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THE INTERVENTION OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN STATE-RUN INTERNMENT CAMPS THE RESCUE OF JEWISH CHILDREN FROM RIVESALTES TOLD THROUGH THE EXAMPLE OF VIVETTE HERMANN

The Camp de Rivesaltes in southern France housed very different groups consecutively: first, soldiers on their way overseas, then refugees from the Spanish Civil War. From 1941 on, Rivesaltes served the new Vichy government as an internment camp for political opponents, Sinti and Roma as well as Jews, including numerous deportees from Baden and the Palatinate. The supply situation and the hygienic conditions were catastrophic, many of the internees died. International aid organizations such as the Swiss Red Cross tried to alleviate the suffering of the people by sending doctors and nurses to Rivesaltes.

Also in 1941, the Nîmes Committee (a group of 25 aid organizations) received permission from the Vichy government to free children from the internment camps, as long as the committee bore all costs. In order to organize the liberation of the children on the ground, the Jewish social worker Vivette Hermann volunteered to be locked up in Rivesaltes.

Hermann worked for the Jewish children's charity Œuvre de Secours aux Enfants (OSE). Her responsibilities included convincing the parents to separate from their children, prepare the children for the separation and to overcome all administrative hurdles and negotiations with the camp administration. Within just seven months, Hermann managed to free all 400 Jewish children from Rivesaltes. Then she, herself, left the camp.

The lecture deals with the background of this extraordinary rescue operation and the interaction between the camp administration, the aid organizations involved and their on-site representatives based on the evaluation of extensive archive files by the Nîmes Committee and the OSE as well as diary entries and letters from Hermann. Emphasis is placed on Hermann's experience and the question of what moved her as a young Jewish woman to go into the proverbial lion's den to save other Jews. The lecture stands out from existing research on French internment camps by using newly discovered source material: Hermann's letters were made available by the family for the first time.

Lilly Maier holds an MA in history from the Ludwig Maximilians University in Munich and another one in journalism from New York University, where she studied as a Fulbright scholar. Currently, she is a PhD candidate at the LMU Munich with a thesis on Jewish female rescuers in France during the Shoah. In January 2021 her biography of Ernst Papanek, an Austrian social democrat who worked for the same aid organization as Vivette Hermann, will be published (Molden).