

Delphin Debenest (1907 - 1997)

Born in the French region (“département”) of Vienne in 1907, Delphin Debenest worked as a judge in the cities of Niort and Melle until 1940 and then became deputy state attorney and member of the magistrate at Poitiers.

Despite his public and safe position as a civil servant of the state in the field of jurisdiction, he decided to join the resistance in 1941. This step of actually leaving the realm of law and order meant that he put at risk his position, his family and, if caught by the Nazis, would have to face imprisonment, probably torture, deportation to a concentration camp, and being sentenced to death.



On the one hand, he continued to work for a state which collaborated with the Nazi occupants, imposing unjust and inhumane laws that negated the basic principles of ‘freedom, equality and the brotherhood of men’ that the French republic had stood for.

On the other hand, he used his position as a judge and state attorney to help resistance fighters escape the suppression and persecution by the French Vichy regime and the Nazi occupants. He therefore joined several networks of the resistance fighters’ organization of “l’Armée des ombres” (army of shadows). This meant that instead of continuing to do his job and getting into moral and abstract trouble, he decided to face the immediate and physical risks of partisan resistance.

In July 1944, when liberation of France was almost on its way, the Nazi occupants became ever more reckless in chasing resistance fighters. On July 27, 1944, they came to finally get Delphin Debenest: he was arrested right in the high court building in Poitiers and deported to the German concentration camp Buchenwald in August 1944.

He had to suffer the hardship and cruelty of so-called life in a concentration camp: on little pieces of paper he had stolen, he put down a diary reporting the prisoners’ work of felling trees in deep snow; death all around; dehumanization, harassment and violence; endlessly lining up for a bit of soup; countless burials; longing for his wife and his two little children – the only thing that made him go on despite his despair. And even in the concentration camp he continued some sort of resistance in founding and keeping up units for solidarity and help among the prisoners.

During April 1945, the allied forces approached which was why the prisoners were evacuated from Buchenwald and put into trains heading for another concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen (close to Hamburg). When the train was bombed at the train station of Celle, Delphin Debenest and a friend managed to escape. Having spent two weeks hidden in the forest, the two men were discovered by British soldiers and taken home to France.

Having survived the concentration camp, Delphin Debenest was nominated French general attorney at the international tribunal at Nuremberg in 1945 where he faced those persons who were the most responsible for the Nazi dictatorship.

Back in France, Delphin continued his work as a judge until his retirement in 1977. He died on July 2, 1997.