



The Holocaust in Senegal

An Artist's Response

The persecution of the Jews during the Second World War by the Vichy Colonial Regime in West Africa is an unfamiliar history to many in South Africa, Africa and around the world. This online exhibition will explore this history and South African visual artist, Joe Turpin's response to it.

In 2020 Joe Turpin was invited to a residency with RAW Material Company – *Centre for Art, Knowledge & Society* in Dakar, Senegal, to produce artwork in response to the recently uncovered history of the Sébikotane internment camp – a site run by the Vichy French Colonial Regime during World War II.

Each work has a story behind it, inspired by historical events, archive records, and real or imagined stories. The works link to history, antisemitism, and colonial oppression at Sébikotane Camp. The exhibition which will be housed at the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre in July 2021, can be explored further through the audio visual links and commentary in this online exhibition.

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Key



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Cover image: Sébikotane site - only two wall/fragments remain. It was adjacent to a work 'yard' which is still there today and likely where the physical labour was done.

Sébikotane (or Sebikhoutane/Sebikhotane) was the site of a small World War II internment camp from 30 July to 12 December 1941. During WWII, Senegal was a French colony under the AOF (Afrique Occidentale Française) and run by Vichy France.

Until November 1942, southern and eastern France remained unoccupied by Nazi forces and although officially

neutral, collaborated closely with Germany. This French collaborationist government (headquartered in the city of Vichy) managed these parts of the country somewhat autonomously. From October 1940, antisemitic legislation and policies matching that of the German-occupied zone were passed, excluding Jews from public life, civil and military service, and interning thousands of Jews in French-administered detention camps. As an

extension of the Vichy government, AOF implemented similar policies, and those considered 'undesirable' - which included Jews - were imprisoned.

During WWII, the number of Jews in West Africa was small, but there was a notable Jewish community and two synagogues in Senegal. The Jews sent to internment camps in Africa consisted of long-time African residents as well as recent arrivals from Europe. The internees were held in a building on the grounds of the William Ponty School for well-to-do Senegalese, with classrooms being converted into dormitories.

Documents from the camp were collected by the William Ponty school and now sit with the National Archives in Dakar. Research is currently being done on this little-known history with the hope to learn more about it and promote history education in Senegal.



Sebikotane is located 34 kilometres (20 miles) east of Dakar, Senegal.



RAW Material Company, Dakar

In 2020 artist Joe Turpin was invited to a residency with *RAW Material Company– Centre for Art, Knowledge & Society* in Dakar, Senegal, to produce artwork in response to the recently uncovered history of the Sébikotane internment camp - a site run by the Vichy French Colonial Regime during World War II. Joe became aware of this history through a talk by Senegalese Professor Alioune Dème at the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre in 2018.

His research included a site visit to the concentration camp, as well as archival research at the Senegalese National Archives and the library at *RAW Material Company* (RAW Base). During his time in Senegal Joe produced artworks that are some of the first visual responses to this history. Each work has a story behind it, inspired by historical events, archive records, and real or imagined stories. The works link to history, antisemitism, and colonial oppression at Sébikotane Camp.



