

Within the Confines of Legality: How the OSE Succeeded in Liberating Hundreds of Rivesaltes's Youngest Prisoners

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Abstract:

The Œuvre de secours aux enfants (the “Society for Children’s Aid”, or OSE) was one of several humanitarian organizations working within the confines of the Rivesaltes transit camp in southern France during the Second World War. The OSE, a Jewish humanitarian aid organization, was particularly concerned with Jewish child prisoners in transit and internment camps like Rivesaltes. Members of the OSE entered Rivesaltes camp on a daily basis throughout the war in order to distribute food and offer supplementary educational opportunities to the young children interred there. Its primary objective, however, was to oversee the safe removal of as many Jewish children as possible from Rivesaltes. To do this, the OSE relied on its established children’s homes throughout the country, as well as new ones that were instituted during the war, to petition the Vichy government for the liberation of Jewish children from Rivesaltes. These procedures were expensive, bureaucratic, and lengthy; however, they allowed the OSE to secure the release of many Jewish children from Rivesaltes and other camps. Throughout the course of the Second World War, the OSE—operating legally and transparently—succeeded in liberating hundreds of Rivesaltes’s youngest prisoners.

Although the Nazi regime established many of its concentration and extermination camps in eastern Europe, the victims of these camps came from countries across Europe—Belgium, France, and the Netherlands, for example—and arrived via a system of transit camps to extermination camps. One such transit camp, Rivesaltes, was located in the department of Pyrénées-Orientales in southern France near the village of Perpignan. Rivesaltes operated as an internment (or “transit”) camp between 1940 and 1944, serving as a holding facility and transit point for Jews, Roma peoples, illegal Spanish immigrants, and German and French political prisoners to camps in the east. Because of the high concentration of children and families incarcerated at Rivesaltes, it was sometimes referred to as a “family camp.” Relief organizations, such as

the Secours Suisse aux enfants (“Swiss Children’s Aid,” a division of the Swiss Red Cross), the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), and the Œuvre de secours aux enfants (the “Society for Children’s Aid,” or the OSE), were legally allowed to provide aid within the camp and even to arrange transfers of children held at Rivesaltes to children’s homes throughout France.

Little research has been conducted on the OSE’s work in Rivesaltes. In fact, while primary source material—including published memoirs, photographs, and oral interviews—documenting the organization’s efforts within the system of transit camps is incredibly rich, historiography on the specific convergence of the OSE and Rivesaltes is sparse.¹ Secondary literature about Rivesaltes tends to mention the OSE

¹ Sabine Zeitoun, *L’œuvre de Secours aux Enfants (O.S.E) sous l’Occupation en France* (Paris: Éditions L’Harmattan, 1990). Hillel J. Kieval, “Legality and

Resistance in Vichy France: The Rescue of Jewish Children” in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* (October 10, 1980): 339-366.

only in passing, and historiography of the OSE during the Second World War (as with many historiographies of humanitarian organizations during this time period) generally takes a more global approach, examining the organization's collective efforts and accomplishments during the war, rather than concentrating on those efforts within a single camp.² The purpose of this article is to complement existing broad research with a more specific case-study through an examination of the work of a single organization—the OSE—within a specific camp—Rivesaltes. This investigation bridges two historiographical conversations that have previously been disconnected. At the center of this particular research is the OSE's main objective at Rivesaltes: the successful extraction of Jewish children from the camp. A close examination of the OSE's efforts at the Rivesaltes transit camp reveals that the organization successfully navigated the legal channels of the Vichy bureaucracy to liberate hundreds of Jewish children from the transit camp throughout the Second World War.

In 1938, the French government converted Rivesaltes—originally a military camp capable of housing up to 18,000 soldiers—into a camp for Spanish refugees

fleeing the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Rivesaltes then transitioned to an internment camp for political prisoners—including Germans who had fled to France to escape the Nazi regime—in June of 1940, with France's capitulation to the Nazis and the establishment of the Vichy puppet government.³ Thereafter, other types of prisoners—illegal Spanish immigrants and POWs, Roma peoples, and Jews awaiting deportation to labor or death camps—were also detained at Rivesaltes. In his 2009 interview with Peggy Frankston (of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), André Zalc, a child detainee at several internment and concentration camps, described his experiences at Rivesaltes.⁴ Zalc could clearly recall the demographics of the camp, though he had been a child during his imprisonment at Rivesaltes: "Part of the camp were gypsies... gypsies, and the other part of the camp was Spanish people from the Civil War. There were like big numbers, of Spanish people, from the Civil War... they were maybe in the thousands."⁵ In late 1942, Vichy officials closed down two nearby transit camps, located in the cities of Brens and Agde. Prisoners from these facilities—children in particular—were then relocated to Rivesaltes.⁶ With the closure of these internment facilities and the

Zeitoun's book and Kieval's article are examples of secondary sources which mention the OSE in connection with Rivesaltes.

