



[Elisa Garrido's papers as a deported resistance member.]

Elisa Garrido aka La Mañica, Ponzán Network Member and Anti-Nazi Saboteur by Imanol

Today we continue with our “Women who took up arms” section and travel to France to look at the story of Elisa Garrido Gracia. She was a militiaman in the anarchist columns. A courier for the Ponzán network and was deported to the Nazi camps and ended up as a saboteur. Most importantly of all, she lived to tell the tale.

Guerrilla greetings to all followers of this blog. Today I turn again to women who took up arms. I am trying not to let myself be distracted by the virus, lock-down and other things around me and I return to my histories. Over the years I have been pretty much focused on guerrilla topics and not paid enough heed to the gender of those guerrillas. And then I spotted where I had been going wrong, so this year I shall at any rate try to balance things out a bit and seek out and rescue, some of those women who acted with as much determination and idealism as the menfolk. So here we go. Today we follow in the trail of Elisa Garrido Gracia aka *La Mañica*.

Elisa Garrido was born in the village of Magallón in Aragon on 14 June 1909. In time she decided to move to Barcelona. She was the daughter of libertarian activists so she became acquainted with “The Idea” early on and embraced it and promptly joined the anarchist trade union. In Barcelona she met Marino Ruiz de Ángulo, a CNT member like herself, whom she would accompany through two wars, which they both survived, ending their days together. In the city she earned her living as a housemaid in the home of a well-to-do family, not that that stopped her from taking part in the fighting in July 1936 in the streets of the city and later joining one of the columns heading off to Aragon from the Ausias March barracks. Elisa must have had very well-defined ideas as she refused to accept that women’s place was in the rear-guard and by 1938 she was still on active service, fighting in the ferocious battle of the Ebro.



[Anarchist militia women on the streets of Barcelona in July 1936]

Once the civil war was lost, she left for exile together with Marino, her partner. Of the early days the couple spent in France, I know nothing, although there is a chance and I will not go far wrong if I venture to guess that they were placed in one of the camps set aside by the French Republic for their compatriots. What we do know is that they both headed for southeast France and lived in Marseilles and in the Upper Alps and soon joined the resistance. They were involved in rescues and they could not have chosen a better group to work with, as it was one of the stages of the Ponzán network, a network made up of Spanish libertarians, one that managed to smuggle nearly 3,000 men and women wanted by the Nazis – either airmen or resistance members or simply ordinary folk in danger – over the border, by land or sea.



After her partner was arrested, Elisa stepped into his shoes and carried on with tasks such as serving as a letter drop as well as as a guide for the organization. Despite her precautions, she was caught in Toulouse in the autumn of 1943 by the much-feared Gestapo. Initially she was placed in the Saint Michel prison in the heart of the city and there she was severely tortured and held in solitary for three weeks, although she managed to keep silent and ensured that no one else was arrested. Her next stop was in one of the prisons in Paris and then it was on to the prison in Compiègne, a clearing-house for the camps.

[Francisco Ponzán Vidal, in charge of the escape line called after him]

Her luck took a turn for the worse on 30 January 1944 and she and another 969 women were shipped to the fearsome Ravensbrück Nazi camp. She was registered as having arrived on 3 February. Elisa was stripped of her name, nickname and history and became Inmate No. 27219.

