French resisters guard the entrance to the newly liberated Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp, December 2, 1944.
USHMM WS #77581, COURTESY OF NARA
The Natzweiler concentration camp (Le Struthof-Natzwiller) is the only one to have been built by the Nazis on French territory. It was set up in Alsace, whose two departments had been annexed to the Reich in July 1940. The occupiers considered Alsace and Moselle to be German lands destined for radical Germanization. Alsace was joined with the Nazi Party province (Gau) of Baden, whose Nazi Party provincial chief (Gauleiter) was Robert Wagner, and Moselle was joined with that of the Palatinate, under the leadership of Gauleiter Josef Bürckel. A civilian administration was installed in Strasbourg, and an internment camp was created as early as July 2, 1940, just two weeks after the entry of German troops into Strasbourg. Doctor Scheel, the first commandant of the SS and of the SD in Alsace, organized the construction of a small camp able to handle the internment of 150 people. The construction order gave a list of people to be held in the camp: (1) Germans who had fought in the international brigades; (2) Alsatian insubordinates; and (3) opponents of the German army.

The first camp was built next to a small town in the Vosges, Schirmeck, about 50 kilometers (31 miles) from Strasbourg, and received the name of Schirmeck-Vorbrück (French: Schirmeck-La Broque). Some 60 Alsatians who had led anti-German activities before the war or who had deserted the German army during World War I were immediately interned. The camp functioned throughout the entire war but never became a concentration camp. It was more of a local work camp, labeled education camp (Erziehungslager) or detention camp (Sicherungslager). During the entire annexation period, the Schirmeck camp was used for the internment of Alsatians who had attempted to cross the new border with France, Jehovah's Witnesses, those accused of black market activity, and family members of the opposition. The camp was guarded by Germans of the Order Police (Ordnungspolizei, Orpo). The SS tried to obtain control of the camp but never managed to do so. Some Schirmeck inmates were transferred to Natzweiler.

Some months after the creation of the Schirmeck camp, the SS created a second camp, not far from the first. The official date for the establishment of a second camp is May 1, 1941. The chosen site was Natzweiler, in the Bruche valley, because of the existence of a granite quarry there. The construction order for the camp came from Heinrich Himmler himself. The SS-Deutsche Erd und Steinwerke GmbH (German Earth and Stone Works, DESt) enterprise expropriated the site and organized the exploitation of the quarry. They founded an office in Rothau, a village in the valley, where the train station nearest to the camp was located. The mayor of Schirmeck was SS-Standartenführer Blumberg. Before the war, Struthof was known throughout Alsace. A small ski and winter sports resort had been installed there (the site’s altitude is 720 meters [2,362 feet]). There was a hotel where the SS guards stayed, as well as a farm. Work on the construction of the camp began in April 1941. Some prisoners from the Schirmbeck camp were used to build the first barracks.

The first convoy of prisoners, around 150 men, arrived on May 21, 1941, at the Rothau station. They came from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp and were initially lodged in the farm's pigsty. The second convoy arrived three days later. On June 28, the first French prisoners arrived in the third convoy. These men worked to complete the construction of the camp. The first four buildings were not finished until November 1941. The inmates soon worked in the quarry as well. Until the spring of 1942, the Natzweiler concentration camp remained small, only amounting to around 200 prisoners. They built the structures for the administration of the camp. The number of inmates then increased rapidly and considerably. At the end of 1942, 2,000 inmates had already been registered. The construction of the camp was not completed until the beginning of 1943. There were 17 blocks within its confines and 12 other buildings outside it. On March 12, 1942, a large convoy of German Communists arrived in Rothau. On June 15, 1943, a convoy of 71 Norwegians arrived. They were resisters who had been imprisoned in the Grini camp or in the Akershus fortress. They had been sent by boat as far as Aarhus in Denmark and, from there, sent by train to Strasbourg, via Hamburg. Nine convoys of Norwegians, with a total of 504 men, arrived in Natzweiler, the last day in August 1944. All of these were classified under the prisoner category Night-and-Fog (Nacht-und-Nebel).

