

How do you write a prisoner's story?

The most important starting place when beginning to write the profile of one of the deported islanders is their occupation registration or identity cards. This gives me their photo, their address, their date of birth and their job. A full name and date of birth is the magic information that I need in order to search for their presence in a Nazi prison or concentration in Germany or further afield. I do this via the International Tracing Service at the Wiener Library in London. Anybody can make an appointment to search the ITS records on their computers. Unfortunately the records are not so good for French prisons. Searching the ITS records is a slow business and you'd be surprised how many people had the same or similar names in Nazi prisons and camps, which is why date of birth is so important to identify people. In a single day working on ITS records, I consider myself lucky if I collect the records of ten people. As I say, it's a slow business!

The next stage is to search for the court martial records, of which Jersey has a fuller set than Guernsey. Fortunately, Jersey's are now digitised and can be searched for online through their catalogue, which is a massive help to me when I'm sitting in Cambridge!

When I have dates for the court records and find out what the person in question was convicted of and when (and often who they were convicted with, which gives us an idea about small resistance groups), I then consult Jersey's political prisoner log book, an invaluable resource as it tells me who from the island was deported, and when. Guernsey's equivalent book appears not to have survived, but I have faith that it is out there somewhere.

By this stage, I am able to build a picture of what the person did to be deported, and hopefully, with the help of ITS records, I may even know where they were sent. The key question I need to know then is what the experience was like for them, so I will then turn to the compensation testimonies written in the 1960s. Almost half of all of those deported to Nazi prisons and camps wrote one of these so, if I'm lucky, then I will have the information waiting for me. Some people wrote pages of testimony and others simply listed which prisons they were sent to and when, which is rather disappointing for me. In general, the better educated the person was, the more they wrote and the more eloquent they were. However, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) often got in the way of this. If they were badly affected, they often could not bear to write much about what happened to them, or their memories might have been badly affected, especially if they had sustained head injuries in the camps. Beatings and ill-treatment was common, and so were medical problems which lasted a life-time for those affected.

I will then also read the profile of the camp or prison concerned, which has been written by my colleague Rod Miller, also working on the project. I cannot praise him highly enough for the work that he has done! To learn about the conditions of the prison or camp will be of great interest to families who had family members there.

Sometimes I am lucky and the family of the person deported has contacted me with memoirs, diaries, prison letters and similar archival records, and this means that I can learn a great deal more about the person. This also means that their memory is preserved for posterity if it can be placed online and disseminated more widely. It also means that others can learn about

what Channel Islanders experienced in prisons and camps. This is not just a story about what happened to those on the continent. It affected Britons too. So if you're reading this and you have archives that you are willing for a researcher to photograph for this website, please get in touch!