² While little secondary material focuses on the Rivesaltes camp specifically, some sources mention the camp. For one example of a Rivesaltes-specific work, see: Anne Boitel, *Le Camp de Rivesaltes 1941-1942* (Perpignan: Presses Universitaires de Perpignan, 2001). For examples of historiography on French transit camps: Simone Gigliotti, *The train journey: transit, captivity, and witnessing in the Holocaust* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009); Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995); Richard H. Weisberg, *Vichy law and the Holocaust in France* (Amsterdam: Overseas Publishers Association, 1996). For works

covering the OSE's operations during World War II, refer to Zeitoun's book, as well as: Sebastian Steiger, *Les enfants du château de La Hille* (Basel: Brunnen Verlag, 1999); or the OSE's website, which offers a succinct history of its humanitarian efforts: www.ose-france.org.

³ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum online archives, "Event History: Rivesaltes."

⁴ Peggy Frankston, "Interview with André Zalc", United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Jeff and Toby Herr Collection (2009). Frankston, based in Paris, is the Program Coordinator of the International Archival Programs Division of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kieval, 341.

ensuing influx of detainees, Rivesaltes's demographics changed to comprise a larger proportion of Jewish prisoners, particularly Jewish children like Zalc, who also described his transfer to Rivesaltes from Brens in his interview with Frankston: "From Brens, they took us to Rivesaltes... they had trains coming in, and they loaded all the people; it was like... wagons, you know, for the horses."⁷ The total number of prisoners detained at Rivesaltes was relatively small. In April of 1941—the peak of Rivesaltes's occupancy—the camp had a population of around 8,000 detainees, of which Jews made up about 40%. The total population of child inmates at that time numbered about 3,000.⁸

Unlike forced-labor camps or extermination camps, Rivesaltes's status as a transit camp and as a "family camp" allowed for the presence of humanitarian organizations like the OSE within the facility's walls. The OSE was the first humanitarian organization to seek and receive permission from Vichy authorities to offer aid and services within the system of transit, labor, and concentration camps.⁹ The organization deliberately selected the camps that were featured in this petition—Récébédou, Agde, les Milles, Gurs, and Rivesaltes—because of their relatively large populations of interred children.¹⁰ With the Vichy relocation of Jews from Brens, Agde, and Gurs to Rivesaltes, outside organizations like the OSE were at first barred from working in the camp at all. After some negotiating, relief organizations were able to offer aid to the prisoners of Rivesaltes, but this was in a much more

constricted capacity than at either Brens or Agde.¹¹ Nevertheless, members of the OSE, the AFSC, the Secours Suisse aux enfants, and other humanitarian organizations were soon able to work legally within the walls of the camp, providing food, medical care, and education.

The OSE appears frequently in primary source material derived from Rivesaltes. The organization, which recently celebrated the centennial anniversary of its 1912 establishment, began as the OZE (*Obshtshestvo Zdravookraney Evre*, or Society for the Protection of the Health of Jews). Founded by Jewish doctors and activists in Moscow, the OZE's primary objective was to "implement a modern health system for Jews who were excluded from the Russian medico-social protection system."¹² By 1934, the organization had expanded to serve Jews living in countries across Europe, including France, where it took on a new title: Œuvre de secours aux enfants, or OSE.¹³ Before the onset of the Second World War, the OSE began to receive Jewish children sent by their German and Austrian parents, who feared for their safety and entrusted their protection to members of the organization.¹⁴ This influx of children led to a shift in the organization's focus from general humanitarian aid and medical services for Jews of all ages to the care and placement of Jewish children in safe homes. This focus is particularly apparent in the group's efforts at Rivesaltes, where each of the OSE's main missions centered around the care for and, when possible, safe removal of Jewish children.

⁷ Frankston.

⁸ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

⁹ Vivette Samuel, *Rescuing the Children: A Holocaust Memoir* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 31.

