

# Courageous WWII Spy Jeannie Rousseau Has Died at 98

Using charm and cunning, she helped uncover Nazi plans to build deadly V-1 and V-2 rockets

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Jeannie Rousseau photographed in 1939 or 1940 Public Domain

In 1943, British intelligence analysts received alarming information about German plans to build V-1 and V-2 rockets at a testing plant in Peenemünde, a region on the Baltic coast. Britain deployed 560 bombers to attack the facility, temporarily derailing the Nazi program and saving thousands of lives. The vital intelligence about Peenemünde had been transmitted by an unassuming, but fearless young French woman named Jeannie Rousseau, who died last week, at the age of 98, reports William Grimes of the *New York Times*.

Rousseau was born in Saint-Brieuc, in Brittany, in 1919. She had a talent for languages and learned to speak German fluently, according to Olivier Holmey of the *Independent*. In 1940, when German forces arrived in France, Rousseau's father, a former official with the foreign ministry, volunteered his daughter to act as an interpreter for Nazi officers in Brittany.

But Rousseau did more than just translate. She began passing bits of information to a local chapter of the French Resistance and was arrested by the Gestapo on suspicion of espionage in

1941. She was quickly released—"German officers would not contemplate that their charming translator might be a spy," Holmeý writes—but the Gestapo ordered her to leave the French coast.

Rousseau landed in Paris, where she secured a job as an interpreter for French businessmen, helping them negotiate contracts with German occupiers. Soon, Rousseau took on a more significant role with the Resistance. While traveling on a train from Paris to Vichy, she had a chance meeting with Georges Lamarque, an acquaintance from her days at university. (Or perhaps the encounter was not so chance. As journalist Anne Sebba notes, Rousseau decided to go to Vichy "in a bid to find out what was going on there, instinctively recognizing that there might be an opportunity to use her knowledge but not yet knowing how.") As it turned out, Lamarque was building the Druids, a small intelligence-gathering chapter of the Resistance, and he asked Rousseau if she would be willing to help the cause. She agreed, and began collecting information under the alias "Amniarix."

During her interactions with Nazi officers in Paris, however, Rousseau went by the name Madeleine Chauffour. Using charm and cunning, she cajoled classified information out of the officials—including their plans to test rockets at Peenemünde.

"I teased them, taunted them, looked at them wide-eyed, insisted that they must be mad when they spoke of the astounding new weapon that flew over vast distances, much faster than any airplane," Rousseau said during a 1998 interview with David Ignatius of the *Washington Post*. "I kept saying: What you are telling me cannot be true! I must have said that 100 times."

Eager to prove her wrong, one of the Germans showed Rousseau drawings of the rockets. She couldn't make much sense of them, but she had a "near-photographic memory," according to Grimes of the *Times*. She transmitted the plans in great detail to Lamarque, who passed them on to the British. That information ultimately persuaded Prime Minister Winston Churchill to bomb the test site, Ignatius noted.

In 1944, the British decided to evacuate Rousseau to London for a debriefing. But according to Rousseau's *Washington Post* obituary, also written by Ignatius, she was betrayed to the Nazis on her way to the meeting point. Rousseau was captured, and sent to Ravensbrück, a women's concentration camp. She was later transported to the subcamp Torgau, and then back to Ravensbrück and then to the subcamp Königsberg, a new punishment camp that was a "particularly abominable" place, according to journalist Sarah Helm. In order to escape it, she and two others ultimately snuck their way onto a truck full of prisoners with typhus to get back to Ravensbrück.

Throughout, Rousseau appears to have been helped somewhat by the Nazis' inability to properly identify her. When she arrived at Ravensbrück, she gave German officials her real name, Jeannie Rousseau. They did not connect her to the "Madeleine Chauffour" described as a spy in documents that were sent separately to the camp.

Still, Rousseau was on the brink of death when she was liberated by the Red Cross in 1945. While being treated for tuberculosis at a sanatorium in Sweden, she met Henri de Clarens, who had survived Buchenwald and Auschwitz. They later married and had two children.

In the years following the war, Rousseau worked as a freelance interpreter for the United Nations. She was made a member of France's Legion of Honor in 1955, and was named grand officer of the Legion in 2009. She has been awarded the Resistance Medal, the Croix de Guerre, and the C.I.A.'s Seal Medal.

But Rousseau rarely spoke publicly about her wartime experiences. Her interview with the *Washington Post* in 1998 reportedly marked the first time that she had opened up to a journalist. At the time of the interview, Rousseau played down the magnitude of her decision to collaborate with the Allied forces, to put her life at risk.

"I just did it, that's all," she told Ignatius. "It wasn't a choice. It was what you did."

**Brigit Katz | | READ MORE**

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