A German-Jewish refugee in Vichy France 1939–1941. Arno Motulsky’s memoir of life in the internment camps at St. Cyprien and Gurs

1 | INTRODUCTION
(Written in 2018 by Harvey Motulsky and Gail P. Jarvik)

Arno G. Motulsky was born in Germany on July 5, 1923 and died in Seattle on January 17, 2018. Through his research, writing, and mentoring, he helped found the fields of human and medical genetics. His contributions as a scientist, physician, and mentor were enormous. His life and contributions are detailed in obituaries published by the New York Times (Grady, 2018), the American Journal of Human Genetics (Jarvik & King, 2018a,b), Genetics in Medicine (Jarvik, in press), The American Journal of Medical Genetics (Obitz, 2018), and the University of Washington (Jarvik & King, 2018a, 2018b).

He was born in Fischhausen near Königsberg, East Prussia to Jewish parents. When the Nazi campaign escalated, his father emigrated to Cuba. At age 16 in 1939, the young Motulsky (with his mother and younger
brother and sister) already on a waiting list for a visa to enter the United States, obtained a tourist entry card to join his father in Cuba. With more than 900 other Jewish refugees, the Motulsky family embarked on the ship the MS St. Louis from Hamburg to Havana (Miller & Ogilvie, 2006).

Cuba deemed the entry cards to be invalid and did not allow the passengers entry to Cuba. The captain asked to land in a U.S. port with the refugees, but the U.S. government did not allow this (Breitman & Lichtman, 2013a, 2013b) and neither did Canada. So the St. Louis headed back toward Germany. A few days before the ship was to land again in Hamburg, four countries agreed to take the refugees. By lots, the passengers were divided among England, France, Belgium, and the Netherland. Arno's family was sent to Belgium. A few months later, the Germans invaded Belgium, and Arno was arrested by the Belgians for being a German "enemy alien."

He was separated from his family and sent to internment camps in St. Cyprien and then Gurs (Holocaust Encyclopedia, 2018). Days before his 18th birthday, he left France in June 1941. From Lisbon, he sailed to the United States, where he arrived in 1941. Soon after he immigrated to the United States at age 18, he typed this memoir (which he titled “Adventures of a young man in mad Europe, 1939–1941”) about his 2 years in Vichy France, published here for the first time. His original manuscript is archived at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. It appears here as he wrote it (in English, his fifth language) with only minor copy editing. We publish it here to document key years in the life of a great geneticist and also for future historians to learn from a holocaust survivor.

2 | MEMOIR
(Written in 1941 by Arno Motulsky)

My name was among the 900 people listed in the passenger list of the German Ship S. S. "St. Louis." It was May 1939 and we were sailing from Germany to Cuba. Our spirits were high because everybody was glad to escape the hell of Hitler. The trip was eventless except that an old man died of a chronic disease, and that he was buried on high sea. After 2 weeks, we arrived in Havana port and were ready to disembark. But next day and the day after, we still had not left the ship. The incoming newspapers had printed stories that all our entrance permits were not valid.

Excitement spread, for if Cuba did not allow entry, the ship would sail back to Hamburg. All efforts by American and local committees proved fruitless. We had become victims of political struggles going on in Cuba at that time.

Five tense days passed, and the Cuban President ordered the "St. Louis" to leave the port. Only one man had succeeded to reach land. He had slashed his arteries and then dove into the shark-infested sea with the intention to commit suicide. Now he was in a Havana hospital after being saved by the harbor police.

Europe came closer. Nervousness grew almost to panic. Frantic cries of help were cabled to the world. If help did not arrive, the concentration camp would be the sure outcome.

Jubilantly the message was received 2 days before the ship would have arrived in Germany that England, France, Holland, and Belgium were willing to give temporary refuge to the unhappy exiles.

I came to stay in Brussels. Naturally, I was glad to have escaped the Gestapo. As in all other parts of Europe after the invasion of Czechoslovakia, so here the mood of the people was rather nervous. Just before the outbreak of World War II, the tension had reached its peak. Extras were grabbed out of the hands of newsboys and large crowds gathered in front of public loudspeakers listening to the latest developments. Gas masks were distributed for any eventuality. But nobody had thought of constructing adequate air-raid shelters until this last moment.

From left to right. The Motulsky family in 1934, before leaving Germany, Arno’s mother Rena, Arno at age 12, his sister Lia, his brother Lothar, and his father Hermann.

Nazi soldiers marched into Poland, England, and France declared war on Germany but still Belgium was spared the horrors of war. After two invasion rumors alarmed the little kingdom and proved false afterward, the Belgians calmed down, although they maintained reinforced army strength.

