

GITTERMANGALLERY

Letter from Eliot Elisofon to Wilson Hicks, *Life* Photo Editor
December 29, 1942

I am sending you a set of pictures through a friend that are dynamite. I talked my way into a French concentration camp and you can see the results for yourself. Who is to censor these pictures I don't know but they are of the utmost importance. At the declaration of the war with Germany many foreigners in France, mostly Central Europe, joined the French Foreign Legion to fight Germany. After armistice (with Germany) they were sent to work camps. Decent French people here in Casablanca were indignant and bewildered when they heard about the camps. No one knew much about them. It had all been done on the QT. and the French administration means to keep it that way. Worse still the American administration here seems content to let things go on this way. Many of the American officers here have heard about the camps and are very mad. They feel the issue of democracy and everything that America has stood for is being butchered here in Morocco.

Christmas Day in French Morocco

I spent Christmas this year in a concentration camp in French Morocco. The name of the camp is Sidi El Agachei. It is near the coast on the road from Casa Blanca to Mazagen. At one time it was a military camp. The buildings which are white and very long form square courtyards. There are dormitories for the men and separate ones for the women. There are also several rooms for mothers with children. The windows are small and are barred, probably from the camp's military days. There is also a dining hall and canteen. Food is prepared in a central kitchen operated by local French. The allowance per person is twenty cents a day. This camp is for women, children, and men unfit for labor. It is considered the most lenient camp.

I went to this camp with an American Quaker who was bringing toys for the children for Christmas. The prison director did not know I was from the American press. I spoke to many of the people and photographed them. There were three groups—Central European Jews, Spanish Republicans, and Axis Women. The last named are in this camp about two weeks. They are Italian women and some French women who had relations with the German Armistice Commission. They are to be kept in a separate court. Many of the people came to me as I was wearing an American uniform. They thought I was there to help them, perhaps free them. It was very bitter not to be able to do something for these people. One man who asked me not to photograph him told me he was in this camp because he had been forced to lie on the ground for six days and nights through hot sun, cold night and hard rain. He was now unfit for work. I photographed a long thin bearded man in the remnants of his Foreign Legion uniform. The coat was held together by two buttons. He had been removed from his regiment, the 13th Artillery by the German Armistice Commission and sent to a work camp.

I photographed an old Jewish couple, age 70 and 72, who were interned as dangerous aliens. A younger man said to me, "In Germany we were persecuted as Jews, and we fled to France. In France we were interned as dangerous Germans. After the French-German Armistice we were interned as friends of Britain. Now that the Americans arrived we are held as Germans dangerous to the Americans.

Babies have been born in this camp. One of my pictures is of Albina Martinez. She is holding in her arms her son who is 17 months old. His father was a Lieutenant in an international brigade. He is now in a work camp and has never seen his son. None of the Spanish Republicans have been spared. A doctor, Hans Landenberg, who was with the 11th Brigade has been interned four years. He said "I would like to be free some day." I could see that these people had lived in the hopes of seeing Hitler beaten one day. They lived in this hope. Now they are shaken. Perhaps beating Hitler will not be their salvation. What then? And these are not a beaten people. They have built a stage in the canteen. They have built props, and backdrops and decorations for Christmas. They have made toys for the children and a Christmas show has been written and rehearsed. The walls are hung with native blankets. The same blankets which keep them warm at night and they are bright and primitive in color. Garish reds, and yellows, purples, orange and many others. And the children still sing, but they also look out through barbed wire.

Some other notes on concentration camps in French Morocco

At declaration of war with Germany many foreigners in France, mostly from Central Europe joined the Foreign Legion to fight Germany. After the Armistice they were sent to work camps where they joined the Spanish Republicans who had been there since 1939.

There are 200 working in a coal mine at Djedera, 150 on a railroad at Bouarfa, 250 on a dam at Erfoud, 200 on a forest plantation at Settat, 120 on runways at Berguent, 100 making bricks at Oued Akrach, and many others. The men are paid three francs a day and a military loan of 1.25 francs in addition.

If a man does not finish his days job three times, or if he fraternizes too much with other prisoners he is sent to a discipline camp. The work is the same but the food is poorer and there are severe penalties for the slightest offense. Prisoners are hit with the stock of a gun or bats. There are two other treatments. The Tomb and the Lion Cage. The Tomb is a hole in the ground the size of a man. The prisoner lies in it about 25 days. He is watched by a Senegalese. If he moves he is beaten. The food is 100 grams of bread a day and water.

The Lion Cage is a small barbed wire cage in which the prisoner remains for a fixed time. It is considered better than the Tomb.

There is a man now in the civil hospital at Oujda. He began at the Bouarfa camp. He had not shelter against the Sirocco, scorpions, lice. Became ill and tried to escape. He was taken to the discipline camp at Ain el Urak. He was placed in the Tomb and it rained. The water in the tomb froze and his feet were so frozen they had to be cut off.

