

R.J. Minney, *Carve Her Name With Pride: The Story of Violette*

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Written in 1956, R. J. Minney's *Carve Her Name With Pride* was among the first stories of British female special agents to be told. Its subject, the courageous Violette Szabo, became even more famous after a film of the book, starring Virginia McKenna, was released two years later. This welcome reprint, published to coincide with the 90th anniversary of Szabo's birth, tells us as much about the telling of this history, however, as it does the inspiring story of its subject.

At the start of the Second World War, Violette Bushell was selling perfume in a Brixton department-store. The next year she met and married Etienne Szabo, a French officer on leave in London, who died of his wounds at El Alamein two years later. Despite now having a baby, Szabo offered her services to the Special Operations Executive (SOE). After rigorous training, she was sent to France in April 1944, on a mission to help reestablish a broken resistance circuit, identify targets for British bombers, and support the destruction of a viaduct. Pleased with her success on all fronts, she treated herself to a couple of Paris dresses and was flown back to London. During her second mission, she was captured after a gun-fight in what is probably the most famous episode in Minney's narrative, and sent to Ravensbrück concentration camp. In January 1945, she and two other British agents, Denise Bloch and Lilian Rolfe, were executed by firing squad. Szabo was posthumously awarded the George Cross in recognition of her courage.

In the 1950s however, it seems that in order to be publicly revered, even highly trained and operationally-effective female special agents needed to have their full complement of feminine virtues. There is no doubt that Szabo was as beautiful as she was brave, but that does not require her to have been always kind and cheerful, and the superlatives heaped upon her throughout this book threaten to overwhelm the real woman. 'She was really a delightful person', 'always happy, always

laughing', 'her large sparkling eyes made everyone turn to look again, and come up, eager to be served by her', Minney quotes Szabo's friends, on one page alone [p.22].

Unsurprisingly Minney also keenly defends Szabo's maternal impulse. Her daughter hardly appears without being 'clasped close', kissed repeatedly or causing 'a glow of happiness' to light up her mother's face [pp.125, 119]. How much more interesting it would have been to have had Szabo's repeated decision to leave her daughter properly examined! This in many ways compelling book gives us a wonderful, terrible, fairytale in which a beautiful young woman, 'a girl' as Minney calls her in his introduction, helps to defeat the forces of evil by making the ultimate sacrifice. Szabo deserves better than this; she deserves to be remembered as a real woman, with complex motivations, fears and joys.

Yet it is easy to forget, behind all the praise, just how controversial this book was in its day, celebrating the life of a woman who left her infant daughter behind to fight alongside men in the field, and opening up a whole new genre of biographies looking at female special agents. It would have been useful to have had a new introduction reminding us of the social context in which the book was written: a time more familiar to Szabo than to the reader today. As it is, the book remains a fascinating look at a wonderful character, and a valuable precursor to more recent biographies, not of just Szabo, but of other female agents who were less celebrated in their own day.