

DISPATCHES

Intelligence
from around
the globe

Beyond the Resistance

Provence ¶ A sunny May morning in Southern Provence. Cypress and olive trees sway in a light breeze, Mont Sainte Victoire shimmers whitely and the cicadas are gearing up for their raucous summer-long concert. We're in the heart of tourist territory, a colour-saturated countryside familiar from the great works of Cézanne and van Gogh.

In the Les Milles district on the edge of Aix-en-Provence, a 19th century red-brick factory sits harmoniously in this landscape. It once produced the distinctive terracotta pantiles that still cover the roof of every provencal house. It was also, from 1939-1942, an internment and deportation camp. And this summer it reopens to the public as a memorial centre, the only one of its kind in France.

Les Milles is a reminder of an episode many have preferred to forget. Earlier, a friend living nearby told us he once asked his father-in-law what went on in the area during the war. The answer came back, "Nothing much." Today, when we stop at a wine co-op barely a mile away to ask directions, the vigneron has never heard of the camp.

Such stories come as no surprise to Alain Chouraqui, the president of the foundation behind the 17 million euro restoration project. "Until the 1980s, France's collective memory of the Second World War was focussed on the Resistance," he says. "The camp at Les Milles is especially problematic because everything there happened while the south was a so-called 'Free Zone'."

At first the camp received would-be emigrants awaiting exit visas: dissidents, enemy aliens, mainly German and Austrian refugees, and artists and intellectuals like Max Ernst, Golo Mann and Lion Feuchtwanger who described his experiences in a 1942 memoir, *The Devil in France*. Later, it was reserved for Jews. And, from there, in the sweaty late summer of 1942, over 2000 men, women and children were packed into railway wagons for Auschwitz. The camp was then under French administration: after the Germans occupied the south in November 1942, it became a munitions depot before reverting to a tile factory after the war.

The idea of reclaiming it began in 1983 when the then-owners planned to destroy some remarkable murals created by the internees. A local campaign gathered, gaining momentum from the rise of the Front National. There was opposition: counter-proposals for a more valuable use of the premises included a museum of agricultural tractors. Sharing the space was also an option: "We would be given 100 square metres in the corner for our little historical museum. There were all sorts of suggestions to marginalise us," Chouraqui says.

The memorial opens to the public this summer. At the moment, though, all is still under construction. We don hard hats, fluorescent jackets and steel-capped builders' boots to pick through huge, rubble-filled rooms with boarded-

up windows where internees spent their days in the penumbra. Les Milles was not a work camp and the painters, sculptors, writers, actors and musicians devised creative ways to spend their days and lift their spirits. A former brick oven, a narrow, hundred metre long tunnel, became a cabaret, named *Die Katakombe* after a celebrated Berlin nightclub. A large workshop decorated with dramatic masks was a venue for theatrical revues or celebrations of the Shabbat.

Over 300 paintings and drawings are thought to have been created in Les Milles. Some were bartered with guards for food and favours, others taken by artists who succeeded in emigrating. Many remain and the renovation has been constantly uncovering new work. An erotic sketch on a tucked-away wall in the men's dormitory testifies to unrequited longings. The artistic centrepiece is the former guards' refectory. Surreal and mordantly satirical, its murals cover all four walls, featuring abundant food and drink. One bears the sardonic legend, "Si vos assiettes ne sont pas tres garnies, puissant nos dessins vous calmer l'appétit" ("If your plates are not very full, may our art slake your appetite"). Even the guards were evidently kept on short rations.

The room is dominated by *The Banquet of the Nations*, attributed to Karl Bodek who later died in Auschwitz. The composition invokes *The Last Supper*, the subject the camp's cosmopolitan population (internees came from 38 countries). Diners tuck into humorously stereotypical national food: an Italian forks up spaghetti, an Indian eats fire and an Eskimo feasts on fish, blubber and a bar of Marseille soap. Above them a dinner-jacketed figure sits in solitary splendour: a capitalist collaborator, a chief of police or camp commander, an ostracised Jew? As with the other paintings here, the meaning remains disquieting and ambiguous.

The art is not what Chouraqui wants to focus on, however. "The world is speeding up and becoming more complex; people are losing their moral bearings. I can observe the processes of exclusion, intolerance and racism starting up again, and not only in France. These are deep trends, not temporary ones, and we want to show how a specific history has universal lessons for the future. We're not just here to look at drawings, splendid as they are." — Sheila Johnston

Smoked Salmon Chow Mein

Beijing ¶ A typical Chinese courtyard in the hills, which opens onto another typical Chinese courtyard and so on. The weather a bit muggy and misty. This is the Huangya Wall Villa Resort, about 90 minutes outside Beijing, the venue for the first Limmud China. As the mist clears on

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