

INSURRECTION

At Eysses, Joseph Schivo tightens the noose around the inmates' collective. The organization and the minute preparation of several months risk at any moment to be reduced to nothing. The internal situation became unacceptable for the collective, so they decide to seize the first chance to attempt an exit. The general context also weighs in. On February 11, 1944, a note from the penitentiary administration addressed to the directors of district prisons institutes Franco-German commissions in each prison to fight against escapes. The occupation forces directly contribute to the surveillance of prisons. For the prisoners, the fear of delivery to the German authorities weighs on them more each day. The visit of an inspector general to Eysses on February 19, 1944 is going to offer a long-awaited opportunity to the inmates.

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Sources : Amicale des anciens détenus patriotes de la centrale d'Eysses, *L'insurrection d'Eysses*, éditions sociales, 1974. Corinne Jaladieu, *La prison politique sous Vichy. L'exemple des centrales d'Eysses et de Rennes*, L'Harmattan, 2007. Documentation Corinne Jaladieu.

❖ Stage 1 : Outbreak of the Insurrection

On February 19, 1944, in the morning, a piece of information spread through all of the yards: the arrival that same day of an Inspector General of Vichy's penitentiary administration. This news is the opportunity awaited by the direction of the inmates' Collective to neutralize the upper penitentiary staff and render itself master of the prison. The inspector provides a hostage of stature, and the decision is made to initiate the specified plan: first, to silently capture the entirety of the prison direction, including the Inspector and all of the staff. The leaders of the different yards are on alert, ready to leap into action.

The inspection starts at 2 pm in Yard 1. The agreed-upon interior signal is the drop of a handkerchief that must announce the start of the operations; it is given by Pascal Fieschi when the inspector general, Director Schivo, followed by the deputy-director, the chief guard and the finance administrator entered into a warming room after a few minutes where they find two hundred inmates and approach a patriotic mural that embellishes the wall. Very quickly, the visitors find themselves assaulted, bound and gagged without being able to give the alarm. Following the devised plan, the inmates simultaneously capture the guards on duty in all the yards, who like all the hostages, are taken and concentrated in the chapel. Certain inmates don their uniforms. The weapons camouflaged in the prisoners' floorboards in two places in Yard 2 are quickly taken out of hiding. So, the first part of the plan wholly succeeded; the inmates are masters of all the detention up to the chapel. It is now time to get out. Before, it is necessary to ensure control of the communications center (to the west of the administrative building) to warn the outside Resistance as well as the control of a gate designated for vehicles, located behind the prison, defended by a watchtower (northeastern gate).

❖ Stage 2 : Fighting at the Chapel and the Administrative Building

On return from a fatigue duty, a common law inmate accompanied by guards is astonished to see an unknown guard on the level of the chapel and cries out. The resistant inmate points his weapon and takes aim at one of the guards, but the submachine gun jams and the shot does not fire; thus, the guard has time to reply and give the alert but cannot close the door giving access to the administrative offices. So, inmates spread throughout the guard post, capturing guards they find there and seizing the guns left at the post.

During this time, the captain of the guard accompanied by a true guard returns to the office located on the left side of the administrative buildings. Supplied with a submachine gun, he immediately opens fire and takes aim at the central corridor accessing the administrative offices, thus forbidding access to the court of honor to the majority of inmates, where one finds the only door allowing access to the main door of the prison. When the copyist, M. Charpentier, crosses the grafting corridors, he is killed by a burst shot by the captain of the

guard. Alerted by the gunshots, the exterior guard places automatic weapons in the windows of the entry buildings overlooking the court of honor and starts to open fire on the detention facilities.

Fernand Bernard, military commander of the Eysses battalion, is seriously injured. The detention areas and the guard house are under the control of the insurgents. The Vichyists occupy the barracks, the communications center, the administrative buildings, the exterior wall of the prison and its watchtowers.

❖ **Stage 3 : Fighting at the Infirmary**

In the infirmary, the resisters Aubert, Kinzler and Neveu make arrangements to open a breach in that side. Paul Weil organizes an emergency medical service for the wounded.

The resister groups, after having summoned in vain the GMR in the turrets to let them leave, make several attempts to cross the exterior walls by attacking the watchtowers with grenades and machine guns. Some climb onto the roofs and shoot at the guards while others, protected by mattresses, attempt to climb to the level of the watchtowers. It is during one of these attempts that Louis Aulagne is mortally wounded by exploding grenades. An attack carried out by the Spaniards and led by Llanos against the northwestern watchtower is conducted with grenade launches from the infirmary. All of these attempts are failures.

At 9 pm, the occupation troops coming from Agen (they were not present at Villeneuve), alerted by Madame Schivo, surround the penitentiary. 150 men, equipped with artillery, encircle the prison.

❖ **Stage 4 : Fighting at the Eastern Gate**

From the windows of Yard 4, Roque calls to the GMR of the Eastern watchtower and tries to negotiate with them so that they will let the prisoners leave. This attempt ends in failure.

