

Brighton, August 31th 2015

I'm not sure who to address this letter to. As a 'historian' I suppose I write for the purposes of History (with a big H) and yet somehow in this context this cannot suffice. My work is usually academic, addressing professors and researchers - to write a letter is far more intense, far more personal. So to begin, a thank you to you: for reading, for caring and for hoping that this all might not happen again.

I am often asked the question '*Why Rivesaltes?*' I cannot remember when I first heard of the camp. I cannot recall finding its story in any book. I cannot think when the idea behind my research project lodged in my head.

I have never been to Rivesaltes, much less suffered the pain of internment, and yet I find myself writing about it every day. I have driven past the camp on childhood holidays without ever knowing it was there. As with so much of our history, the events of the past seem to be hidden in plain view.

As a historian, the story of the camp fascinates me. My previous work has looked at other concentration camps, but Rivesaltes' history is so unique - that such a site should unite so many memories, so many stories and so many people makes it a site of such significance for our shared European heritage.

At this stage, I should make it clear, I write this letter as an Englishman. My interest in French history comes as a passionate Francophile and as a student of the past: France's 20th Century is a source of fascination and consternation. Much of the story makes for uncomfortable reading (and even more uncomfortable remembering) which has led to accusations from some (in Britain and further afield) that France has been amnesic about its past... On the contrary, France has arguably done more than most to try and come to terms with the legacies of the past. My own country invented the concentration camp, bombed Dresden into the ground and had the largest empire the world has ever known. People in glass houses should learn not to throw stones...

Places like Rivesaltes, and the dark past to which it attests, to my mind, speak to us in a global sense. Spaniards, Germans, Frenchmen, Algerians and countless others passed through this space - to tell Rivesaltes story is to tell that of the world. Events that took place here were conceived of by human minds, enacted by human hands and affected human hearts. The story of Rivesaltes therefore tells us something of that which it is to be human, speaking to us across national borders, creeds or castes.

As Rivesaltes survived for so long, swallowing so many people, there of course exist multiple memories of the site. I am inclined here to insert Michael Rothberg's wise words: '*memory divides and history alone unites.*' Rothberg's work cautions against a competitive struggle over memory, instead arguing that the only way we can conceive of the past is as an entangled set of stories, each interlinking, overlapping and informing the other. Thus, Rivesaltes' history can only be understood as an intersecting patchwork of Gypsy, Jewish and Harki memories. History must be written through a spectrum that sees neither black nor white, but only subtle shades of grey.

The only way forward at Rivesaltes is surely through a creative engagement with both history and memory in which different groups are encouraged to interact and share their experience. The reproduction of Camp Joffre's history must, in the words of memorial director Agnès Sajaloli, *'consider memory as a live subject and interpret it as such - interrogate it, revisit it, look over it with a fine tooth comb.'* Only in this way can the site help to reconcile the France that created the conditions for such a camp to exist and the victims that it consumed.

I am inclined to finish my letter with a reference to the present. Historians are often dismissive of the suggestion that we must study the past in order not to repeat it in the future, but surely Rivesaltes must speak truth to present power. CIMADE's powerful memorial at Rivesaltes reminds us that until 2007, people were interned at Rivesaltes 'whose only crime was to be foreign'. Alongside the memorials to Spaniards, Jews, Gypsies and Harkis, all the monuments speak of the internment of those considered Other. With present migration 'crises' dominating the political agenda across Europe, we must surely remember the lessons of Rivesaltes and never close our ears to the cries of the past as they echo through the present.

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Cette lettre est issue des « Lettres de Rivesaltes ».
Un projet initié par l'artiste Anne-Laure Boyer
pour le Mémorial du camp de Rivesaltes
dans le cadre de son inauguration.

Les lettres y ont été exposées d'octobre 2015 à juin 2016.

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