

W11 – Feature profile writing

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Dame Mary Barraco

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Dame Mary Barraco, World War II resistance fighter who suffered Nazi torture, dies in Virginia Beach at 96

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Mary Sigillo Barraco never forgot what happened to her inside a Gestapo torture cell.

She couldn't forget her beatings if she tried, for she bore the mental and physical scars for the rest of her life.

She'd landed there at just 19 after fighting the Nazi regime every way she could: flirting with guards to rescue prisoners of war, working on an underground newspaper, sheltering Jewish refugees, smuggling false passports. American born but raised in Belgium, Barraco joined the Belgian Resistance from the earliest days of World War II. And when she got out of prison, she joined right back again.

But she survived the war, and she believed there was a reason why.

"For me to feel free, I had to forgive," Barraco told documentary interviewers in 2016. "But I'm not going to let anyone forget. I should've been dead a long time ago, and there's a reason God has kept me alive.

"I think it's very important I share my story ... so (people) know what it is to lose your freedom. I lost my freedom once. I don't ever want to lose it again, because without freedom, you have absolutely nothing."

Barraco, who became known as the Torchbearer of Freedom, died Dec. 6 at 96. She'd been living in Virginia Beach since 1950.

Throughout the decades, she dedicated her life to telling anyone who would listen about the horrors of the Nazi regime and the importance of standing up for what you believe.

No one could take that away from her, not even the Gestapo.

Barraco was born in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1923.

Her father was an electrical engineer, and her mother stayed home with her and her younger brother. When she was 7, as America sank into the Depression, her parents decided to go to her mother's home country of Belgium. Her father ended up getting a job in Canada, but the rest of them went on to Belgium as planned.

There, they lived with Barraco's grandparents in the city of Renaix and she recalled in the 2016 documentary interview that it was a "very, very happy" time. She went to a French school and was a lovely singer, hoping to train for the opera someday.

Then the Nazis invaded.

"My grandfather had been a prisoner of war in World War I," Barraco said in the documentary. "He said to me, 'Little Mary, there is going to be a war. And Belgium is going to be taken over again by the Germans. I'm going to depend on you to take care of your mother, your grandmother and your brother because I may not be here.' I made that promise to my grandfather. I was 14 years of age. And when the war broke out, I remembered those words."

She remembered Belgian flags being replaced with swastikas and hungry, barefoot prisoners being marched through the streets. As the only Americans around, her family was expected to present themselves to the Gestapo three times a day, at 8 a.m., noon and 5 p.m.

"After all, we were the enemy."

At 17, horrified by seeing the march of prisoners, Barraco started sticking a Red Cross band on her arm, flirting with German guards and going into the prisoner of war buildings to rescue the men out through another gate. She took them home, gave them food and rest.

Soon she was working with Resistance officials, being trained not to give anything away during questioning. She sabotaged rail lines and bought clocks to be turned into time bombs. She smuggled documents and rescued downed Allied paratroopers.

She started singing with a band made up of Resistance members. Through them she met her first love, Arthur Libre — which "means free in French, ironically."

Around that time in 1942, they weren't hearing much about concentration camps, Barraco said in the documentary. Her mother, a hairdresser, heard about them through Jewish salesmen coming through from Brussels. Through the men they started taking in Jewish children and directing them to safe havens. Barraco started work on a "clandestine newspaper."

One early morning while she was sleeping, the door banged in and the Gestapo came. Luckily there weren't any children staying with them at the time, but an officer started reading her love letters from Libre.

"I said to him, 'What were you sent here for, to read love letters?' " Barraco recalled. "And he turned around and gave me such a smack that I fell on the floor.

"I was very resentful of what they had done to me, and just felt, I've got to do something."

It was time to leave Renaix. Though torn to leave her mother behind, Barraco ran away with Libre with false passports to northern France. But someone along the way betrayed them. The two were captured, separated and sent to a Gestapo prison.

