Memories of Menachem Mayer and Frederick Raymes about Life in Gurs Detention Camp

Fred: The year is 1940. Winter. Rain, wind, damp and cold... The barracks they put us in were completely bare. That first night we didn't even have straw to sleep on. It was a far cry from home, from our more-or-less normal lives, to this entirely new reality; the contrast was so stark that we were all in shock. After a few days, the adults began to comprehend the magnitude of the calamity that had befallen them. The little ones and the old people simply cried and whimpered all the time.

Menachem: There were altogether three hundred large wooden barracks, built to house 20,000 people. The camp was divided into thirteen "islands" - ilots - to the French, designated by the letters of the alphabet-each comprising between twenty-five and twenty-eight units. Each island was surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by French sentries. Our island, ilot I, certainly was an island - we were separated and isolated from the others ... as well as from the outside world beyond the camp fence. The barrack was about thirty meters long and seven meters wide. There was a door at either end. The windows were wooden shutters that could be opened, giving rise to many arguments. It was too hot for one, too cold for another, the third person complained about too much light...

Fred: When the two of us - eleven and eight years old - went outside in the morning, we immediately sank into mud, because the entire camp was built on swampland. There were no sidewalks, no pavement or vegetation-just a sea of squelching mud. I do not exaggerate when I say that it came up to my knees, and it was hard work dragging out anyone who had the misfortune to fall in. The mud was a severe hindrance, especially for the old people, who found it almost impossible to get to the toilet facilities. Everyone who survived clearly remembers the mud of Gurs.

Life in the camp centered around eating and finding shelter. For washing there was cold water, running from crude pipes drilled with small holes, and located out in the open. That winter was exceptionally severe, and the water often froze in the pipes. The temperature in Gurs, in the foothills of the Pyrenees, plummeted to below minus four Fahrenheit. Washing under these conditions may have suited boy scouts, but it was a calamity for the old people, as well as the women who were forced to wash themselves in public without a shred of privacy. We children were not bothered too much - we weren't too fond of washing anyway.

The toilets were another story. They were installed next to the barbed wire fence surrounding the camp. To get to them you had to climb some stairs to a flat slab of concrete cemented to pillars. Along the entire length of this slab were holes, separated from one another by low partitions and open to the heavens. The only way to relieve oneself was to squat over these holes and take aim! If you hit the target, well and good, if not... Naturally, the whole area became contaminated and befouled within a very short time. The stench was unbearable. Under each hole was a barrel, holding between fifty and one hundred liters. Every morning it was the task of the Spanish prisoners to remove the full barrels and replace them with empty ones. This was done by means of...
carts on a narrow rail track running around the perimeter of the camp, which we children promptly named the "shithouse express."

When we arrived in the camp in October 1940, we were supervised by German non-Jewish female prisoners. They had fled from Germany to France because of their anti Nazi views. At the start of the war between France and Germany, they were imprisoned as enemy aliens by the French and found themselves in Gurs. They spoke both French and German, so some of them were appointed to take charge of the barracks that had been suddenly inundated with this German-speaking humanity. One of them was Hanna Schramm. After the war she wrote a book, Living in Gurs, wherein she described the day we arrived:

The first ones to emerge from the darkness into the lighted hut were old women, women holding babies, others leading children by the hand, all of them wide eyed with fear. The trucks arrived one after the other, unloading their cargo - women of all ages, rich women, poor women, the healthy and the sick. There were many children with them and elderly people of 95... They looked like ghosts, confused and bewildered, in an unfamiliar world... It was raining the night they landed in Gurs, in the mud and the pollution, to be thrust into miserable huts, worse than prison cells.

The Jewish organizations and various welfare associations, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, were informed of the dreadful conditions in the camp; in 1941, they began distributing food supplements. Adam Rotkowsky wrote: "There is severe hunger ... we must save these people ... we must act now .... Organizations such as the Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants (OSE), the Quakers, ORT, the Joint Distribution Committee, YMCA, the American Red Cross, Secours Suisse, CAR, and Hicem have all tried to help." But it was too little and too late for the elderly and the feeble. The Gurs cemetery is the final resting place for 1,187 camp prisoners, including Grandmother Mina. She was seventy-two when she died (1870-1942). Some time after the war, tombstones were erected. Grandmother Mina' s grave is number 562, as I learned thirty years later during one of my pilgrimages. Lice were everywhere. There were frequent outbreaks of diphtheria, typhoid fever, dysentery, and other infectious diseases. The children received various inoculations. For some reason I still have my inoculation certificate listing all those painful shots.

The food was minimal, totally inadequate to say the least-ersatz coffee, slices of black bread... We can't remember receiving real solid food. We were given watery soup in which a few cabbage leaves floated. The lucky ones found a lump of potato or carrot in their ladle of soup, and the greatest joy imaginable was the discovery of some shreds of meat. We were always hungry. The food was cooked in huge pots over an open flame, in the kind of field kitchen that was in common use among armies in the nineteenth century.

Menachem: Always hungry, we kids ran wild in the camp. It didn't take long for us to find our way to the other blocks (islands), where Father and our uncles were being held. Visits to Father were even more special, because he had been drafted as a cook for his barbed-wire enclosure. If you have to be a prisoner, this must be the best occupation in the whole camp. Father was always looking for work and, possibly because of his past experience as a butcher, he was
assigned to the kitchen. The kitchen was a makeshift structure—several poles holding up a sheet of tin. Over an open fire stood a long row of barrels that functioned as enormous cooking-pots.

**Fred:** During our sneak visits Father would cut us a thick slice from a round loaf of bread, toast it over the open flame, and spread it with a thick layer of fat from a large 5-gallon tin can. He sprinkled brown sugar on top. What joy! There was simply no better gift he could make to his sons. This addition to our daily ration helped us survive. I remember this very clearly because those moments were so precious ... food, and then more food... It is impossible for anyone who has not experienced true hunger to understand how important food became to us, and how central it was to our lives.

**Menachem:** There was no school. We spent the whole day roaming around the camp. I remember hiding behind a hut and smoking cigarette butts picked out of the mud!

**Fred:** We also explored the area outside the camp. We got as far as the nearby village of Gurs. The French police never stopped us—they knew we’d eventually return to our parents in the camp. I can’t remember how we managed to communicate with them - we didn't speak a word of French! We were pretty wild kids, taking full advantage of our enforced "vacation" behind barbed wire. One morning, I awoke to see two candles burning beside me. A woman had died in the night. It was the first time I saw a dead body. The Spanish prisoners who were responsible for cleaning the camp came by with a cart every morning to collect the Angel of Death’s gleanings of the previous night.

**Menachem:** I remember standing next to the fence one morning, transfixed by the sight of a horse-drawn wagon carrying corpses covered with blankets, as it moved through the camp. I can still see the legs sticking out.

Mayer Menachem and Raymes Frederick, Are The Trees in Bloom Over There? (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2002), pp. 79-82.