In June 1943, a total of 4,430 prisoners had been registered at Natzweiler. In 1944, their numbers fluctuated between

A section of the Natzweiler concentration camp, December 2, 1944. USHMM W5 #10102. COURTESY OF NARA
6,000 and 7,000. In total, 52,000 prisoners were registered in the camp or in the exterior subcamps. The mortality rate at Natzweiler was quite high, and it is estimated that around 20,000 prisoners died there of exhaustion, hunger, illness, and maltreatment. The inmates came from many different countries. There were many Alsatians and Mosellans imprisoned for insubordinate conduct or acts of resistance. Others were Alsatians or Mosellans who had resisted forced enlistment in the German army (Malgré nous), starting in 1942. Also numerous were French, Dutch, Luxembourgers, Germans, and Eastern Europeans. There were Sinti and Roma (Gypsy) prisoners. Not one inmate was recorded as Jewish in the main camp; Jews who were sent to the Natzweiler complex went directly to the subcamps. There were no women prisoners in Natzweiler. In the interior of the camp itself, there was a Nacht- und- Nebel section, as well as a political branch of the Gestapo. The majority of inmates were political opponents or resisters.

The camp had several commandants. The first was Hans Hüttig, replaced first by Egon Zill, then by Heinrich Schwartz. Josef Kramer, an SS-Obersturmführer, stayed in the post for the longest time, from June 1942 to April 1944. He had previously been posted to Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Mauthausen, and Auschwitz. He had worked in the concentration camps since 1934. In April 1944, he was named commandant of the camp at Auschwitz II-Birkenau. It was under his command that Natzweiler became a large concentration camp. His replacement, Fritz Hartjenstein, had previously worked in Birkenau. The camp's surveillance was provided by 200 SS, of which 150 were wardens and 50 handled administrative tasks. The commandants lived in a requisitioned villa, which was located in the mountains above the camp.

The Natzweiler camp had at least 42 subcamps at any given moment (and up to 92 in total, according to some sources), located in Alsace, Moselle, and southwest Germany. Certain subcamps were not created until the autumn of 1944, in Germany, when the main camp had been evacuated. In Natzweiler, the majority of inmates worked in the quarry. They also built a road between Rothau and the camp. In the autumn of 1944, the quarry was enlarged toward the east, and a wide esplanade was cleared. It was on this plot that two buildings and 13 barracks were built to serve as workshops for the Junker airplane manufacturing firm of Dessau, which had previously taken over workshops in Alsace. In Natzweiler, inmates worked to strip down and repair airplane motors. There were also civilian employees in these workshops.

Inmates' corpses were burned first in a mobile crematorium, until a permanent structure was built outside the camp, in October 1943, next to the hotel. All of the deaths, except those of the Nacht-und-Nebel inmates, were recorded at the city hall of the village.

The inmates could only establish contact with the valley’s residents with difficulty. During the marches to the work sites, some residents would try to give a little food to the inmates, sometimes by leaving it along the roadside. The Rothau station was also a place where fleeting contacts could be made. It appears that during the last period of the camp, in 1944, discipline was somewhat less severe, and contacts were easier. The large number of inmates also prevented the possibility of constant surveillance. The locals may have even bribed certain SS guards to be able to feed the inmates.

There were medical experiments performed at the Natzweiler camp, on the effects of mustard gas, typhus, and hereditary diseases. A gas chamber was built for this purpose, outside the camp, in an outbuilding of the hotel where the camp administration was based. It was used from the summer of 1943. The experiments took place at the research center of the University of Strasbourg (Versuchabteilung der Reichsuniversität Strassburg). The director of this center was August Hirt, professor of anatomy at the Reichsuniversität. Another scientist, Professor Eugen Hagen, head physician of the Luftwaffe and professor of hygiene at the University of Strasbourg, was responsible for research for a vaccine against typhus. Dr. Bickenback led studies on urotropine, used as an antidote for phosgene gas, and Dr. Eusele practiced vivisection. Gypsies
were sent particularly from Auschwitz to Natzweiler to serve as guinea pigs in these experiments. However, the only murders in the gas chambers that can be regarded as certain are described in testimony at one of the trials of Nazi doctors at Nürnberg: 86 Jews, including 30 women, arrived from Auschwitz in August 1943; they were gassed on August 11, 13, 17, and 19, with potassium cyanide. It took them 30 to 60 seconds to die. Their bodies were sent to the anatomy institute at the Medical University of Strasbourg, where they were reduced to a skeletal state. At the liberation of Strasbourg, in November 1944, 17 bodies, 3 of which were women, were discovered. The dissection work had barely been started.