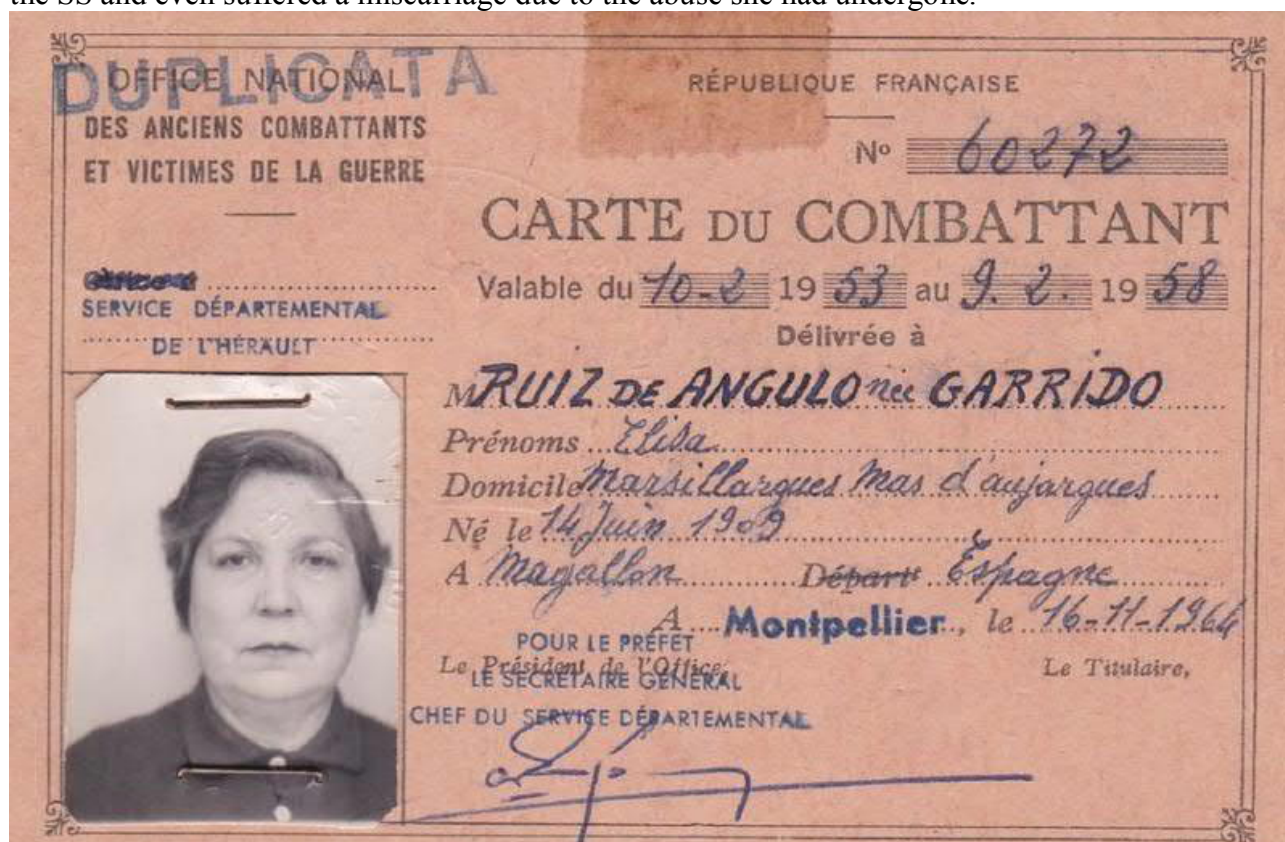


[Women working for one of the Kommandos in the vicinity of Ravensbrück.]

As one might expect, her reception was not pleasant. She spent hours on end standing to attention, there were beatings and screams and in the end she was stripped, had her hair shaved off and was forced to take cold showers and the fact that this was in February did not count. On 21 June 1944 she was posted to the Kommando Hasag to work in a military complex manufacturing shells in the city of Leipzig along with a sizeable gang of other deportees, including another seven Spanish women. There her number was changed again, to No. 4068. No matter how often they changed her name, Elisa was steadfast in her beliefs and so it was not long before she started sabotaging shell production, with help from her comrades. They toiled for 12 hours a day in return for soup and a crust of bread. They regarded themselves as political prisoners and indeed she declared years later: "Therefore we looked upon sabotage as a basic duty and the truth is that the shells and the machines were rendered useless with pleasing frequency." In addition to the sabotage, they also insisted upon their prisoner status: "We made up our minds to venture to act by way of asserting our political prisoner status vis à vis the German workforce, who had been told that we were thieves, prostitutes, etc., undergoing re-education through labour and to whom they were absolutely not to speak." The Nazis decided to pay them a small wage in canteen vouchers, something that the female prisoners seized upon in order to shout: "We are not free workers but political prisoners and we want no Hitler money."

Among the acts of sabotage carried out by Elisa she was to recall knocking some of the shell factory out of commission. This was her *modus operandi*: "I used to leave some of the explosive out of the shells which, since they had not been packed properly, had to go through the milling machine to be re-packed, whereupon the machine acted as a detonator and triggered a series of explosions."

After part of the plant was blown up, she was sent back to Ravensbrück, the train in which they were travelling coming under an Allied air attack. Once back in the camp, she was placed in the “Gypsies’ hut”, No. 28, housing those sentenced to work in the kilns. During this time there was severe mistreatment doled out and she was attacked and bitten by the guards’ dogs, was raped by the SS and even suffered a miscarriage due to the abuse she had undergone.



[Elisa Garrido, Ponzán Network member, deported to Germany and later anti-Nazi saboteur]

Her luck changed in June 1945 when she was included in a Red Cross supervised prisoner swap. In return for a bunch of German prisoners, a group of female deportees were to be released: Elisa was one of them. They were first taken to Frankfurt and then on to Sweden via Denmark. On arrival in Stockholm, they were set free.

Once the world war was over, Elisa and Marino, who had been reunited, settled in Paris, a city with a large number of Spanish libertarians on its streets and they hung on there until the end of the 1950s.

After their time in Paris, the couple decided to return to Spain and settled in Mallén. Elisa opened a fishmonger’s in Cortes de Navarra, whilst Marino found work as a taxi driver. Their plans did not prosper so they decided to cross back over into France and settled there again. Life was much easier there and life was less dangerous.

In France, Elisa was recognized and decorated, unlike in Spain. Yet again it was a case of “Spain is different”. Elisa died in Toulouse in March 1990.



[Elisa Garrido with some family members on one of her visits to Magallón.]

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<https://www.elsaltodiario.com/ni-cautivos-ni-desarmados/elisa-garrido-la-manica-integrante-de-la-red-ponzan-y-saboteadora-antinazi>

Translated by Paul Sharkey