There are many more cases. All are under the orders of General Director Vivier of the Production Industrielle in Babat.

An in-house memo at *Life*, January 27, 1943

(Hicks received the pictures, they were never published, and the negatives are missing.)

“I took the Elisofon pix of the French Concentration Camp and the air raid on Casablanca into the office of Captain Smith which now reviews all War Theater and Army pictures. There I found that Eisenhower had cabled the War Department about this, and they are not taking it lightly. Colonel Mitchell, head of the Pictorial Branch, and Major Swasey, the Executive officer, had a long talk with me about this.

Eisenhower’s cable stated that Elisofon had taken pictures of a French concentration camp without authority of the French or Eisenhower. Elisofon told the Eisenhower representatives that they were being sent to the U.S. by Navy for censorship and releases by the Navy Bureau of Public Relations here. The French protested about the pictures to Eisenhower, who then contacted the Naval commander in the area to cable the Navy B.P.R. here to hold the pictures subject to review by the Giraud mission in Washington.

Then the pictures turned up today in our New York office, and Colonel Mitchell has asked that you furnish a complete record of how the pictures got to Hicks and sent to Mrs. Elisofon. They are not in any way blaming LIFE for this, but they are terribly concerned that there is a big leak over there in Africa somewhere, and that pictures are getting out. Col. Mitchell indicated that Eisenhower doesn’t look with too much favor on correspondents anyhow, and a thing like this if not immediately tracked down and the leak plugged could work against all correspondents in the area.”

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Eliot ELISOFON (1911-1973)

Concentration Camp in French Morocco, Audience sings Christmas song., 1942

Vintage gelatin silver print

7 3/8 x 9 1/4 inches (18.73 x 23.5 cm)

Numbered in pencil verso.

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Eliot ELISOFON (1911-1973)

Concentration Camp in French Morocco, Audience sings Christmas song., 1942

Vintage gelatin silver print

7 1/2 x 9 1/4 inches (19.05 x 23.5 cm)

Numbered in pencil verso.

GITTERMANGALLERY



Eliot ELISOFON (1911-1973)

Concentration Camp in French Morocco, Barometer dance., 1942

Vintage gelatin silver print

7 1/2 x 9 1/4 inches (19.05 x 23.5 cm)

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Eliot ELISOFON (1911-1973)

Concentration Camp in French Morocco, Camp Doctor Landesberg plays accordion for accompaniment., 1942

Vintage gelatin silver print

9 1/4 x 7 7/16 inches (23.5 x 18.89 cm)

Titled and numbered in pencil verso.

GITTERMANGALLERY



Eliot ELISOFON (1911-1973)

Concentration Camp in French Morocco, Children sing "Put on our shoes", 1942

Vintage gelatin silver print

7 7/16 x 9 1/4 inches (18.89 x 23.5 cm)

Numbered in pencil verso.

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Eliot ELISOFON (1911-1973)

Concentration Camp in French Morocco, Freda Dresner - Polish - Queen of the Dolls., 1942

Vintage gelatin silver print

9 1/4 x 7 7/16 inches (23.5 x 18.89 cm)

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Eliot ELISOFON (1911-1973)

Concentration Camp in French Morocco, French and Native guard at gate to camp., 1942

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Eliot ELISOFON (1911-1973)

Concentration Camp in French Morocco, Gustav Schmiliver - Russian Jew - diamond cutter, learned violin in camp., 1942

Vintage gelatin silver print

9 1/4 x 7 3/8 inches (23.5 x 18.73 cm)

Titled and numbered in pencil verso.

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Eliot ELISOFON (1911-1973)

Concentration Camp in French Morocco, Italian Woman at Water Faucet in Courtyard., 1942

Vintage gelatin silver print

7 1/216 x 9 1/4 inches (17.79 x 23.5 cm)

Numbered in pencil verso.

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Eliot ELISOFON (1911-1973)

Concentration Camp in French Morocco, John Bechiko-Spanish- in sword drill., 1942

Vintage gelatin silver print

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Titled and numbered in pencil verso.

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Eliot ELISOFON (1911-1973)

Concentration Camp in French Morocco, Morris Yankel age 70 and his wife Chanah age 72. Left Poland in 1940 to escape the Pogroms., 1942

Vintage gelatin silver print

9 3/8 x 7 3/8 inches (23.81 x 18.73 cm)

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Eliot ELISOFON (1911-1973)

Concentration Camp in French Morocco, Mother and Child, Albina Martinez with 17 month old son. In this camp two years. Father is Antonio Martinez interned in Missouri. He was a Lieutenant in an International Brigade.

He has never seen his son., 1942

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Still wearing For. Leg. uniform., 1942

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