In the meantime, I had received my American immigration visa and was preparing my voyage across the Atlantic.

In the early morning of the tenth of May, 1940, I was suddenly awakened by terrific explosions in the vicinity. My first thought was that a thunderstorm raged outside, but when seeing the blue sky and the swarms of giant bombers flying in formation, I realized that the German war machine had struck at Belgium. I got dressed in a rush and was ready to do everything just to leave the country. I threw all my belongings into a suitcase and pondered desperately how to reach any harbor for ocean-going vessels. In the streets, I would be arrested by the Belgian police as an alien, for the radio announced that all Germans living in Belgium faced internment.

Despite our pleas that we were Jewish refugees having American visas, soon five soldiers requested that my mother, little sister, and brother report to the nearest police station.

In a big hall, there were thousands of men, women, and children, most of them Jewish refugees but also a few Nazi citizens of the Reich. The officer directed himself to the crowd and announced that women and children may leave. I, being 16 at the time, included myself among the children. I hurried out with the people sent home, but unfortunately, I was taller than anyone else of them. The officer hailed me and after asking me for my age, he told me I had to be detained. I was just 7 months over the age limit. All male German subjects between 16 and 59 were gathered from the different police stations at a huge armory.
Without any examination of our status, we were driven out of the yard and ordered to run. Five thousand men some waving big suitcases others carrying cardboard boxes, still others having nothing for they had been picked up in the street, galloped disorganized through Brussels’ boulevards pushed on by the charged bayonets of the Belgian guards. The mob jeered and booted at us with curses like “Swine, rascals, 5th column.”

Left and right we saw some damage done by the Luftwaffe that morning. Pointedly, a German Stuka had dived on the yard where the German nationals had been thrown together, had seemed to drop a bomb, but then had let its load fall about 500 yards from us. Possibly, the pilot did not want to shed the blood of his Nazi brethren.

Arriving at a freight yard highly exhausted from the 15-min run, we were tightly packed into a waiting freight train. Fifty to sixty men shared one freight or cattle car.

Late that night the train slowly set into motion. All of a sudden, several miles before the French frontier, we came to a stop. We heard the roaring of planes and the explosions of bombs. A dive bomber came screaming down and dropped TNT. Then in a fraction of a second a terrific explosion shook the train. A freight train loaded with gravel was squarely hit, and the locomotive and the rocks burst into one of our own cars. Twenty-five of our people, among them some German nationals had been thrown together, had seemed to drop a bomb, but then had let its load fall about 500 yards from us. Possibly, the pilot did not want to shed the blood of his Nazi brethren.

Next morning, we pulled into Tournai, the French frontier town. Car by car we were allowed to leave the train for a short rest period. One of the men in the car next to mine tried to escape, and just as I watched he was shot dead while running down a hill.

Some hours later, we were marching through the streets of Tournai toward the big armory, that 2 days later was a heap of ruins. We stood eight full hours in the yard under a blazing sun, every 15 feet a soldier with a charged bayonet watching us. These soldiers were particularly outraged, their division had been destroyed the day before and only a few hundred had escaped the razor-like mowing panzer division. In the night, we heard from afar the grumbling of guns. The Germans sped through Belgium like devils. The next morning, May 14th, 1940, some food was distributed, but only a few privileged got something. I and many others had to move out without anything. Another march through the upset town, people yelling and jeering again, the station, 40 persons pushed into a cattle car and off we went.

Here the most unbelievable episode of my odyssey starts. We had to stay 52 hr in these cars without a drop of water, without a crumb of bread. Parachutists, fifth columnists and other nice names were painted on our train and always when passing a village pebbles, stones, and foul eggs were thrown on the miserable man freight. A man in our carriage was hit squarely in his face and bled during the whole trip. He only recovered from his wounds several months later. Two of our fellow passengers began to rave. One of them, a scholar in Egyptology, did not stop grumbling: Give me a small bottle of water and a little one of mineral water. He never recovered and lives today in the hospital of Camp de Gurs. We began sucking our toothpaste; we drank mouthwash. Mirages of opulent meals passed before my eyes, when I chewed a piece of leather. Suddenly the door opened, our guards asked for our beakers and other vessels. We gave them everything in the belief that they wanted to bring us some water. Some seconds later, we heard the vessels crashing on the track. It was a cruel and sadistic joke. Slowly our resistance was vanishing. We stopped at some odd station.

