



ONE OF FOUR YARDS

The majority of the inmates are grouped in the four yards, the heart of prison life. On the ground floor of each yard: the warming-rooms and workshops where the inmates pass the day. Upstairs: The chicken cages and the dormitory that they return to for the night. The daily walk takes place at a cadenced pace; the round of clogs, in rhythm with the "one, two" count of the prison guards symbolizes the extremely strict discipline of the galleys of Eysses. Yet, with the massive arrival of resistants in the autumn of 1943, the prison administration exercises worse and worse control over the individuals that it claims to banish from society.

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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.

- **From Prison Rule to the "Republic" of Eysses**

Thanks to the pressures exerted daily by more than 1200 inmates, the resistants succeed in imposing profound modifications of the penitentiary's very strict prison regime. They are united in the same Collective. To represent themselves in front of the direction, they elect two delegates, a communist and a Gaullist: Henri Auzias and Stéphane Fuchs. This organization, which the authorities were aware of, also allowed the camouflage of a clandestine organization, equally pluralist, politically and militarily preparing the attempt at a collective escape with the goal of rejoining the exterior combat. Effectively, the prisoner again becomes what he no longer is even on the outside under Vichy: a citizen free to think and to act, though on the inside of well-guarded walls.

- **Organization in the Yards**

At the time when they arrive at Eysses, the political prisoners, for the most part coming from the large Resistance movements (Combat, Liberation, Franc-Tireur and Partisans, National Liberation Front), have already passed through several short-term prisons, where they acquired, to varying degrees, experiences of unity and collective organization. They have the desire to be treated with dignity, build relations amongst themselves of unity, solidarity, and mutual aid while also reaffirming their commitment to the liberation of France. The communist prisoners, the majority, invite the Gaullist prisoners to join them in the National Front of Inmates and propose the formation of a "Common Front of Action."

Stephen Fuchs (gaullist) and Henri Auzias (communist) are chosen by their comrades to represent them in front of the prison direction. In each yard, two delegates (one communist, one gaullist) are officially appointed to present demands in front of the direction and participate in the clandestine inter-yard meetings. Some leaders are also designated to organize various tasks in each yard: cleaning, solidarity, leisure, instruction...

The first concern is finding an equilibrium in the representation of all the Resistance movements present in the penitentiary, and the second is the pursuit of efficiency. Thus, the military command ("Eysses Battalion") is entrusted to Commander Bernard (socialist), due to his command experience at the time of the Spanish War, and the direction of the infirmary to Doctor Paul Weil of the Franc-Tireur movement. The strategy put into action in the prison is intended to seek unity to prepare the escape and the resumption of combat. Strong from this unity, the prisoners set up a structured organization aiming to prepare the collective escape.

- **From Physical Training to Military Instruction, the "Battalion of Eysses"**

A military organization is also secretly implemented in the prison. It becomes the "Battalion d'Eysses" (Battalion of Eysses; known after the war as Battalion FFI-Combat Unit). The only goal is the preparation of a collective escape in order to rejoin the Resistance and participate in the battles of the Liberation.

The men are organized into groups of ten (Gaullists and communists mixed), sections and companies, the entirety forming a battalion headed by a staff-officer under the direction of Commander Bernard and the military commission of the Front National. The Spaniards are grouped together, even though they integrate themselves into the general organization by contributing their precious experience of armed combats.



Military instruction and courses in weapons handling are given, under the cover of authorized courses, and regular physical education becoming obligatory in January, in view of the escape. This is entrusted to qualified sports instructors, such as Jean Chardonnet of Lyon, a high level cyclist as a civilian, or sports teacher Marcel Cochet of the Liberation Movement, who exercised at the Lalande High School of Bourg-en-Bresse.

- **The Resistant Guards**

Inmates are specially chosen in each yard to serve as intermediaries with the friendly guards, also called “electricians” (nickname given by the resisters). The direction of the inmates sends precise directives to the guards and tips for recruiting their colleagues. Fifteen guards thus join the Resistance in the “Front National des Surveillants” (National Front of Guards) (led by G. Dumas), though it is necessary to add three guards who will actively participate in the successful escape of 54 inmates on January 3, 1944.

On February 19, 1944, some of them will play a fundamental role in carrying out the operations, notably in informing the resisters of the arrival of Vichy's Inspector General on that same day, the act triggering the insurrection.

- **Patriotic Manifestations**

Amongst the commemorations organized in prison, the patriotic manifestations are the most important. Recall that these manifestations are forbidden outside the prison by the occupation authorities and that their initiators risk prison. In this context, their organization inside the prison space is charged with political meaning. At Eysses, several manifestations of large magnitude are organized, like that of November 11, 1943. This day is the opportunity to seal the union between hundreds of inmates of all walks of life, recently brought together. The program mixes entertainment (reading of poems, choir) and political action, both with exclusively patriotic tones.

- **The Prison University**

The political prisoners' thirst for knowledge has diverse causes, the most important coming from an awareness directly linked to the ideas of the Resistance. The courses and the instruction are weapons in the struggle for Liberation but also, and especially in the liberated France, a guarantee of effective and active participation in its reconstruction, on the bases conforming to the National Council of the Resistance (CNR). Another reason is psychological: to avoid the idleness that works against morale. Finally, the authorized courses act as a screen for the secret political courses.

This thirst for learning is encouraged by the main leaders, and the inmates extract from the penitentiary's direction the authorization to receive study books, notebooks and paper, and to have courses.

- **Creation and Prison**

The exceptional collection of letters, journals, songs, poems, photos, drawings, objects made at Eysses stand witness to the creativity of the political prisoners at Eysses, permitting us to capture the man behind the prisoner. Portraits of inmates, notably, restore the prisoners with their humanity and their status as free men.

In addition to individual creations, a recreation commission is given the task of organizing shows and recreational activities given in a specially constructed theater above the chapel: sketches, songs, plays.

- **Celebration of Youth (Inter-yard Sports Competition)**

On January 16, 1944, a “Fête de la Jeunesse” (Celebration of Youth) is organized in the prison (31.5% of the inmates are less than 20 years old). After the escape of 54 inmates at the start of January, this is meant to channel the fervor of the youths and contribute to the elevation of morale, but also to cement the unity of the group and contribute to political formation. Sports competitions are organized in Yard 3, then a political meeting celebrating the unity of the Resistance under General de Gaulle's authority, of whom a giant portrait is raised above the stage.