



## RAYMOND GURÊME

(Meigneux, France, August 11, 1925 – Saint-Germain-lès-Arpajon, France, May 24, 2020)



Portrait of Raymond Gurême  
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Raymond Gurême was born into a family of showmen.<sup>1</sup> His father, Hubert Leroux, born December 10, 1884, in Belgium, was the descendant of a line of French fairground artists for more than five generations; a former soldier of World War I, he suffered physical scars from the war for the rest of his life. His mother, Mélanie Gurême, born on April 8, 1902, in Mouroux (France), was the daughter of Yenish basket makers.

Between 1922 and 1938, Raymond Gurême's parents had nine children, each playing a different role in the family circus. From his early years on, Gurême became a clown and an acrobat; he quickly developed a passion for horses, which he had in numbers all his life. Before the war, his parents bought a travelling cinema. As Raymond Gurême later said, when his family arrived in villages with their circus and cinema, they had "the feeling of bringing civilisation but also joy and entertainment."<sup>2</sup>

The life of the Gurême family profoundly changed when the decree of April 6, 1940, was introduced, **forbidding so-called nomads and showmen to travel on French territory.** They set up their

circus in a field in Petit-Couronne, near Rouen, and Leroux was hired at the steel factory. The family lived off his earnings and from hosting film screenings. That was until October 4, 1940, when French gendarmes arrested them and took them with their caravan to the internment camp for Nomads of Darnétal, a few kilometres from where they had settled.

Two hundred people, arrested because they were considered "nomads", were taken to this camp, which was located in a disused factory. On November 27, 1940, the Darnétal internees had to abandon their belongings and their trailers. They were transferred by train to the Bretigny-sur-Orge railway station, and then walked to the Linas-Monthéry autodrome, which, from that point on, serves as a nomad internment camp. The living conditions in the camp were very harsh, and the internees suffered extreme cold and hunger.

**Gurême escaped from the Linas-Monthéry camp** for the first time with his brother René during the night of July 26 - 27, 1941. They were denounced, recaptured and brought back to the camp on August 15, 1941. However, Gurême did not give up his plan to escape. He fled again during the night of October 5 - 6, 1941,

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<sup>1</sup> This notice is based on the archives examined by Lise Foisneau and Valentin Merlin as part of their historical research (French Defence Archives, International Tracing Service, Departmental Archives), on the testimony of Raymond Gurême, and on the book he co-authored with Isabelle Ligner.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Gurême and Isabelle Ligner, *Interdit aux nomades*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, p. 20 [ebook].

and **walked 140 kilometres to the Darnétal camp**, where the family caravan had been kept. There, he collected clean linen and some precious belongings.

Gurême was hired on farms across the Concarneau region. The money he earned was used for his journey back to the Linas-Monthléry camp and to supply his family in secret. But on April 21, 1942, the camp internees were transferred to the Mulsanne camp where they remained until August 3, 1942, when Gurême's parents were transferred to the Montreuil-Bellay internment camp. When Gurême learned that his family had been interned in the latter camp, he made three trips to bring them food. It was on one of these trips that Gurême was arrested in Angers. Instead of being transferred to the Montreuil-Bellay camp, he was sent to the Villa des Roses orphanage in Angers. He escaped from there and was caught again.

On June 15, 1943, Gurême, still a prisoner of the Villa des Roses, **stole a truck loaded with food that he gifted to the local resistance before escaping**. He was recaptured and imprisoned in Angers prison where he was tried by a German military court and sentenced to six months imprisonment for theft and concealment. On August 13, 1943, Gurême, considered a "common law" offender, was sent to Germany for re-education at a labour camp in Frankfurt-am-Main-Heddernheim. He escaped but was immediately recaptured.

Forced to work for the firm *Vereinigte Deutsche Metallwerke AG*, he was put in solitary confinement for working too slowly and attempted to escape in March 1944. Gurême managed to **return to France** on June 15, 1944. He then joined a group of French Forces of the Interior (FFI) near Paris. After the Liberation of France, Gurême joined the ranks of the regular army. **Gurême was not reunited with his family until 1950.**

In 1951, Gurême met Pauline with whom he had fifteen children. In 1968, Gurême bought a piece of land in Saint-Germain-lès-Arpajon, three kilometres far from the Linas-Monthléry autodrome where he had been interned. He lived there until his death in May 2020.

In 1983, Gurême applied for status as a political internee, which was refused because of his arrest as a "common law" offender in June 1943. Gurême first testified publicly in 2004. It was only in 2009, when his **autobiographical book** was about to be published, that he obtained the status of **political internee**, a public acknowledgement of his internment at Darnétal and Linas-Monthléry. As for his request for recognition of his status as a political deportee, he never received a positive answer. In 2011, the publication of the book, *Interdit aux Nomades* (Forbidden to nomads), written in collaboration with Isabelle Ligner, made his life story more widely known.

In 2012, he was ordained *Chevalier de l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres*. Sadly, this did not prevent him from being beaten by the police on his property, two years later.<sup>3</sup>

Gurême was one of the leading figures of the international Romani and traveller's movement of the early 21st century. His story of uninterrupted resistance inspired a whole generation.

#### Sources and further information:

1. Raymond Gurême and Isabelle Ligner, *Interdit aux nomades*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 2011.
2. Lise Foisneau and Valentin Merlin, "French Nomads' Resistance. 1939–1946", in Angela Kóczé and Anna Lujza Szász (éd.), *Roma Resistance during the Holocaust and in its Aftermath. Collection of Working Papers*, Budapest, Tom Lantos Institute, 2018, p. 57–101.
3. Jean-Baptiste Pellerin, *Ils ont eu la graisse, ils n'auront pas la peau*, 2013, 36 minutes.

This biography has been written by Lise Foisneau

<sup>3</sup> Isabelle Ligner, « Raymond Gurême agressé et blessé chez lui par la police, qui conteste sa version des faits », October 3, 2014. URL : <http://www.citoyens-resistants.fr/spip.php?article354>