Nurses with big water vans and field kitchens watched our arrival. We heard the transport chief shouting: These swine were just fed and watered, and the train went on. The guards robbed wallets, jewels, watches. Nobody resisted, we were so weak! Four hours before our arrival we were finally given some stale bread and water. Like starving cattle, we drank water out of hats, the palms of our dirty hands, out of muddy tin cans. Two weeks late we were still thirsty.

We arrived somewhere in Western France, near Poitiers. A small camp suitable for 500 persons was packed up with 5000. Our food in the first days consisted of water, of which we drank gallons, some bread, and sometimes a tiny herring. I was so terribly weakened, that I just laid on the straw during all these days. So I had some sleep, during the night our bunk was so overcrowded that sleep almost was impossible. Moreover, a hundred persons always had to stand up. There was no place. Already some days after our arrival, the Nazis separated themselves. We were searched and had to surrender our money except 200 francs. Some Nazis were so thoroughly anti-French that they tore their money. I saw chips of dollar bills in the latrines.

After 10 days, we were ordered to have our baggage ready for departure. It was the Germans again who were pushing forward. We knew, however, nothing of the military situation. No newspaper reached the camp, and nobody told us anything.
the Mediterranean, that formerly had sheltered thousands of fleeing Spanish republicans, was to be our residence for the next 6 months. Our first impression of our future home was one of horror. A terrific sand storm was raging, whipping clouds of sand into our faces. We saw collapsing shacks and bunks, dirty, and derelict. The fury of that sandstorm that recurred every 3 or 4 weeks is tremendous. One cannot open one’s eyes and mouth, it is impossible to walk. The fine sand even permeated the roofs of our huts, and we ate always the plate being full of sand. During the days of the sandstorm we slept on our bellies, a piece of cloth wrapped around our heads.

Food in the early weeks of our stay was scarce and monotonous, for 4 weeks we did not get anything else but peaches. There was nothing to buy. Sanitary conditions were horrific and never improved. Going into details would be an offense to good taste. A dysentery epidemic did not spare one of us. Doctors short of medicines could not do anything to help the sick. Our ramshackle huts had no floor and we were not given beds, either. Lying on the few straw bits in the sand, we were plagued by myriads of fleas. Mice and rats devoured our food. Flies and mosquitoes bit us. We learnt to understand why Spaniards were plagued by myriads of fleas. Mice and rats devoured our food. Flies and mosquitoes bit us. We learnt to understand why Spaniards

Our guards, little disciplined before the armistice, now without any order, began trading with us. We were half-starved, taking this to their advantage, these fellows offered us bread and chocolate to skyrocketing prices. We had to pay for a loaf of bread 2–4 dollars. Most of us could not afford these luxuries, (only a few had managed to hide their money during the search); we simply had to continue walking around with an almost empty stomach. After some time, we were permitted to open a canteen, which however did not sell bread or chocolate.

After some weeks passed and nothing happened, we realized that we had to stay for some other months there. So we began repairing and tightening the gaps of our huts. The camp was separated into eight districts of which only three are inhabited. Each district consists of four rows of fifteen shacks, in each of them is room for about fifty men. They are made of wood and roofed with corrugated iron. There was no furniture, no electric nor gas light. We had to buy candles. We tore down some inhabited huts and built primitive chairs and tables. From the corrugated iron of the roofs we built “beds.”

In all this misery, there was one highlight: bathing. Two hours in the morning and two in the afternoon we were allowed to swim in the deep blue Mediterranean Sea. There we laid after swimming in the sand and tried to forget for a short while all our misery.

Mysteriously some persons fell sick. Every day an increasing number of men laid down with fever. Our doctors could not do any research about this sickness, they lacked the most primitive means. We could complain as much as we wanted, the French authorities did not care, even after some persons died of this sickness.

A courageous doctor cleared the mystery. On the danger of being shot, one night he left the camp and took some water and blood samples to Perpignan. He had the water and the blood analyzed and the next night he returned with the results. The water was highly contaminated with all kinds of germs, and blood tests clearly showed that the sickness was typhoid fever. We were bold enough to show the written testimonials of Perpignan medical institute to the commandant. In face of these proofs, he did not dare to punish the doctor, he even reported to the health board and a week later we were vaccinated against typhoid fever. That was 3 weeks after the first cases. Two hundred persons already were sick of which 60 had died. Malaria plagued us too and we even got the necessary quinine.

Many of the internees possessed valid visas for oversea countries, particularly for the United States. But no one was released. Thus the visas expired and nobody knew when he would be given the possibility to make a new application. In compliance with the armistice regulations, people outside the camp having visas could not leave France, either.

