Jacob’s letter

*This letter was found in 1988 in a glass bottle buried in the Septfonds camp, which was destroyed in 1945, by a farmer who was ploughing his land. The letter is now in the archives of La Mounière.*

30 August 1942, Septfonds

Yesterday, I asked one of the camp guards if he could give me some paper and a pen to write a letter. I feel so alone here and I need to tell my story, I want people to remember me, my life and my family. I decided to write these few pages in order to leave a trace of my stay here because I don't want to be forgotten. For some time now, people have been leaving the camp, I am afraid I might be the next one and I don't know where I would be sent.

My name is Jacob Slowinski, I was born in Warsaw on 17 July 1903. I lived there with my mother and brothers and sisters in a Jewish ghetto. I started working in a cabinet-making shop when I was 14. Life was hard for the Jews in Poland. In November 1918, we were victims of a pogrom, which put me and my family on the street. We lost everything and unfortunately my two sisters died as a result of our misfortune. The guilt of not having protected them and the sadness continues to haunt me even today. We were able to find stable housing, but the economic crisis occurred and my mother lost her job. Only my job at the cabinet-maker allowed us to survive.

In 1935, I also lost my job. I decided to leave for France, though reluctantly, because I had to leave my family behind. I quickly found a job in a coal mine in Lens. The beginning was difficult, I didn't earn much and I only spoke Yiddish. Over time, I was able to get by in French.

In 1939, I learned of the invasion of Poland and in 1940, that of Belgium. I and other Jews, who were afraid, decided to go to the south of France, via Paris. There, I learned that my family had been locked up in the Warsaw ghetto.

In June 1940, I arrived in Montauban hoping for a better life, but I quickly came down to earth when anti-Jewish laws forced us to register with the authorities. I finally had to do that in October 1940 and that's how I was reduced to a simple word stamped on an identity card, “Jew”. Since then, I have barely survived, in fear, anguish and misery.

In the spring of 1942, I was placed under house arrest in Caussade with other Jews and on 13 May 1942, I was sent to the Septfonds camp. Here I was incorporated into a group of foreign workers, the GTE no. 302. I mainly do maintenance and gardening work in the camp. One day, in the vegetable garden, I found a spoon. I don't know why, but this rather ordinary spoon meant something to me, and I decided to keep it.

The guards are tyrannical, hygiene is abominable, the meals hardly deserve the name of food. I have established relationships with people who speak Yiddish and French, but I feel terribly alone.

A few days ago, I saw Jews arriving in Septfonds from the Lot and Tarn-et-Garonne, and among them, for the first time, there were women and children. How can anyone force such young and fragile people to live here under such conditions? How can the camp employees look at them, see the fear in their eyes and remain indifferent? Among these new prisoners, there was a terrified young girl. To try to distract her, I did a magic trick with my spoon.

The camp authorities intend to separate some of the workers in GTE no. 302 and put them in a special hut. I am terrified that I will be one of them and that I will again be separated from the few people I know.

It’s just gotten dark; I have to go back to my hut. You who will find this letter, if it is ever found, do not forget us and make sure this never happens again. Remember that we fought bravely against Nazi barbarism, I and all those who fell under the yoke of tyranny and human horror. Regardless of our nationality or religion, we all stood together with dignity in the face of our oppressors in the hope that one day justice would be done.

*On 3 September 1942, Jacob and other Jews boarded a train for Drancy before being sent to Auschwitz without knowing that death awaited them at the end of the rails.*