lalinde in a permanent or semi-permanent way. Then, “the relatives of the prisoners are authorized to stay no more than 48 hours”. After the investigation, the Lachapelle woman (wife of a former guard of the prison) is invited to live somewhere else”. And finally, an investigation is made on the opening and the closure of the café. But from August 22nd, 1942, and the return of Lieutenant-colonel Olle-Laprune, while commanding the Military District of Bergerac, we begin to speak about the “purge” of the region of “all the shady persons who live permanently in the district”, and “proceed to massive checks of identity”. Three days later, 25th August, Colonel Plasselle, who commands the military region of the Dordogne, passes on the request of an implementation of purge of the region of Mauzac for the Prefect.

It is finally from September 1942 when the project called “about purge” is set up. Indeed, in a note sent to the estate management of Dordogne police and emanating from the Regional Prefect of Limoges (administrative Region RS of which was a part the Dordogne under the Occupation) on 7th September 1942, the implementation of measures is stated in the region of Mauzac. The penalty is
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Immediate for four shady persons: Huger Pauline, Mascaloux Jeanne, Hildebrand Adrienne and Charles Barthe. Each of them is suspected of having contacts with the Mauzac prisoners and are thus asked to leave the district of Bergerac.

We notice here not only the interests, the speed of decision-making of the authorities and the implementation of the project, but also the term "purge" which returns ceaselessly in police reports and prefectorial reports. So, even in Dordogne, and even without approaching the Jewish question or the other foreigners, we have to mention the radical measures of purge near the Camp of Mauzac. However it is necessary to put into perspective the extent of this measure, in the sense that it does not directly give rise to executions, nor even confinement.

Conclusion

Finally, the prison of Mauzac was released by the Resistance at night from 7 to 8 June 1944. In a report of 2nd July 1944, Captain Blanchet, leader of the guards of Mauzac, tells the events. During all the journey preceding the attack, the rumour was spreading in the prison. Considering these rumours seriously without getting into a panic however, the Captain takes the measures which are imperative and passes on the orders to his men. But when, at about 12 pm, the leader of the Resistance movement "Cerisier" (cherry tree) comes to park close to the prison, Captain Blanchet was the only person who wanted to react. His men do not obey him any more and help even at the liberation of the camp.

Finally, on 26th October 1944, the Provisional Government of the French Republic states political prisoners (and not of common law) in Dordogne. It counts 188 in the Camp of Mauzac. The prison of Mauzac, internment camp under the Occupation, took a quite great importance during this period for the French Government, but also for the German power in their fight against the Resistance and all the forms of opposition to the regime. The camp was an instrument of pressure and Vichy government intensification of the administration in Dordogne.

After it has been released, the camp of Mauzac becomes a prison until today.