Conditions becoming worse and worse, we tried to get out of this hell. Plenty of internees who had money and relations in France escaped, other ones tried to go back to Belgium to their families. A big transport of Belgium-goers reached Bordeaux in the occupied territory and was sent back by the Germans to St. Cyprien where the typhoid fever epidemic was raging. Another group of rather poor men had escaped and having no money went into a camp directed by the American Quakers in Toulouse. One morning they were rounded up and sent back to Cyprien where the commandant put them in a special district. They got worse food and were not allowed to leave their shacks.

When fleeing increased from day to day, the commandant forced us to give our parole of honor promising not to flee. Some men who did not give this blackmailed promise were sent to the special district. In exchange we were allowed to leave three times a week for the neighboring villages. A man who fled despite his parole of honor was caught.
brought back, and was punished in a most terrible way. He had to spend 3 days in a dark bunk, chained and getting only bread and water. The following 3 days in the special district, then again in the bunk and so forth.

Gurs. The appearance of these thousands of unfortunate, mostly old, people had been gathered and were sent to unoccupied France, where French authorities brought them to the first superficial glances much better than St. Cyprien. The sheds had floors and electric light. There were even stoves and the structure of those miserable huts seemed solid in comparison with those at St. Cyprien. But soon we learnt that Gurs was worse than the former, and if we had called St. Cyprien a hell, this was super-hell.

Rain was pouring during 5 days in the week. The loamy ground was soggy and we sank ankle-deep into the mud. After a month, we were given the possibility to buy rubber boots. But most of us had little or no money and could not afford them. So we went on in the mud with feet always wet and catching all kinds of diseases. Almost everyone suffered from rheumatism.

Food was too little to live on and for many of us just enough to die. From November to the middle of January 550 persons died. A large percentage among these lost their lives from the consequences of under nourishment. Several thousand suffered from a dysentery epidemic. Medical care was wholly inadequate. We had enough doctors but practically no medicines.

Our food consisted of two times a day a watery soup and the daily bread ration of about 9 ounces. Sometimes we got a small salt herring and a spoonful of jam. In the first months of my stay, we had a canteen where mainly apples and candy were sold. Later the canteen dissolved. So-called “black traffic” in food was flourishing. Highest prices such as 6 dollars were obtained for a loaf of bread.

Our sheds had no windows, only flaps in the walls which on account of the cold could not be opened. We had stoves, but we did not get enough wood. We could keep them burning only for some hours in the evening. So we vegetated in the dark, starving and freezing. Many men became completely apathetic, lying all day on the floor, incapable of any mental or physical effort.

One rainy afternoon when nobody was outside the sheds I went through the camp. An old woman of about 75 years was struggling through the tough mud toward me. Suddenly she stood still unable to get her feet out of the mud. After some vain efforts of loosening herself, she started sobbing and fell down into the mud. I brought her to her hut where she laid down like a dying animal.

French authorities did not know who we were, nor did they make any efforts to learn about our situation. They simply carried out what the French ministry and the Germans told them. As long as we stayed behind the confines of the barbed wires they did not care what we did and we could do whatever we liked. One day, when we complained once again of the bad food, the French officer in charge of the camp’s food department frankly admitted: If ever a famine in France breaks out, it is you who will starve first.

Despite these terrible conditions, cultural life was flourishing. Not one night went by without some sort of entertainment. Scientists, politicians and artists lectured about different subjects. Entertaining actors staged theater performances and music hall shows. Famous musicians gave excellent concerts. A small camp university was established. From philosophy to handicraft training, everyone could find a course to his liking.
liking. We had relatively large libraries with literature in many subjects. Books had been donated by the International Red Cross and the Y. M. C. A. which also sponsored all the other cultural activities.

A bureau for social work, where I worked as a correspondent, centralized material aid (that means mainly clothes and money) that were sent by French Jews and from neutral Portugal and Switzerland. Packages from the United States never arrived. With time going on the American Quakers offered through their French branch some food. The Camp Council decided to give it to the old people. All schools in Switzerland organized collections. The result was the establishment of “Swiss Aid.” Through “Swiss aid,” every boy and girl up to 21 was given an additional meal consisting of a fortifying beverage, cheese, and fruit. The Swiss children saved by their spirit of sacrifice many a life of innocent kids.

From the very first day of our stay in Gurs, almost everyone including me made all possible efforts to arrange an emigration from France. Our immediate goal for leaving was the obtainment of the French exit visa, whose issuance was controlled by the Germans. The first exit permits were given in February, I got mine in the beginning of March and was brought like every other possessor of that visa to a special emigration camp near Marseilles: Les Males. Here we were given ample possibility to get in touch personally with our respective consulates in Marseilles.