¹⁰ Sabine Zeitoun, *L'œuvre de Secours aux Enfants (O.S.E) sous l'Occupation en France* (Paris: Éditions L'Harmattan, 1990), 94.

¹¹ Kieval, 342.

¹² OSE, *Centennial brochure: OSE: 100 Years of History, 1912-2012* (2012).

¹³ Zeitoun, 20.

¹⁴ Samuel, 31.

Within the walls of the camp, the OSE was able to provide aid in various capacities. In order to operate inside Rivesaltes, OSE members set up offices outside the facility and requested permission to enter on a daily basis. Other relief organizations, such as the Secours Suisse aux enfants and the Quakers, were permitted by the Vichy regime and camp authorities to bring in and distribute food among the prisoners.¹⁵ In addition, the OSE was allowed to provide clothing and medical care. Vivette Samuel, who worked with the OSE in Rivesaltes, explains the three specific objectives of the OSE's work there in her 2012 memoir *Rescuing the Children*: "The OSE worked at Rivesaltes in three areas: medical aid, which consisted of bringing supplementary food to the frailest people; the liberation of children and the finding of places to shelter them, which also meant taking complete charge of their education and health; and, as much as possible, their emigration."¹⁶ It is evident from Samuel's description that the OSE prioritized the extraction of child prisoners from Rivesaltes, though this was not the only way that OSE members sought to improve the lot of the children interred at the camp. The OSE's third goal in particular—to oversee the education and health of the young detainees until such a time that they might be freed from the camp—highlights the OSE's ongoing operations to better the lives of the children of Rivesaltes within the legal constraints set forth by the Vichy regime. While Zalc informs his interviewer that Rivesaltes did not have a school, it does appear that the OSE was able to offer limited educational opportunities to the youngest inmates at Rivesaltes, who were

children of pre-school and kindergarten age¹⁷ Zalc, already about eleven himself at the time of his imprisonment at Rivesaltes, did not have the opportunity to receive any education during his time there.¹⁸ The lack of instructional opportunities for children represented one of the most urgent issues within the walls of the camp and, in accordance with its guiding objectives, the OSE attempted to combat this issue.

As the OSE attempted to better the lives of Rivesaltes's child population within the confines of the camp, the organization was simultaneously working to expand its network of children's homes outside the camp and to fill them with liberated Rivesaltes youth. The Vichy regime's question of what to do with child prisoners, particularly Jewish children, had been answered in different ways during various stages of the Nazi occupation. At first, Jewish children who had been rounded up in Paris were sent to live in abandoned school buildings, overseen by the Union Générale des Israélites de France ("Union of French Jews", or UGIF). However, the extraordinary number of these children put a strain on the Union's resources and, upon petitioning from the OSE and other organizations, many of them would be dispersed throughout France.¹⁹ The OSE had established several children's homes across the country, and would continue to expand this system over the course of the war in order to remove as many children as possible from the system of internment and concentration camps. Later Vichy decrees would mandate the deportation of Jewish children along with their parents to concentration camps in the east, rendering it

¹⁵ Kieval, 341.

¹⁶ Samuel, 34.

¹⁷ Frankston. As for educational opportunities within Rivesaltes, there are photos which document the presence of OSE workers instructing young children in the camp. See "Children, imprisoned in the Rivesaltes transit camp, attend an OSE pre-school."

From United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Simone Weil Lipman.

¹⁸ Frankston.

¹⁹ Martha Jelenko, "France" in *The American Jewish Yearbook* (September 30, 1943 to September 17, 1944), 250.

even more imperative to extricate children from the camp system as quickly as possible.²⁰

The OSE operated exclusively within the bounds of legality, navigating the channels of Vichy bureaucracy in order to legally extract Jewish children from Rivesaltes.²¹ Prior to the war, the OSE had opened several children's homes, beginning in Eaubonne and Montmorency in 1936.²² These facilities would allow the OSE to liberate some children legally from Rivesaltes, despite an arduous and lengthy process. The Secours Suisses aux Enfants began their preparations to receive released child prisoners in late 1940, as the first humanitarian organization to do so; other relief organizations quickly followed suit in early 1941. However, the Vichy authorities would not authorize any releases until the spring of 1941.²³ The regime had only agreed to allow Jewish children under the age of fifteen to be removed from camps after strenuous negotiations with several international humanitarian organizations. After eventually conceding to these petitions, the Vichy administration decreed that each case for the removal of a Jewish child from an internment camp would be assessed individually and ultimately granted or denied by the Vichy regime. In order to petition for the removal of a child from Rivesaltes, the petitioning organization needed to provide "certificates of lodging" (i.e., papers which indicated that the child had permission to reside in a specific county from the local prefect) on the child's behalf.²⁴ These certificates were difficult to obtain, and required the cooperation of

prefects—few of whom were willing to allow Jewish children to be stationed within their departments.²⁵ Nonetheless, according to its centennial brochure, the OSE estimates that 500 children were removed from internment camps in this way, many of them dispersed abroad.²⁶

