

Generosa Cortina Roig

LAIA: *"Jo no sóc una excepció. Sóc un testimoni, però no sóc una excepció. Moltes dones van fer el mateix que jo."*

MARIONA: "I'm not an exception. I'm a witness, but I am not an exception. Many women did the same as I did."

MARTÍ: These are the words that Neus Català, a Spanish republican woman, gave us at the age of 97. She was one of the many women who fought against fascism, but as she says, she was not an exception. We need to know the reality, women were part of the anti-fascist fight, as was Generosa Cortina Roig. That's why we bring you her life story, a history of female resistance.

— WIRE'S HEADING —

MARTÍ: On 19th April 1910 in Son, a village in Pallars Sobirà, Catalunya. Generosa Cortina Roig was born. Daughter of Bàrbara Roig and Antoni Jaume Cortina, due to the family economic situation at the age of fifteen, in 1925, she migrated to France. She stayed in Granges-sur-Lot, where her sister lived. There, in 1931 she married Jaume Soldevila Pich and went to live in Toulouse.

Soon after, in 1936, the civil war started. Her husband's Brothers, Joan and Ricard, like many others of his generation, joined the fight against fascism. Joan in Madrid and Ricard in Cartagena.

The war ended, and fortunately, both brothers survived and could return to where they lived: Escart. But what seemed a relief at first, turned into a nightmare. Those were tough times, Joan and Ricard had to work as farmers in a forest, chopping wood and smuggling in Andorra to sustain themselves. What Generosa didn't expect was to be embroiled in her brother-in-law's businesses.

MARIONA: Women's participation in The Second World War was very diverse: from active belligerent action in military corps such as WAAC, the US Women's Auxiliary Corps, to silent and clandestine, but likewise dangerous and meaningful actions. The second case is



represented by women like Generosa Cortina Roig. Active armed resistance in European countries where fascist regimes have already been established, must be understood through its vast counterpart: the clandestine organized lines in charge of escape paths and information flow.

Thus, the actions of these clandestine groups were particularly important before and during The Second World War, when this story took place. As a result, repression thrown to these members once they were captured, was also especially harsh, as we'll see in a few moments. Regarding Generosa's contribution to silent resistance, we must emphasize her and her husband's actions in Pat O'Leary, an English escape line in which they smuggled various aviators, as well as in De Jean's network, and in the Roch Mission.

In June 1943 in one of her brothers-in-law, Joan and Ricard, journeys to Andorra, they were intercepted by the Guardia Civil and imprisoned in the Seminari Vell in Lleida. During the 30 days they served in prison, they met a man from Saint-Girons, in Ariège, France, who was connected to the French Resistance's network. Months later, in the middle of the Second World War, the Belgian Consulate contacted the brothers to recruit them. This Saint Girons boy had recommended them due to their smuggling skills. They were tasked to send mail between Toulouse and Barcelona, which contained data and information on behalf of the Allies across the French border. That's how the de Jean's network, also known as the SOL line, began.

Spanish participation in French militias was huge, according to their previous exile during 1939. The GTE's "Foreign worker companies" were also a cover for clandestine organization and rearmament of exiled Spanish fighters. As we can see in Generosa's case, the antifascist international network was essential for the resistance's survival, in an armed or unarmed way.

During their action in the de Jean's clandestine network, Ricardo was responsible for getting the Belgian packages in Barcelona, under the fake name of "agent José", and taking them to a "mailbox" house in Cerdagne. There, "agent Pablo", being his real name Jaume Soldevila, took the package to Toulouse where Cortina handed it to another agent. Soon, an alternative path was needed as the risks of being caught were quickly increasing, so they redirected the route through Pallars-Sobirà instead.

In April 1944, the Belgian government, who was exiled in London, started Generosa and Jaume's last meaningful clandestine mission before falling into fascist's claws. In this mission, the resistance had to smuggle into France the Belgian aviator, Captain Charles Hépécée.

Unfortunately, after trespassing the frontier and due to being spotted before in Son, Lleida, Charles Hépécée was taken by a German patrol. The aviator was forced into very violent



interrogations and soon after, he was shot to death. This was the beginning of the end.

LAIA: It was expected that the Gestapo would end up discovering who was behind de Jean's network, also known as the SOL line. On April 15, 1944, just one month after Hepcée's arrest, they entered Generosa and Jaume's house and arrested them. They would be sent to Germany on one of the horrible but well-known ghost trains. Despite the attempts of the Maquis guerrillas to stop the train, as happened on many other occasions, the German Nazi forces managed to continue the journey. Generosa and Jaume, like many other people, could not get rid of the terrible conditions they had to live on the train. More than a month of travel without being able to eat or drink, without being able to sit, living 24 hours a day in a train bum, all padded with no windows to ventilate. Their reality was reduced to those four walls of the wagon while they could hear how the war continued outside and their life hung on the pure causality of the war situation.

