

ERNEST GILLEN

(1921-2004)

Former deportee from Luxembourg



Ernest Gillen was born on 19th March 1921 in Haller, Luxembourg. During the German Occupation, he decided to join the LPL – Lëtzebuerger Patriote Liga.

He was arrested on 16th April 1942 and transferred to the jail of Luxembourg-Grund from 16th to 18th April 1942, deported to various places, such as Hinzert's concentration camp for over 2 months; then he was interned to the Wittlich prison, to Luxembourg-Grund from 7th to 30th October 1942 and finally into the Trier prison.

From 29th January 1943 to 2nd March 1944, he resided in the concentration camp of Natzweiler-Struthof (Alsace), Number 2486; then he was deported to Dachau's camp, Number 64949, and from 26th March to 25th September 1944 to the annexe camp of Wesserling-Urbès, Number 9343.

Upon evacuation of the camp, when the Allies approached, he was moved to Neckarelz (Baden) on 26th September and to Heppenheim (Hessen, Germany) from 10th October 1944 to 23rd March 1945.

During a **first death march**, on 23rd March 1945, he endured terrible conditions and fears of being shot by the Allies until reaching Dachau. He was then interned once more into the camp of Dachau till 5th April 1945.

On 5th April 45, Ernest Gillen was transferred to the Munich-Riem airport, where he had to work hard in frightful and really dangerous conditions due to the frequent aerial bombings by the Allies.

During **the second death march**, on 29th April 45, from Munich-Riem to Bad Tölz, he managed to take flight with some other prisoners from Luxembourg, during the night of 1st- 2nd May, when they were given shelter in a farm in Rottach.

He was finally released, on 4th May 1945, by American troops at Breitenbach, near the Schliersee.

The Luxembourg group went from Breitenbach to Augsburg in an old car. Then Americans carried them in a lorry to Mannheim.

On 14th May 45, the group could take a train via Paris to Luxembourg; on 18th May, Ernest Gillen and his companions finally came back to their native country and to their family, happy to have survived.

After the war, Ernest Gillen became a government official in Luxembourg, first at the Ministry of Finance and then at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In 1981, he retired, leaving his office at the embassy in La Haye and Brussels.

Immediately after the war, he undertook a long process of research and wrote a thesis on the inhumane conditions in the concentration and extermination camps, and also on the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis.

He contacted many camp survivors, became an active member of various associations of remembrance and returned on the 12th September 1976 for the first time to Wesserling-Urbès, the scene of his detention, as part of a remembrance ceremony and in the company of the Luxembourg Association of former deportees from the camps of Natzweiler-Struthof and Wesserling-Urbès.

In the period between 1947- 1978, he published articles in the “*Revue*”, about his detention in various camps, such as “*Verent am Ongléck, verent am Gléck* ».

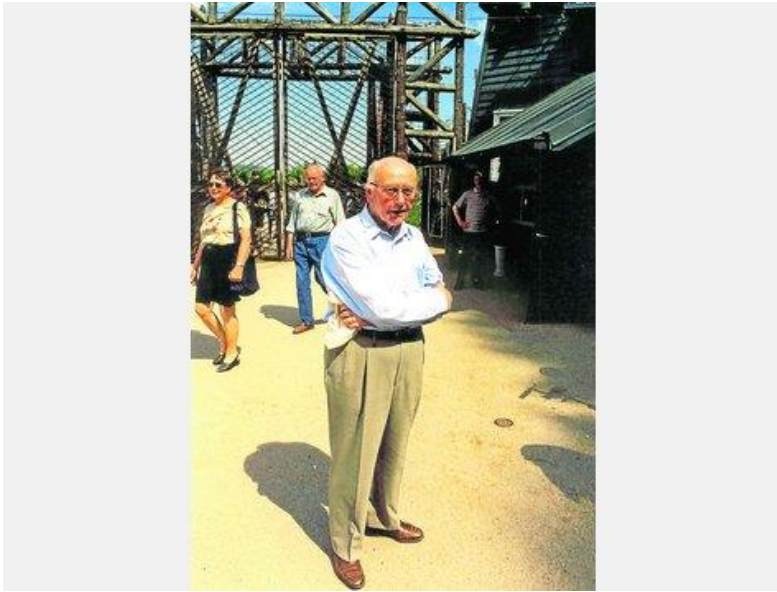
He has also written articles about Hinzert, as well as about events and vicissitudes of the war in Rappel, Lëtzebuurger Sonndesblad and Luxemburger Wort.

He was engaged in the National Council of Resistance and in the Association Natzweiler-Struthof of Luxembourg.

He died on 2nd February 2004 in Esch-sur-Alzette (Luxembourg).

After his death, the family allowed the publication of his Memoirs, named “« *Sou wéi ech et erlieft hunn* » illustrated with his many drawings, so that young generations never forget the barbarity suffered by millions of human beings in the name of a dictatorship and a fanatical political ideology.

Ernest Gillen at the camp of Natzweiler-Struthof, in front of the entrance.



Testimony of Ernest Gillen about the camp of Urbès:

« Due to the danger of typhus, all the camp had to get vaccinated. We only had 2 or 3 syringes for this operation ».

« We slept poorly: 120 to 150 people in a narrow room on the straw ».

«The work was hard: we had to pull bags and cables, to work ourselves to death with pick and shovel. We had to work under the rain, in the cold and in a hurry or inside the tunnel».

« The food was bad and insufficient (...) »

« During the first weeks, we had very bad shoes: clogs. Many prisoners had to walk barefoot on sharp stones of the tunnel ».

«I saw, how Janisch wanted to throw a bowl of boiling soup at the head of a prisoner. But he lowered his head at the same moment and Janisch missed his aim. After he beat him with hands and feet».

« Because of the escape of Russian prisoners, the commander Brendler received the order from the direction to punish all prisoners of the camp. Brendler

undertook the biggest thrashing, I have seen in my life. 800 to 1000 Russians received 10 blows in their behind. This punishment was during few days”.

(Source: Mr. François Wehrbach’s book)



Ce pèlerinage à Urbès était empreint d'indicible émotion, en particulier pour les détenus que furent (de gauche à droite), MM. Jean Thony, Aloyse Wies et Ernest Gillen et qui ont été appelés à dévoiler la plaque commémorative.

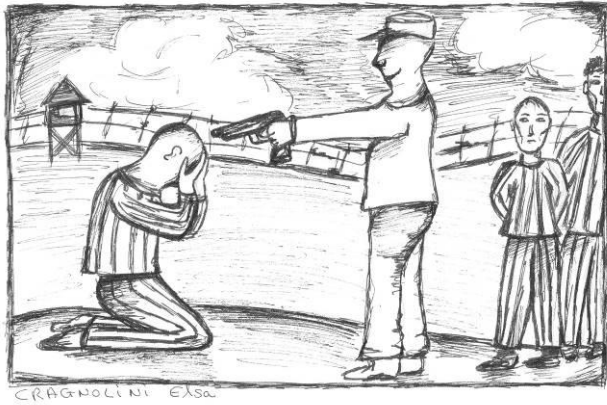
Remembrance ceremony at the camp of Urbès, on 12th September 1976.

From left to right, the ancient deportees, Jean Thony, Aloyse Wies and Ernest Gillen.



Drawing by Noémie Diby, inspired by this of Henri Gayot – 2015

Drawings by Elsa Cragolini, 2015



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