While the OSE aimed to liberate as many Jewish children as possible, and declared the liberation of these children as its absolute priority, the process for doing so was difficult and costly.²⁷ Samuel writes, "The amount needed to take out a single child could be used to help at least four inside."²⁸ Between 1942 and 1944, however, a sense of urgency to extricate as many Jewish children as possible took hold of the OSE.²⁹ Vichy leaders transferred four thousand Jewish children under the age of twelve to Drancy in July of 1942, in response to growing pressure from Nazi leaders to deport young and elderly Jews who had previously been incarcerated in holding facilities and transit camps.³⁰ Over the course of that year, the Nazi regime would deport thousands more. Many would end their journey at the gates of Auschwitz, and there was little that the OSE or other organizations could do to prevent it.

Clandestine methods of liberation may have seemed easier and quicker than following the legal protocols set forth by the Vichy regime, but the OSE never used such methods.³¹ Other organizations, some of which were affiliated with the OSE, did choose to pursue clandestine routes for smuggling children out of internment camps; the OSE, however, adhered strictly to legal avenues, even under the increased

²⁰ Ibid, 251.

²¹ Kieval, 346.

²² Ibid; See also photo archives from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, such as "Children in an OSE home [probably Eaubonne]," courtesy of Henry Schuster.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Kieval, 342.

²⁵ Zeitoun, 98-99.

²⁶ OSE, *Centennial brochure*.

²⁷ Samuel, 34.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Zeitoun, 45.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Kieval, 352.

pressure of the Nazi Final Solution.³² The main reason for this compliance with the law even at the height of Vichy deportations stems largely from the OSE's awareness of the intense government surveillance of all humanitarian organizations entering the camps. The OSE, as a Jewish institution, was under particular scrutiny.³³ The Vichy regime received intelligence on all of the OSE's activities within as well as outside of Rivesaltes. Communication between members of the OSE in France as well as abroad was regularly intercepted and read before being sent on to its intended recipient. For this reason, the activities of the OSE were not only entirely legal; they were also completely transparent.

This transparency not only served as a safeguard against legal predicaments with the Vichy government, it also augmented communication between the OSE and other humanitarian groups. This facilitated a stronger network of aid for Jews and Jewish children interred within the camp system. Other organizations—most notably the UGIF—had complete access to OSE records and agendas, and often worked in tandem with the OSE towards these goals.³⁴ Therefore, while the primary reason for the OSE's conformity to the Vichy regime's arduous legal process for removing children was to avoid trouble with the authorities

(which would have certainly shut down all of its operations within Rivesaltes as well as other camps, as well as possibly resulted in the incarceration of its own members), this compliance also allowed the OSE to coordinate its efforts with other humanitarian groups.

The OSE operated within the confines of the Rivesaltes transit camp—and within the confines of Vichy bureaucracy—to offer aid to the Rivesaltes's youngest prisoners. While the organization sought to alleviate conditions for child detainees by distributing food and offering supplementary educational opportunities, the OSE's primary objective was to oversee the safe evacuation of as many Jewish children as possible from Rivesaltes. The OSE could have taken many routes in pursuit of this goal, yet the organization chose to work with the Vichy regime. While the legal procedure for releasing a child from Rivesaltes was expensive, bureaucratic, and lengthy, the OSE's commitment to legal and transparent operations created a stronger network of aid organizations within the camp system. Even more importantly, the transparent and legal nature of the organization's operations made it possible for the OSE to safely secure the releases of hundreds of Jewish children from the Rivesaltes transit camp.

³² OSE, *Centennial brochure*; see also: Vivette Samuel, *Rescuing the children: A Holocaust memoir*. (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002). Samuel's memoir describes the pressure to

pursue illegal extraction methods to which some humanitarian organizations would succumb.

³³ Samuel, 36.

³⁴ Kieval, 342.

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