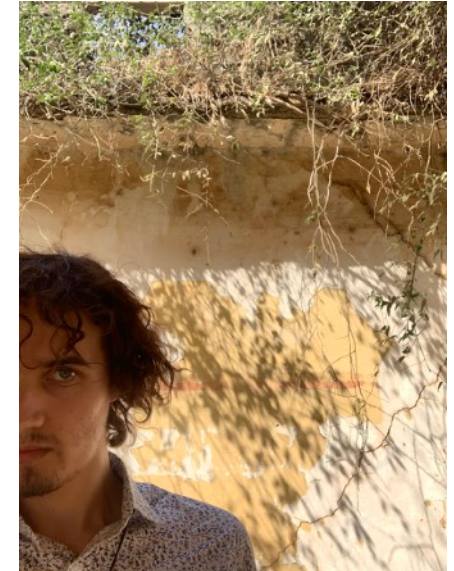
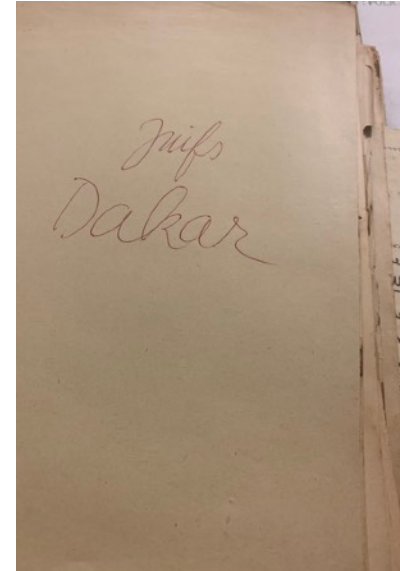
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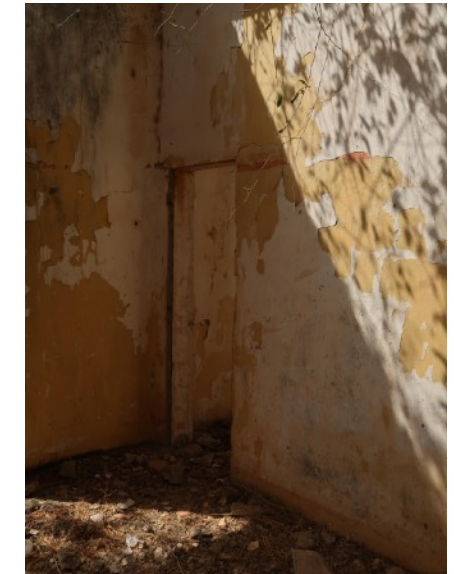
Sébikotane site - there are several 'rooms' like this, adjacent from one another.



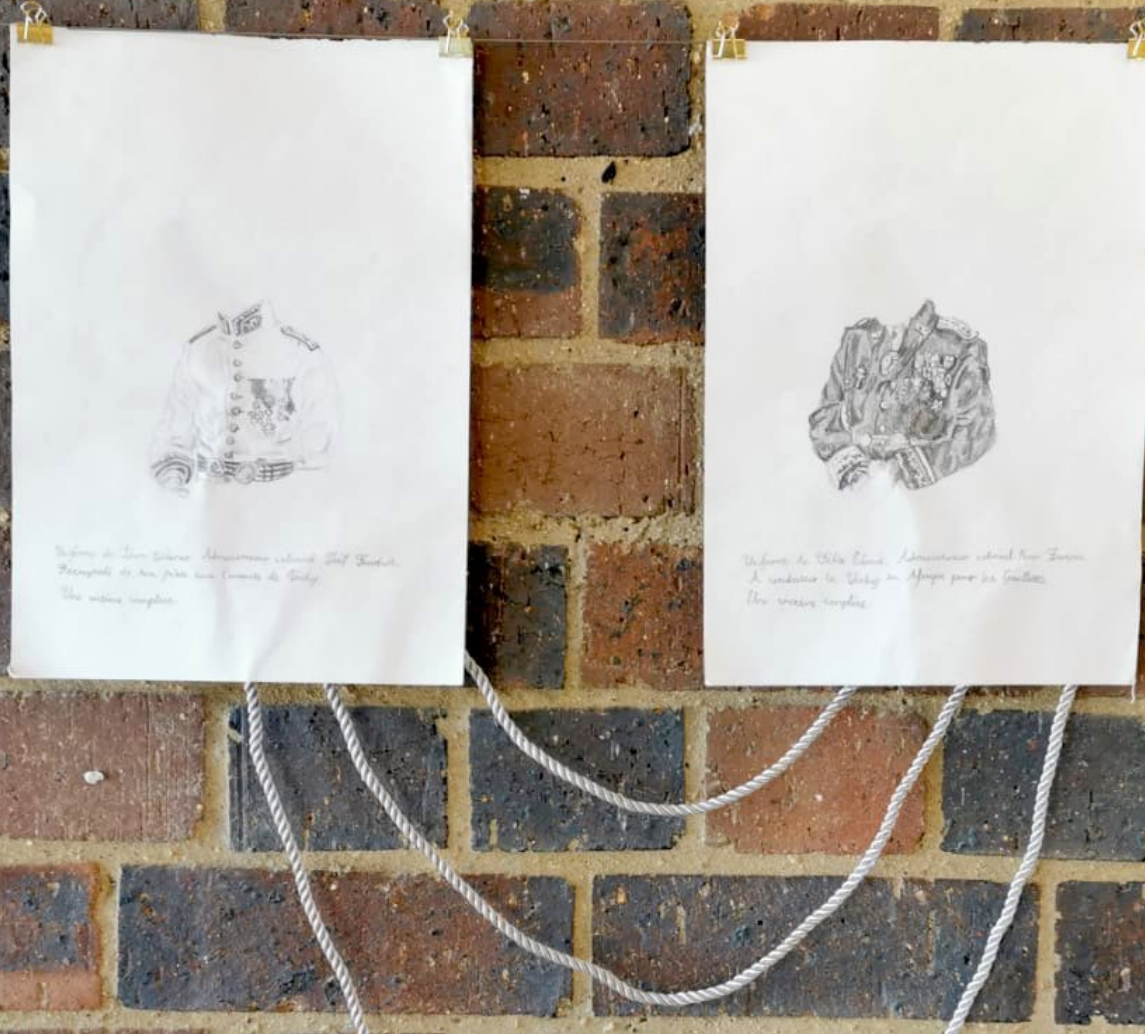
Joe Turpin on site at the Sébikotane internment camp