There were escapes from the camp, with the goal of reaching the border that separated Alsace from the rest of occupied France, which was not far away. In March 1942, some Czech and Polish inmates organized a resistance network, led by Communist leaders. They succeeded in establishing a liaison with Communist militants in the Bruche river valley. The three leaders of the group were Pole Joseph Cichusz, who had fought in the Spanish Civil War; German Edwald Motzkat, a Communist from Wiesbaden; and a Czech, Mautner. Only one escape succeeded, organized by Alsatan inmate Martin Wintenberg. He had arrived at Natzweiler on November 12, 1941, from the Schirmeck camp. He was put to work in the garage of the SS guards, then in a detention commando, and then in the SS laundry. With a German inmate, Alfons Christmann, he set about preparing his escape. He obtained the help of an inmate named Karl Haas, who worked in the SS garage and reserved some gasoline for an escape by car. Since they worked in the laundry, Wintenberg and Christmann got hold of two uniforms left to be washed. On July 4, 1942, they were both able to leave the camp, in a car, dressed in the uniforms. There were three other inmates hidden in the vehicle. The five men succeeded in reaching France, then the unoccupied zone. They left Christmann, quite weakened after his imprisonment in the camp, at the home of some of his family members who lived in the south of France. The Gestapo found him there in October, arrested him again, and sent him back to Natzweiler, where he was hanged in front of the other inmates. The four other escapees succeeded in reaching Spain.

Another resistance group, French Communists led by the FTP (Franc-Tireur Partisan), organized ties with the valley. A massive escape was planned, but the German guards found the plan in a satchel where one inmate had hidden it. The members of this network were executed. Some were hanged, others shot. A similar escape attempt by Russian prisoners was harshly suppressed in June 1943: 15 men were killed after a long public punishment.

The Natzweiler camp was evacuated on August 31, 1944, before the advance of the Allied armies. There were still 7,000 men at Natzweiler at that time. Some trucks took the weakest inmates to the Rothau train station, but the largest number made the journey on foot. At the station, freight trains took them into the interior of the Reich. The evacuation operation was completed on September 4. Only a few SS men remained at Natzweiler. Convoys of inmates from Natzweiler arrived at Dachau, where they were redistributed to different commandos in southwest Germany, either attached to Natzweiler or not. On September 7, the 1,127 patients from the infirmary (Revier) arrived there. The camp administration was reinstalled at Gutenbach, in Germany, on the Neckar.

The administration of Natzweiler continued its work of managing prisoners who were spread out in many subcamps, several of which had just been created, and it even continued to register new inmates. In April 1945, all the prisoners were transferred to the control of the administration of the Dachau concentration camp.

Those principally responsible for the Natzweiler camp were judged at Wuppertal by a British military tribunal, from May 29 to June 1, 1946. The main charge was only the execution of four women, three of whom were identified as members of the SOE (the British Special Operations Executive): Denise Borrell, who was French, Diana Rowden and Vera Leigh, and a fourth woman whose identity remained unknown. They were killed in the camp on July 6, 1944. Among the nine accused were Magnus Wochner, head of the Political Department (Politische Abteilung), and the head of the camp, Fritz Hartjenstein. The latter was sentenced to life in prison. Werner Rohde, the camp physician who administered at least one of the fatal injections, was sentenced to be hanged. SS-Oberscharführer Eugen Buttner, who directed the quarry commando, was sentenced to death by a French military tribunal and to forced labor for life by a Soviet tribunal. He was pardoned in 1956.