Pelouze, Coquet, Brun and Jourdan attack the Eastern gate (walled in since the escape in January) with pickaxes. The GMR retaliate. The insurgents progress towards the Eastern watchtower, protected by straw mattresses. Louis Aulagne is in the lead. They ascend a level; the GMR reply with grenades. Aulagne, seriously wounded, is carried to the infirmary. With one arm amputated by Dr. Weil, he succumbs to his wounds while letting out his last words: *"Good bye fellows, I die for France."*

❖ **Stage 5 : The Surrender**

At midnight, the staff officer of the inmates attempts to negotiate several times by telephone with the prefecture, asking the prefect to let them leave, arguing based on the quality of the hostages that they hold; they are met with refusal.

Auzias leads the negotiations along with other leaders of the Collective: Pierre Doize, Stéphane Fuchs, Victor Michaut, Edouard Aubert, Toussaint Raffini, Jean Coin, Henri Turrel and Claude Leroy. But the militiamen appealed to the Germans, who issue an ultimatum of a quarter of an hour before the bombing of the prison. Director Schivo is then brought forth, and he gives his "word as an officer" that there will not be reprisals and confirms to the authorities the correct treatment of himself. All the testimonies insist on the militiaman's particularly spineless attitude, dead with fear and attempting to justify himself with all sorts of deceitful attitudes. No delay is granted. To avoid the bombing of the prison and to spare as many lives as possible, the inmates free the hostages, give up their arms (eleven machine guns and eight grenades), and return to their dormitories. It is about four in the morning.

❖ **Stage 6 : Time of Repression**

On February 23, 1944, at 11 am, 12 resisters from the Eysses battalion, victims of reprisals decided by the Vichy government, are executed in the yard usually used for hanging out laundry: Henri Auzias, Fernand Bernard, Roger Brun, Jean Chauvet, Louis Guiral, Alexandre Marqui, Gabriel Pelouze, Félicien Sarvisse, Jaime Sero-Bernat, Domenec Serveto-Bertran,

Joseph Stern and Jean Vigne. Facing the French firing squad, refusing to be blindfolded, they sang *La Marseillaise* and *Le Chant du départ*.

The day after their execution, despite the interdiction, the people of Villeneuve come to put flowers on the tombs where they rest at the Saint Catherine cemetery of Villeneuve-sur-Lot.

Since the Liberation, the wall of the prison against which the execution poles had been raised has become the "wall of the executed": a registered memorial spot since the supplementary inventory of historical monuments, acts as a reminder to the living of France of the court martials. The patriotic homage, a strong point of the annual commemorations at Villeneuve-sur-Lot since 1945, perpetuates the memory of these men, who all "Died for France."

▫ **The Investigation and the Court Martial**

On February 20, Joseph Darnand, Secretary of State of the interior, goes to Eysses. The interrogations commence on the morning of the 20th in the yards, just as a general search of the prison is organized. The hidden weapons in the infirmary are discovered. The inmates are searched, and everything that belongs to them is destroyed. The mobile brigades of Limoges and Toulouse are called in as reinforcements for the interrogations of the 1200 inmates. Among them, only one will speak.

Following these interrogations, fifty hostages, considered to be the leaders, are taken to the segregated quarters. Though the selection of hostages is finished, some resisters are still "interrogated" all night, in the cave under Schivo's apartment.

The counsel of ministers names a court martial that arrives at Eysses on the night of February 22. From 11 pm to 4 am, the court investigates 15 proceedings out of the 50 hostages behind closed doors.

▫ **The Executions**

At 10:50 am on February 23, the 12 condemned men are brought to the laundry yard ("execution yard"). Henri Auzias launches an indictment against Schivo and his accomplices, and then the condemned intone *La Marseillaise*, taken up by the inmates in the segregated quarter. After the fire of the GMR, the 12 are finished off at close range.

▫ **Reaction of the Population of Villeneuve to the Executions**

The executed must be put in a pauper's grave. The penitentiary staff, scandalized, opposes this. Fearing a manifestation of the population of Villeneuve, the executed are not put into coffins until dawn. The population is warned that all procession and all manifestations are strictly forbidden, as well as the decoration of the tombs with flowers. All the same, they will be flourished that very day, notably by Marguerite Belloni, and the following days by the population.

❖ **Stage 7 : Delivery to the Germans**

On May 30, 1944, it is by this court of honor that more than 1200 resisters leave the prison under the hand of the German division *SS Das Reich* (which will become famous a few days later at Oradour-sur-Glane) to the railway station of Penne-d'Agenais, in the direction of Compiègne, antechamber of deportation.

❖ **Stage 8 : Deportation**

In the hell of the wagons as well as in the Dachau camp, the members of the Eysses Battalion will conserve the spirit that they forged in prison, thus considerably diminishing the risks of death, surrender, and despair. That which they since call "the spirit of Eysses" allows them to fight and to hold on until the end, to the effect that their losses are less than that of the entirety of the population of the concentration camp.

Four hundred of them will lose their lives in the Nazi concentration camps.