Sébikotane site - only two wall/fragments remain. This was adjacent to a work 'yard' which is still there today and likely where the physical labour was done.



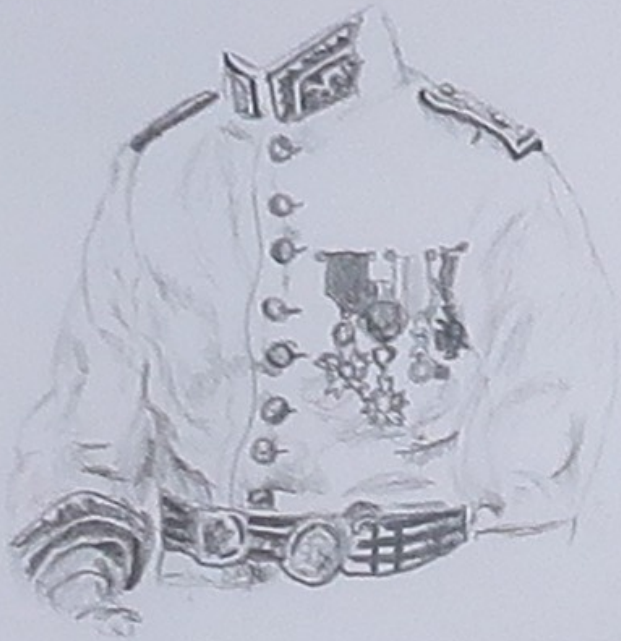
Inside another of the potential sites at the Sébikotane internment camp



A COMPLICIT VICTIM, 2020
2x 210mm x 297mm,
measurements variable
Lace, graphite on paper

AN ARTIST'S RESPONSE BY JOE TURPIN

Complicit Victim: On the Margin of the Shoah



Uniforme de Léon Géismar. Administrateur colonial Tzif Français.
Révoqué de son poste sous l'autorité de Vichy.
Une victime complice.

The white military uniform belonged to Leon Géismar. Géismar was a Jewish and French colonial official stationed in French West Africa (AOF), in a top position in the capital of the region, Dakar. When the Vichy regime took power under the Nazis and inherited France's African colonies, Géismar did not object to the politics necessarily, and kept his position in Senegal. Eventually, Leon Géismar was forced to step down because he was Jewish.



