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Notable Daughters of Charity (1): Sister Helene

Martha Beaudoin D.C.

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A Heroine of the Resistance

Sister Helene 1891-1945.*

As guardian angel of the poor and prisoners, Sister Helene helped more than 2,000 French soldiers escape the Gestapo.

Sister Helene, a name dear to thousands and thousands of prisoners - the symbol of the most daring charity during war time.

From 1939 Sister Helene knew how to face the unforeseen problems of the "phony war."¹ In the space of twenty-four hours, 100,000 inhabitants of the Moselle had to evacuate the border, abandoning on the spot all their possessions. Sister Helene took the initiative of recovering furniture and clothing for them. Using trucks she transported all of these things to the Charentes, to the great consolation of those who had been evacuated.

But then came the disaster of 1940 and its pitiful columns of prisoners marching towards the East. On 17 June, 2,000 prisoners arrived before the prison of Metz. Nothing had been planned for their housing, food or care. Thanks to the spontaneous generosity of the entire city and with the help of volunteer nurses, Sister Helene supplied these exhausted men, bound their poor feet, bruised and bleeding from endless marches.

But these columns resumed their march towards the stalags of Rhenania, Westphalia, and the Palatinate. Sister Helene decided to bring them supplies in her legendary truck. Everywhere she went she forced doors open and unloaded food and warm clothing. On the way back she took the first mail from the inmates and a secret cargo of prisoners hidden inside her vehicle. But since she certainly could not bring them all out, she had to organize an escape system for them. An order was given, addresses were obtained, and a whole network of smugglers was thus set up. The general headquarters of this escape agency was none other than Sister Helene's office at the Hospice of Saint Nicolas de Metz.

* Jean Herion. LA MEDAILLE MIRACULEUSE (mars-avril, 1960) p. 32

¹ Also called the "drôle de guerre" and the "sitzkrieg", this refers to the period of deceptive quiet on the western front from September 1939 to May 1940.

Each day twenty-five or thirty escapees arrived at the Hospice. As soon as the password was given, they were lodged and fed for several days. A new network of smugglers would lead them as far as the unoccupied zone.² Often Sister Helene would see to their passage herself to the Lorraine line of demarcation, which was particularly difficult to cross. New stratagems had to be invented each time. Thus it happened once that Sister Helene had loaded up her truck with a group of mentally ill elderly women who were quite agitated. Behind and under them were hidden the escapees. At the border, Sister Helene declared, "These are some poor mentally ill old ladies that are being moved to Maxeville." The authorities burst out laughing in front of these poor women and let Sister Helene and her prisoners by. More than 2,000 prisoners owed their escape to the efforts of Sister Helene. But the Gestapo decided to arrest such a patriot. During her interrogations, she held her questioners at bay, and did not betray a single one of her collaborators. A patriotic doctor gave her lodging in a convalescent home. Sister Helene left there soon after and returned to her office at Saint Nicolas where her escape agency continued to operate at full production.

When the Gestapo learned of her return, they dispatched agents to arrest her and take her into custody. They asked for her at the entrance of the office of the Hospice. Sister Helene who was at the door at the time replied, "I'll go get her right away." They had not recognized her. Sister Helene realized that she had to leave her post for good this time. The next day, thanks to her escape network, she was in Lyons where she devoted herself to the service of the refugees from Lorraine.

The French Resistance then decided to help General Henri Giraud escape.³ It was necessary to find a trustworthy man to bring him clothes, money, and legal papers. Sister Helene was consulted and designated a trustworthy man, one of her former smugglers, who would carry out this mission. As soon as the Germans entered the Unoccupied Zone in November, 1942, they began searching for Sister Helene who had joined the Underground. In reprisal they arrested the venerable Superioress General of the Daughters of

² After the French surrender to the Germans on 25 June 1940, the country was divided into two zones, the northern one administered directly by the Germans, the southern one under the administration of a puppet government at Vichy.

³ Henri Giraud (1879-1949) was a noted French general and a rival of Charles de Gaulle in the Free French movement.

Charity. Radio London announced to the whole world this arbitrary arrest. It was a hard ordeal for Sister Helene who was so attached to her Community when she heard this tragic news.

Around this time Sister Helene became ill. A terrible cancer was to overcome her indomitable energy. In December, 1944, her last agony found her in the Hotel-Dieu of Clermont Ferrand. The highest dignitaries rushed to her bedside. General Giraud pinned on her medal of the Legion on Honor and kissed the hand that had saved him. "Metz is liberated." Such was the last news which rejoiced the heart of Sister Helene. She knew that she would never see her good city, her old hospice, her good companions, her dear poor again... "Now leave me alone with God," she requested of her companions who were at her bedside. After having renewed her vows of a Daughter of Charity, Sister Helene, exhausted and ravaged by the terrible pain, gave her beautiful soul to the Lord of Charity.

If Sister Helene was not able to see Metz again, the old Lorraine city wanted to have her body. On 17 June 1946 the remains of the heroic Daughter of Charity received the solemn homage of the entire city. More than 10,000 residents of Metz escorted her coffin of white wood which now rests in Lorraine soil under a humble cross.

In memory of Sister Helene, her liberated prisoners erected in front of her hospice a memorial which speaks the best of her soul and her ideal. The image of "Our Lady of Prisoners" guards the front of the old hospice of Metz and perpetuates the memory of this heroic Daughter of Monsieur Vincent.

It is the intention which imparts weight to all our works and renders them meritorious in the sight of God

Saint Vincent de Paul

In prayer God helps us to realize his goodness in giving himself to us.

St. Louise de Marillac

The more we pray, the more we wish to pray.

Saint Vincent de Paul

What food is to the body, prayer is to the soul.

Saint Vincent de Paul