

Danielle Casanova (1909-1943), a French resistance hero

by
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Danielle Casanova was born under the name of Vincentella Perini, in Ajaccio, in 1909 (Lamendin, 2007). She graduated from “l’Ecole du Luc”, in the Var area. After briefly studying in the high school of Longchamp, in Marseille, she then left for Paris to attend courses at the Dental School located on “rue Garancière” in November 1927. She lived in a small bedroom on “rue Monge”. In 1927, when she was 18, she registered for the Federal Student Guild (“l’Union Fédérale des Etudiants”). There she met Laurent Casanova whom she married in 1933 (Riaud, 2005). The latter was imprisoned in 1940. Once he escaped, he took on more important responsibilities within the Resistance.

She became one of the leaders of the Federal Student Guild where she managed the dental department (Riaud, 2005). In 1928, she joined the Communist Youth League (“les Jeunesses communistes”) where she was called Danielle. There, she was the secretary of the group representing the University of Medicine. Meanwhile, she diligently continued her dental studies. In 1934, she became secretary of the new management of the movement. In 1936, she established the Guild of French girls (“l’Union des jeunes filles de France”). As soon as she finished her studies, she practiced dentistry in the dental clinic of the working cooperative society called “La Bellevilloise”, and in the free health center of Villejuif. In 1938, she condemned Hitler’s regime in front of the Congress of New York (Riaud, 2007).

In 1939, the communist party was officially forbidden and opposed the Regime. Under the German occupation (Riaud, 2005), she got involved in the clandestine reconstruction of the communist party, and when the party joined the Resistance movement, she took steps against the regime as the editor of “The Women’s voice” (“La Voix des Femmes”). On February 15, 1942, after being watched for a long time, she was arrested by the French police at her friends’ house, the Politzers’, who were living on “rue de Grenelle”. She refused to talk. She was photographed, examined from top to bottom and imprisoned in the Warehouse where they kept prisoners until March 23. That day, she joined the Prison “la Santé” where she was kept isolated. She stayed there for five and a half months. On June 9, 1942, she was interrogated by the Gestapo. On August 24, 1942, she was sent to the Fort of Romainville where she showed outstanding devotion and affection towards her fellow detainees. With the only book that she owned, Danielle gave history classes. On November 11, she made her female detainees sing *La Marseillaise* at 12 o’clock. Out of a small notebook, she created a clandestine newspaper. She also organized food distribution to the least fortunate.

On January 24, 1943, the young Corsican was part of the convoy leaving for Auschwitz. In the same convoy were 230 women including Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier (Paris-Musées, 2002). On January 27, they entered the women’s camp in Birkenau singing *La Marseillaise* (Panstwowe Muzeum Auschwitz, 2003). An SS guard asked if there was a dentist among them. Danielle left the group and joined the “Revier” (the infirmary) where she worked in the shack reserved for dental care. This shack was divided into three rooms (a waiting room, a room furnished with three beds for the dentist and her two assistants, and the dental office, which was well organized according to Danielle Casanova). Being a prominent figure in the camp, she was allowed to keep her hair. She had the Identification Number 31655 tattooed on her left arm. The records of the camp first mentioned her name on April 29, 1943 and also mentioned her position as a dentist in the women’s camp in Birkenau (Panstwowe Muzeum Auschwitz, 2003 & Riaud, 2007).

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Doctor Adélaïde Hautval (Hautval, 1991), a physician, arrived in the camp with the same convoy. *“I think she has changed, she’s pale, swollen and I know that she cried all night, aware of her comrades’ fate. How could we avoid it? With a clear vision about the future and possible means, she set herself a program: to give them “jobs”, to steal medicine and food for them, even from her own ration, and above all to give them a certain and regular moral support. Until the end, Danielle remained faithful to her program - always. And this faithfulness was to be the cause of her death because, out of all of us, she was the one who lived in the most favorable living conditions.”*

As soon as she arrived, she immediately got in touch with the clandestine organization on the camp. She succeeded, at the risk of her life, in sending information in and out from the camp about the horrors committed there. Despite appalling living conditions, she did her utmost to help her sick comrades (Riaud, 2002). On May 1, 1943, she had a violent fever. The SS Chief Doctor Dr Röder, who was fond of his effective dentist, vaccinated her, but it was already too late. She died from typhus in Auschwitz in the night of May 9 to May 10, 1943. Her death was mentioned in the official records of the camps on June 17, 1943 (Panstwowe Muzeum Auschwitz, 2003 & Riaud, 2007). That very day, all the detainees cried for their lost friend.

Numerous communist tracts announced her death and intentions of retaliation.

Today, Danielle Casanova remains a noteworthy example of devotion and self-sacrifice in the world of imprisonments in concentration camps. She is also a legendary figure of the French Resistance.

M^{me} Danielle Casanova (1909-1943) (FNDIRP, 2003)



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