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Jean-Marc Dreyfus and Sarah Gensburger, *Nazi Labour Camps in Paris, Austerlitz, Léviton, Bassano, July 1943–August 1944*. Translated from the French by Jonathan Hensher. New York: Oxford Berghahn Books, 2011. x + 168 pp. Tables, figures, notes, bibliography and index. \$70.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-85745-139-2.

Review by Renée Poznanski, Ben Gurion University of the Negev.

Between July 1943 and August 1944, 795 Jews were interned in three satellites of the infamous Drancy camp near Paris. Most of them were the Jewish spouses of “Aryans,” wives of prisoners of war, or half-Jews; some of them were skilled craftsman. Many came from Jewish families who had mixed intimately in French society. A study of these three camps in Paris—Austerlitz, Léviton, and Bassano—constitutes the core of this book. Let us say at the outset that the authors, both of whom have written elsewhere about the plunder of the Jews, were well-placed to conduct this inquiry.^[1] In this study, which is based on administrative documents located in various archives in France and Germany, as well as testimonies collected in the past or which they solicited themselves, no aspect of the history of these camps seems to have been overlooked.

The authors correctly locate the creation of these camps in the context of the depredations organized in Western Europe by the *Einsatzstab Reichleiter Rosenberg* (ERR) and later the *Dienststelle Westen*, which involved the units of Operation Furniture (*Möbel Aktion*), whose specialty was stripping Jewish apartments of their contents, starting in the spring of 1942. The head of the *Dienststelle Westen* in Paris, Kurt von Behr, directly supervised the operations of these three camps after they were set up. In this book we can follow the course of the administrative vagaries that led to the establishment of the various Nazi departments that specialized in theft from the Jews, as well as the types of collaboration that developed between these units and the *Commissariat Général aux Questions Juives* and various French groups—notably the Organizational Committee for Removal and Storage Businesses, which, thanks to the pillage of the apartments of Jews who were arrested and then deported, had ample work over a period of two years for the French drivers and movers in the capital who worked for its 185 member companies. We also learn that the stolen furniture was stored in six warehouses in Paris before being carted off in weekly convoys to bombed-out cities in Germany or to various German agencies.

According to the authors, the three camps were set up to satisfy the need to sort and pack up the stolen furniture and at the same time cope with the unique situation of the Jewish spouses of Aryans and half-Jews, several hundred of whom, not enjoying immunity from the roundups, were interned in Drancy. In the hierarchy of internees established over the months by the German authorities, they constituted a category of persons who could not be deported or at least would be the very last deported. Their fate was decided in Berlin. On March 6, 1943, after a public protest there by the Aryan wives of Jews who had been arrested several days earlier, Goebbels found himself forced to release the men. A sort of functional logic thus presided over the idea of setting up the three camps in Paris. “The argument that workers were needed in order to expedite the process of economic expropriation only led to the creation of new camps when it converged with the priorities of the German administration responsible for the arrest, detention and extermination of the Jews” (p. 42).

Effectively, it was after Alois Brunner arrived in Paris and officially took over command of Drancy on July 2, 1943, that it was decided to set up the satellite camps. Because the spouses of Aryans were *a priori* not to be deported, it made sense to put them to work and free up space in Drancy for Jews who would be sent to the East.

The book describes in detail the three buildings that were turned into labor camps (Lévitan in July 1943; Austerlitz in November 1943; and Bassano in March 1944) and recounts their history. Here one can applaud the incorporation into the text of a large number of very useful illustrations. The authors accompany the internees step by step, telling of their arrival, their assignment to jobs, the conditions in which they labored, their daily lives, and so on. Their workday averaged ten hours under the watchful eye of Nazis: ten hours of sorting, cleaning, and sometimes fixing, moving, and packing up various objects that the Nazis had taken from the apartments of Jews.

The authors track the path of these items until they reached their destination in Germany. It was forced labor—physically strenuous, and demoralizing. But the Nazi overseers were rather easy on their slaves, who were allowed to correspond with the outside world, on rare occasions to leave the camp briefly, and to be paid short visits (on a more regular basis) by their relatives. The UGIF saw to supplies, albeit imperfectly; but individually-addressed packages were allowed and even delivered some times. Ultimately, “the material situation [of the internees] varied enormously between individuals.... To differences in position within the camp’s organisation must be added socially determined differences in terms of behaviour and the amount of assistance provided—or not—by outside sources” (p. 104). What weighed most heavily on the internees throughout their “stay” was the threat of being sent back to Drancy as a prelude to deportation. This is how we must understand the title of one of the chapters, “A Place of Fragile Safety.” The authors write that 166 Jews were deported from these camps, a number that quantifies the safety they could enjoy in these satellites of Drancy.

Nevertheless, in comparison with the conditions that prevailed in other camps, they were the privileged few among the interned Jews. No doubt, these camps were places of internment and, as we have seen, the working conditions were arduous. Above all, 21 percent of the internees were later sent back to Drancy before being deported to Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen. The editor of the English edition decided to call the book *Nazi Labour Camps in Paris*; in French, the authors made do with the more sober, *Camps à Paris*. Certainly there is nothing wrong with the English title. They were indeed labor camps (unlike Drancy and those in the southern zone); what is more, they were effectively run by the Nazis (this too unlike the camps in the southern zone and Drancy until July 1943). But if one considers our mental picture of Nazi labor camps, the connotation suggested by the English title is false. In Drancy, where no one worked and which until the summer of 1943 was run by the French, the conditions of internment were much harsher and the threat of deportation much more imminent. One may regret this concession to drama in the retitling of the book.

It is true that no previous monograph has dealt with the unique features of the three camps studied here (the French original was published in 2003). Nevertheless, to conclude this review by seeing this as a “memory hole” seems to be too much (p. 145). Monographs about many other French camps were not published any sooner. The publication of the study, commissioned by the association of former inmates of the three camps, is more the result of the evolution of the collective memory of the Second World War in France and of the fate of the Jews on its territory. To this, one can add that hundreds of satellite camps throughout occupied Europe still await their historians. Finally, works about the Jews of France during this period do devote one or several paragraphs to these camps. The authors of this book conclude by quoting the testimony of a former inmate, who wrote them as follows in 2002: “As far as I

am concerned, [Lévitan] was always just a brief transitional passage between Drancy and Bergen-Belsen” (quoted on p. 151). Paule Lévy, the author of this letter, provides us spontaneously with the key to a marginal status that derives neither from forgetfulness nor from suppression but, in fact, reflects a true marginality in the general history of the period, due in part to the small number of those interned in them (as compared to other camps). This does not detract in the slightest, of course, from the centrality of the concentration camp experience in the life of each of those Jews who were interned in Lévitan, Bassano, or Austerlitz, or from the importance of this well-documented and instructive monograph.

NOTE

[1] Sarah Gensburger, *Images d'un pillage. Album de la spoliation des Juifs à Paris (1940–1948)* (Paris: Editions Textuel, 2010); Jean-Marc Dreyfus, *Pillage sur ordonnances. Aryanisation et restitution des banques en France, 1940–1953* (Paris: Fayard, 2003).

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