

Gurs

Prison camp located in the Pyrenees Mountains of southwestern France, 50 miles from the Spanish border. Gurs was originally established in April 1939 by the French government, in order to detain Spanish Republican soldiers running from Spain after their defeat in the Spanish Civil War.

After France fell to Germany in mid-1940, Gurs was located in the zone unoccupied by the Germans, which was controlled by the Vichy government. At that point, many Jewish refugees fled to southern France hoping to escape the German army. However, the Vichy authorities imprisoned many of those refugees in Gurs and other camps like it. In addition, the German authorities deported to Gurs thousands of Jews from the German regions of Baden and Palatinate. Some of these prisoners were released over the next two years and moved overseas.

In spite of the severe conditions at Gurs, the prisoners managed to conduct high level cultural activities, education courses, and religious services on a regular basis.

After Germany occupied southern France in November 1942, the Germans began deporting Jews from prison camps like Gurs to extermination camps in Poland. By late 1943 some 6,000 Jews had been deported, and only 48 remained. Gurs was liberated by the Allies in the summer of 1944. (For more on Vichy, see also France.)