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The black military uniform on the right belonged to Félix Éboué. Éboué was a Caribbean, of African slave descent, and French colonial official, one of the highest and first ranking Black men in the French and colonial military ranks. He was a Gaullist in his political thinking, and was already stationed in Africa, in Chad, when Vichy took over. Éboué joined the French resistance, whose cross marker is visible on his uniform, and fought against the Vichy forces with the allies on the continent.



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*Uniforme de Félix Éboué. Administrateur colonial Noir Français.
A combattre le Vichy en Afrique pour les Gaullistes
Une victime complice.*



The head covering is the Yarmulke, or Kippah, and is traditionally worn by Jewish men. It is not a common site in the region, but is seen worn by visiting Rabbi and other Jewish professionals.



Sumbia, or Laffa, is a woollen hat often worn in the region, mostly by Muslim men, and was popularised in African political consciousness by the leader Amílcar Cabral. The woollen hat originates in Scandinavia and Moscow, where the cold temperatures required it, and where Cabral and other leaders spent some time training.



In Senegal and other parts of the continent, **the fez/tarbussh hat** is recognised as part of the uniform of the African soldiers in the colonial armies. Today it is symbolically worn as part of the uniform of some political guards.



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WISE CHEEK, 2020
3x 203mm x 203mm
Acrylic on canvas



EXHIBITION ARTWORK

Engrained in the history and consciousness of West Africa, and the rest of the African continent is the painful history of the **transatlantic slave trade**. Outside Dakar is Gorée Island, where many slaves were imprisoned, shackled and taken away forever.



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LES CHÂÎNES, 2020
560mm x 790mm
Acrylic on canvas, silk



SANS TITRE (MAILLOTS), 2020
750mm x 800mm
Two individual garments, flocage,
synthetic polyester material, wood, metal

This work is the home and away football jerseys of an imagined 'prisoners football team' from the Sébikotane camp. The club badge symbol depicts prisoners walking free; two footballs; the name of the camp; the year of it's operation (1940) and is surrounded by chains. Above the crest is the Star of David, the symbol of Judaism, in place of where many actual football clubs place a star after they've achieved a milestone.



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The orange square (from a mobile company), colour pallet and cat are almost omnipresent and seen everywhere in Dakar, and so it is a combining of these elements, to represent the place.

The Arabic sentences translates as “should I now think of death?”. The idea of an internment camp in such an otherwise beautiful part of the world and the artist’s lived experience which saddened him.



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GREEN CAT SENEGAL, 2020
830mm x 1380mm
Acrylic on canvas



تذكرى الموت ، ليدم



I WOULD RATHER IT LOST TO THE
FORCES OF MOTHER NATURE,
THAN HANDS OF AN ARSONIST,
2020
200mm x 200mm
Acrylic, graphite, ink on canvas, silk