She was sterilized with electrodes on her stomach, beaten, tortured. In solitary confinement, she once took the chance to stand on a table and look out a tall window. She saw Libre and began to sing "Lost Paradise." Later, she saw in his prison journal that he'd written, "I saw for the first time Mary looking through the window and she sang 'Lost Paradise.' He said, 'now I can continue living.' "

Barraco was taken out of that prison and to another in Brussels, "known as the torture headquarters of the Gestapo.

"The cell I was thrown in had fresh blood on the walls," she said. "I knew I was put there for suffering. They cut my hair, they broke my nose, they broke my back, they literally broke my teeth."

She wanted to say goodbye to her mother, so she took out the only thing she had, a bobby pin, and scratched on the wall, "Adieu, Mama." It was the most scared she'd ever been in her life, she said.

"And I still feel that today," she said in 2016. "It's a feeling that I will never, ever be able to erase."

One night, she dreamed that she and Libre, her fiance, were walking together and saw a tunnel. He walked toward it and told her to go back, and left. The next morning, she was told Libre had been executed.

"When you receive this letter, dear, I will have left this world," he'd written her in a letter dated Oct. 21, 1943. "This is my goodbye ... I hear the boots. They approach. Goodbye my love."

Eventually Barraco received six months in prison. When she got out, she immediately rejoined the Resistance. A few years later she'd find Libre's body, along with his journal and a photo of her.

"I have never considered myself a survivor," Barraco said. "I have always considered that what I did, that was my duty to do. I could never have lived under Nazi regime. I would've rather have died."

In 1946, Barraco returned to the States and was protected daily by the FBI after being threatened by the Nazis, according to her obituary, and she married Joseph Barraco, who died in 1978. The couple had adopted a daughter, who gave Barraco her grandson, Leon Smith.

In 2004 the King of Belgium knighted Barraco, giving her the title of dame.

Barraco's haunting interview was for a documentary series called "What We Carry," by the Holocaust Commission of the United Jewish Federation of Tidewater.

Elena Barr Baum, the commission's director, said Barraco had been speaking through the organization for years, including at many local schools, when officials got her to agree to do the documentary.

"Mary believed from the moment that she had these experiences that people needed to know," Baum said. "A lot of survivors really didn't talk about their experiences because they were trying to put things behind them and it wasn't particularly welcomed until 'Schindler's List' came out. But Mary had always shared her story. It was not about what she had suffered but about the importance of freedom."

Students who heard her speak would be moved and want to get her autograph, take her picture and hug her, Baum said.

"She changed my life and my way of thinking 40 years ago when I was but just a teen and I'm a better person today for having met her," one former First Colonial High School student wrote on her obituary page, remembering a presentation she gave there in the mid-1970s

In 2009 a play about her life, "The Torchbearer of Freedom," was performed at Bluefield College in western Virginia and came to a local Catholic school with a corresponding exhibit.

Baum said a conversation with Barraco never ended without her saying, "I love you."

"When she knew you were on her side, she was loyal and wanted you to know it," Baum said. "Mary was an institution. It's the end of an era."

In recent years Barraco's old injuries were proving particularly detrimental. Back in prison she'd suffered severe kidney damage from long periods of withholding urine. Pain from the bones broken by Nazis never abated. In the 1950s she survived intestinal cancer that may have been caused by drugs the Gestapo gave her. She'd also long had dental issues stemming from the beatings.

"She said, 'You can only get pistol-whipped so much before you have issues with your mouth,' " said Beth McGlooin, Mary's friend and neighbor of nearly two decades in the Linkhorn Estates neighborhood and fellow congregant at Star of the Sea Catholic Church.

Barraco was a devout Catholic and in recent years, when she could no longer attend mass, McGlooin would bring her communion. McGlooin said her friend was passionate about voting and standing up for what you believe. She worked on several political campaigns in Virginia, including those of Sen. John Warner and Reps. Paul Tribble and G. William Whitehurst.

McGlooin first met her when Barraco spoke to their neighborhood garden club.

"She's this petite woman, and you think, how can somebody have that much courage? And you also think, 'Would I be able to do what she did?' "

"People will remember her for years to come. It was an honor to know her."

