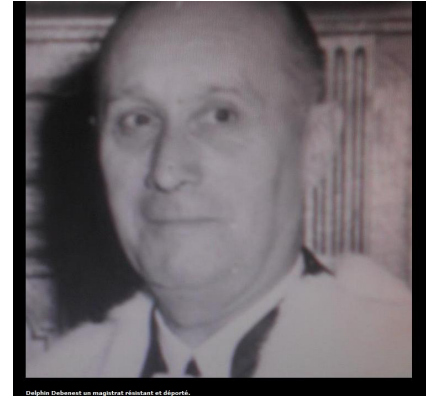


Delphin Debenest (1907 - 1997)

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.

Story on Delphin Debenest's life

composed by Zuzana (CZ), Eric, Lars (GE), Anastasia (GR)

A radio interview with Delphin Debenest, recorded in 1997

- Speaker 1:* Hello from radio "Stand up, Europe" for an interview on how Europeans stood up to resist the Nazi occupation terror before and during World War II. For today's report, our reporters went to France for an interview with French resistance fighter Delphin Debenest.
- Speaker 2:* Bonjour from France everybody out there. Our interview today in our series of "Stand up, Europe" took us to France to meet another one of the heroes who risked and sacrificed their lives to fight for freedom during the National Socialist regime. We are deeply honoured to meet Mr Delphin Debenest, former resistance fighter, politician and judge who survived.
- Speaker 3:* Welcome to our studio and thank you very much for talking to us about your life, Mr Debenest. Aged 90, you are one of the few remaining resistance fighters who can give our audience first-hand evidence of the terror regime that the Nazis forced upon Europe.
- Speaker 2:* When the Germans invaded France you were working as a judge in Niort and Melle and then you even became deputy state officer at Poitiers and were active in politics. Please, tell us how it came about that you turned from judge to resistance fighter.
- Mr Debenest:* As a judge I had to struggle with the increasing influence from the Vichy-Regime and thus the Nazis, changing all our laws. I noticed that something was going very wrong. I mean, as a judge I still had to serve the community, the community of all equal people, no matter where they came from or which religion they had. The Nazi ideology was the complete opposite. I realized that it was time to act. But because you do not have any chance on your own, I decided to join the resistance.
- Speaker 3:* Did you ever think about the consequences for you and your family? You must have been aware that the Nazis might find out that a judge in such a high position joined the resistance.
- Mr Debenest:* Well, of course, I was afraid for my family. But I thought that it was time to act, I could not just watch how human rights were trampled. For me, we had to stand up for our rights, to serve the community of humankind and to become a better country – no matter what the cost. I acted without thinking of myself, but of course I thought a lot about my family. But they all agreed with what I did ... If I had ever thought about the consequences, I wouldn't ever have been able to act with such self-confidence. Still, it was the only way to fight against the Nazi-Regime.
- Speaker 2:* How was it for you to lead such a double life – being judge under the Nazi influence and at the same time fighting the Germans in the resistance movement?
- Mr Debenest:* I knew that I had to continue to do my job, because as a judge I could at least try to help resistance fighters. Sometimes it felt terribly wrong to serve a state which collaborated with the enemy, but at the same time, in the background, I knew I was doing the right thing when helping people to escape from the oppression and persecution. I have always stood up against inhumane laws and unfreedom – which was what the Nazis had forced upon our state. And you know, as a French I've

always tried to live up to our principles: “Freedom, equality, and the brotherhood of men”.

Speaker 3: Can you remember one event that was some sort of special against the Nazis?

Mr Debenest: Actually I cannot think of any special event. I tried my best to help and fight against them as much as I could. So in the end, I guess everything that I, along with my friends in the resistance could do to free our state from the Nazi occupants was special in itself. On the other hand, you know, it is not or shouldn't be anything special to stand up and fight for freedom and peace whenever you realize that the human rights are about to be trampled by whoever it may be – even at the risk of failure or death.

Speaker 2: Thank you very much for giving us some insight in your life and thoughts, Mr Debenest.

Speaker 1: This was radio “Stand up, Europe“ with another interview with a survivor and former resistance fighter whose beliefs in the human rights had made a judge become an outlaw under the Nazi oppression.

- **How you got caught and transported to the concentrations camp?** I quitted my job because I could no longer do this for moral reasons, and after that in July 1944 when the liberation of France is almost on the way, the Nazi occupants became ever more reckless to fight against the resistance fighters. On July 27 they came to me to arrest me in the high court building in Poitiers and deported me after that to the German concentration camp Buchenwald in August 1944.
- **How did you feel there in this situation?** I already knew that I would be caught but that time was extremely hard, I had all time very much fear about my family and that I never see her again and I thought every moment that I was going to die that was extremely hard for me, but I didn't want to give up because I wanted to see my family again and I wanted to continue to support the resistance for the freedom of France.
- **How did you escape from the camp?** During April 1945 there was an attack by the allied forces, which was why the prisoners were evacuated from concentration camp Buchenwald and put into trains heading for another concentration camp at Bergen- Belsen. When the train was bombed at the train station of Celle, me and my friend managed to escape, we had to spent two weeks hidden in the forest.
- **How did you feel when you were found by the British soldiers?** At the first moment I was shocked that this people could be German soldiers but then I realised that were British soldiers and we were incredibly happy that we are rescued and saved.

What an excited story from judge to a hero. We are very thankful, for your visit here in our timeless talk.