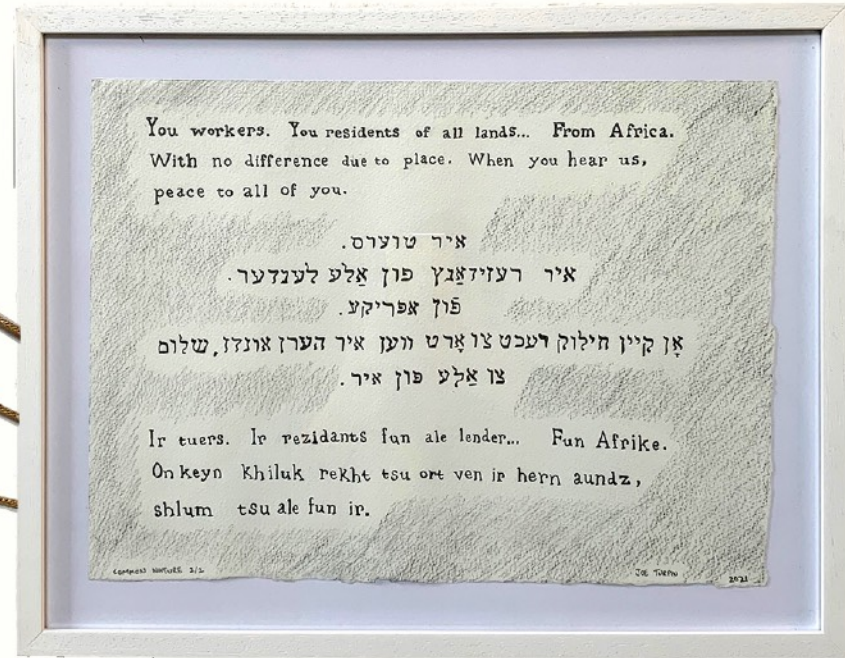
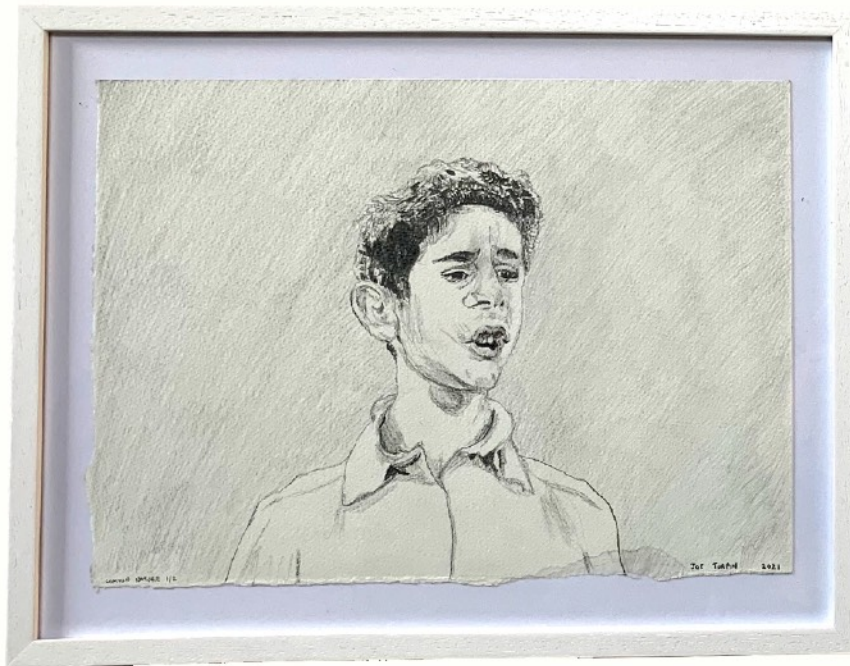
This canvas depicts the coastal site where the Sephardic Synagogue once would have stood. Two musical instruments, a Kora – the sacred and delicate instrument of the Griot musicians and story tellers of this region – and a shofar, the Ram's horn blown to welcome holy days in Judaism, but also used to warn of impending war. The image of the hand holding the shofar is inspired by the Holocaust Memorial at the Jewish section of West Park Cemetery in Joe's hometown of Johannesburg.



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This work was inspired by the Yiddish film Mir Kumen On (1936), which was funded by a Jewish workers Bund in Warsaw and depicts a day in the life of a Jewish children's health sanatorium in Poland. In one scene, a young boy calls out a united workers declaration. Speaking in Yiddish, he mentions men and women from places like France to China including a mention of Africa; he says that one's origins of land should create no difference between them. This can be seen as hugely progressive, considering it was still the height of colonialism and twelve years before apartheid segregation was formalised in South Africa.



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COMMON NATURE, 2021
2x 380mm x 280mm
Graphite on paper, lace



This video work was filmed at the location of the Sébikotane Camp and William Ponty School in the town of Sébikotane. It depicts the sites as they look now.



Thank you for viewing this online exhibition.

We hope that you found it informative and engaging - please leave a comment [here](#)

Learn more

By listening to Professor Aomar Boum:

"Revisiting Vichy Forced Labour Camps in the Sahara, 1940-1945".

Thanks and acknowledgement must be given to:

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