We lived in a big former brick-yard factory. Conditions were somewhat better than in the other camps. We had beds and first of all much better food. Besides the usual watery soup, we got vegetables, sometimes meat and always a dessert such as cheese, fruit etc. During the first month of my stay in Les Miles, we could go to Marseilles as much as we wanted and even stay some days there.

Normal life after 10 months of seclusion seemed wonderful to us. We could walk in streets, we could go into stores (at that time already including me made all possible efforts to arrange an emigration from France. Our immediate goal for leaving was the obtainment of the French exit visa, whose issuance was controlled by the Germans. The first exit permits were given in February, I got mine in the beginning of March and was brought like every other possessor of that visa to a special emigration camp near Marseilles: Les Males. Here we were given ample possibility to get in touch personally with our respective consulates in Marseilles.

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The following day I got my certificate of liberation saying that I had to leave French territory within 3 days, otherwise I had to be sent back to Camp des Miles. On June 28th, I left Marseilles bound for the Spanish frontier at Canfranc. On account of coal shortage, only a few trains were running. 230 miles from Marseilles to Canfranc took me 30 hr.

Frontier formalities were rather quickly done. I was sitting in a Spanish train and could not yet believe it. Nightmare France was behind me! After a fatiguing night and an entire morning in a rattling coach with crowds sitting on the benches and on the floor, I arrived in Madrid. The trip from the frontier to the capital had been rather interesting. Food smugglers hid their costly packages under seats and whenever one of the soldiers accompanying every train passed, they put their feet more tightly together, so that the soldier could not see their merchandise. One smuggler had so many packages, that he struck the attention of the soldiers. They searched all he possessed, found a lot of ration food stuff and arrested him right away.

At every station bare-footed kids with torn clothes and emaciated faces came to the train begging for a piece of bread. Poverty in Spain is indescribable, most people do not even have the money to buy the scarce rationed food. It is impossible to get shoes, shirts etc.

At the first glance Madrid does not look as if two and a half years ago a bloody civil war was raging in its streets. Clean avenues and filled cafés make believe that not much has changed. But seeing lots of war cripples, and every now and then bombed-out houses show what really happened here. The food situation is, as to what I saw, in Madrid better than in Marseilles. The only difference is that Spanish people are so poor that they cannot pay the general expensive prices.

Lisbon was the boom city of Europe. Thousands of foreigners wait there for their ships to America. In the streets one hears as much English, French and German as Portuguese. Stores are crammed full with everything. New cafés are established every day. Refugees are sitting there discussing their chances of emigration.

My principal occupation in Lisbon was eating. I ate about four times as much as I did in normal life. I could not calculate how many times more than in Gurs. Unfortunately, the sailing scheduled for July 10th of my steamship "Nyassa" was postponed. The Portuguese were sending almost every day new reinforcement of troops to the Azores. They confiscated for that purpose temporarily every national ship they could get hold of.

Had Summer Welles not made a statement declaring that the United States did not envisage a military occupation of the Azores, I would have been still in Lisbon. So, we left the beautiful city on July 24th for Casablanca. There 200 persons embarked, who had been on those two ships to Martinique, which had been called back to French North Africa. The passengers had been interned near Casablanca in the desert. Through efforts of Aid committees, they got booking for S. S. Nyassa. When I saw some French "guardes mobiles" (our guards in the different camps) on the docks, a shudder shook me.

On the ocean, we were twice intercepted by English war ships. In Bermuda we had to pass a 2 days examination of our status. The control was very efficient, every scrap of paper was read and the English controlling officers knew their business. What a contrast in comparison with French controls we experience during the war!

Conditions on board were not bad. The ship was a liner of 10,000 tons and had accommodations for 750 passengers. We were only 700. Food was sufficient, and in first and second class even luxurious. In this respect we had not to suffer like many of my friends who arrived on the "Navemar."

After 16 days we sailed into the port of New York. The statue of liberty was to bring us freedom again. It was a wonderful feeling seeing the skyline of the biggest city of the world merging out of the mist. We were so glad to be able to set foot on a free country. After some hours, when I was in the streets of New York, I was the happiest and luckiest guy in the world.

Today, seeing my odyssey of horror in retrospect, I do not regret that I had to experience so many hardships. I learned a lot of practical philosophy and I learned to know people. These 2 years were the best school of life I could ever have.

I hope that my lines will contribute to the rescue of 30,000 men, women and children still interned in the camps of Unoccupied France, who face a slow death unless wholesome aid is granted to them.

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