The trip that had started in July in France, for Generosa, ended at the end of August in Dachau, one of the concentration camps located in Germany. However, her stay would be short, in September she was finally interned along with other women in the Ravensbrück camp. 65,475, a number that would forever remain in Genrosa's memory, her internal number. For the men and women of the SS who controlled the camps it could be one more digit, for her, that number was always part of her history.

Without knowing very well what her future would be, Generosa followed the orders from day to day. She was forced to work for the German industry in the Kommando de Oberschöneweide, in the Henkel factory.

The hardships that Generosa and her companions had experienced and were experiencing, did not stop them from reviving their rebellious spirit. They took advantage of their work in the factory to sabotage production. The punishment came again; Conxita, one of her colleagues, said: "I had to control the parts, but we did sabotage. We all did. They beat me with sticks and cut my hair short. Out of 650 women, there were only 115 of us left". It seemed that after the punishment and the terror came freedom when the factory where they worked was bombed and they took the opportunity to escape.

However, the snake of Nazism that had heads and eyes all over snatched away their freedom again. They were locked in a cell being deprived of light, ventilation and hygiene, to be finally transferred to the Sachsenhausen camp where they were destined for forced labor again on the Köpernick command.

The days passed in poor conditions, uncertainty clouded his mind, freedom or death could come at any moment. What happened outside the concentration camp was really unknown to



them, despite the information that could reach them.

MARTÍ: Outside, the war continued, but now it seemed that there was a winning side. In April 1945 the Nazi regime, in all its terms, was falling rapidly. The allied troops were approaching the concentration camps to liberate them but the SS, trying to fulfill one of the great dogmas of their "religion", continued, now chaotically, with the commitment to resist and exterminate for the survival of Germany.

Prisoners in the camps were forced to leave the camp and walk to the safe areas for the Nazis, this was known as death marches. The name is really accurate; people who could not follow the path because they had been physically overexploited and exposed to subhuman conditions and consequently they were too weak to walk, were murdered by the SS.

Generosa was one of the women who could not follow the march, but it was thanks to her companions that she was able to survive. They had joined a mutual fight, and had created a collective identity amongst them that encouraged them to resist. Generosa and a group of women were able to hide for a night. Of the 85 women who had left the camp, 22 remained. They wandered until the troops, first Soviet and then American, found them and helped them. Generosa was repatriated to Toulouse, France, unable to return to Franco's Spain. There she was reunited with her husband, Jaume.

At this point, we would proudly explain that she received several recognitions from the French and American governments, such as the Medal of Freedom in 1962 or The Croix de Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur. We think that what really deserves to be known, is that more human part of Generosa's story.

LAIA: *"Sóc una supervivent, per desgràcia... perquè molta gent que ha mort (...) Vaig lluitar per la llibertat. Vam lluitar per això, moltes dones van morir en aquesta lluita. La vida és bonica, i vaig lluitar a mort per conservar la vida. Són aquelles contradiccions que té la vida."*

MARIONA: "Unfortunately, I am a survivor...because many people died (...) I fought for freedom. We fought for freedom, many women died for this cause. Life is beautiful, so I fought to death to keep myself alive. Those life contradictions..."

MARTÍ: We can hear the words of Neus Català again. The Spanish republican woman was deported to the same concentration camp as Generosa. These words bring us closer to that worldly reality, how surviving became a matter of fighting for freedom in all its senses.



MARIONA: Generosa was a woman who represented in herself the anti-fascist struggle and who, at the same time, knowing her life trajectory allows us to delve into what was that transnational story that starred in the first half of the 20th century. A woman from a small town in Lleida, in Catalonia, has allowed us to know from first hand the pain experienced by so many people, the struggle against fascist regimes. Her story, though, would have an exceptionally happy ending; Generosa and Jaume opened a restaurant and lived in peace the rest of their elderly lives. She died on the 30th of December 1987.

LAIA: A lot of people died, and we must remember all those who did not have the same happy ending, but also we must give thanks to that resistance that remained alive. Today we try to give her a voice. We talk about her, because we talk about female resistance: about those female voices that remained in the background. Fighting is twice harder when being a woman and an anti-fascist, so today we need to call it twice as loud and unearth those women who have never been remembered.

