

20 Minutes to Death: Record of the Last Execution in France



The following document is a written record of convicted killer Hamida Djandoubi's last moments before he was guillotined in a Marseilles prison on September 10, 1977.

This record -- dated September 9 -- was written by a judge appointed to witness the execution.

Djandoubi's execution was the last execution carried out in France before capital punishment was abolished in 1981.

Then-President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who had voiced his "loathing for the death penalty" before he was elected to office, flatly turned down Djandoubi's appeal for clemency and chose to let "Justice run its course", as he did on two previous instances (Christian Ranucci, executed on July 28, 1976 and Jérôme Carrein, executed on June 23, 1977).

Hamida Djandoubi, a Tunisian national, was sentenced to death for killing his former lover, Elisabeth Bousquet.

He was executed in Marseilles' Baumettes prison in September 1977.

The following text was written on the night of the execution by judge (*juge d'instruction*) Monique Mabelly. Mabelly later entrusted the document to her son, who ultimately passed it on to Robert Badinter, the ex-Minister for Justice who successfully campaigned for the abolition of the death penalty in France.

Badinter eventually gave the document to the French newspaper *Le Monde*, which published it on October 9, 2013. The text below is a translation. The French original can be found [here](#).

9th September 1977

Execution of Djandoubi, Tunisian citizen.

At 3:00 p.m., [presiding] judge R. notified me that I had been appointed to assist with the execution. I feel repulsed, but I can't get out of it. I thought about it all afternoon. My role will consist of taking note of the prisoner's statements.

At 7:00 p.m., I went to the cinema with B. and B. B., then we had something to eat at her place and watched a late-night movie until 1:00 a.m. I went home, I did some chores, then laid down on my bed. Mr. B. L. telephoned me at 3:15 a.m., as I requested. I got ready. A police car came to pick me up at 4:15 a.m. During the journey, no one said a word.



Hamida Djandoubi, the last prisoner executed in France

We arrived at Marseilles' Baumettes prison. Everyone was there. The District Attorney (DA) [avocat général] arrived last. A large group formed.

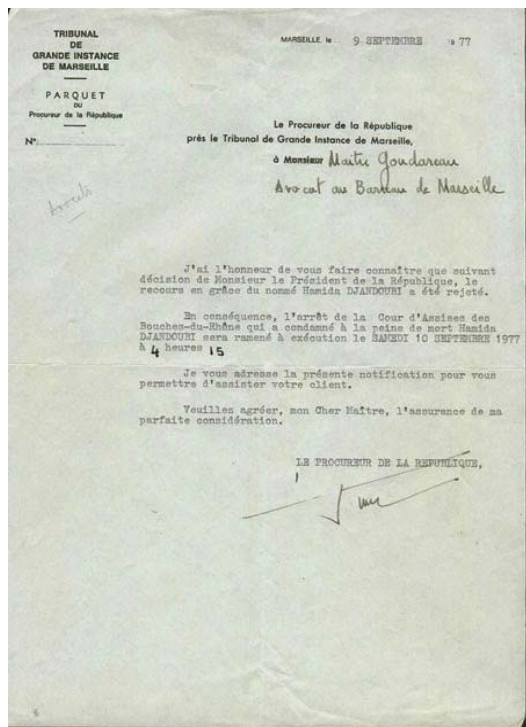
Twenty or thirty guards, the 'officials'. All along the path, brown blankets were spread on the ground to cover the sound of our footsteps. On the path, in three places, tables holding basins of water and towels.

The cell door was opened. I heard someone say that the prisoner was dozing, but not sleeping. He was made to 'get ready.' It took a long time, since he had an artificial leg and it had to be put on. We waited. No one spoke. I think this silence, and the apparent calmness of the prisoner, relieved those present. No one would have wanted to hear crying or protests. The group reformed itself, and we took the path back. The blankets on the ground had been pushed to the side slightly, and we were no longer trying to avoid making too much noise with our steps.

The group stopped beside one of the tables. The prisoner was seated on a chair. His hands were locked behind his back with handcuffs. A guard gave him a filter cigarette. He started smoking without saying a word. He was young. Very dark hair, neatly styled. His face was rather handsome, with even features, but he was pallid and had dark circles under his eyes. He looked neither stupid nor brutish. Simply a handsome young man. He smoked, and complained immediately that his handcuffs were too tight. A guard approached and tried to loosen them. He complained again. At this moment, I noticed the executioner standing behind him, accompanied by two assistants. He was holding a cord.

Originally, it was intended to replace the handcuffs with the cord, but in the end it was decided to just remove them, and the executioner said something horrible and tragic: 'See, you're free!' It sent a shiver down the spine... The prisoner continued to smoke his cigarette, which was nearly finished, and he was given another. His hands were free and he smoked slowly. I understood then that he was beginning to realize that it was all over - that he could not escape now - that his life would end here, and that the moments that he still had would last as long as that cigarette did.

He requested his lawyers. Mr. P. and Mr. G. approached. He spoke to them as quietly as possible, because the executioner's two assistants were standing right by him, and it was as if they wanted to steal his last moments as a living man. He gave a piece of paper to Mr. P. who tore it at his request, and he gave an envelope to Mr. G. He spoke to them



The official letter announcing that Djandoubi's request for grace had been rejected. The letter was sent by courier on September 9th and orders an execution for the following morning.

Source: [Jeremy Mercer](#)

The glass was nearly empty and, in a last attempt, he requested another cigarette: a *Gauloise* or a *Gitane* [unfiltered cigarettes made with strong, dark tobacco], because he didn't like the brand that he had been given. The request was made calmly, almost with dignity. But the executioner, who was becoming impatient, interrupted: "We've already been nice with him - very humane - we have to get this over and done with." In turn, the DA intervened to deny the cigarette, despite the prisoner repeating the request and adding very opportunely: "It will be the last." A sort of embarrassment came over the assistants. About twenty minutes had passed since the prisoner sat down on his chair. Twenty minutes, so long and yet so short.

The request for this last cigarette brought back the reality, the 'identity' of the time which had just passed. We had been patient, we had stood waiting for twenty minutes while the prisoner, seated, expressed wishes which we immediately granted. We had allowed him to be the master of that time. It was his possession. Now, another reality was appearing. That time was being taken back from him. The last cigarette was denied, and to get it over and done with, he was hurried to finish his glass. He drank the last sip. Passed the glass to the guard. Immediately, one of the executioner's assistants took a pair of scissors from his shirt pocket and began to cut off the collar of the prisoner's blue shirt. The executioner signaled that the cut was not large enough. So, to simplify things, the assistant made two big cuts to the shoulders of the shirt and removed the entire shoulder section.

Quickly (before the shirt collar was cut), his hands were tied behind his back with the cord. He was helped up. The guards opened a door in the corridor. The guillotine appeared, opposite the door. Almost without hesitating, I followed the guards who were pushing the prisoner and I entered the room (or, rather, a courtyard?) where the the 'machine' stood. Beside it was an open brown wicker basket. Everything went very quickly. His body was practically thrown down but, at that moment, I turned away. Not out of fear, but by a sort of instinctive and deep-rooted modesty (I can't find another word).

I heard a dull sound. I turned round - blood, lots of blood, very red blood - the body had toppled into the basket. In a second, a life had been cut. The man who had spoken less than a minute earlier was nothing more than blue pyjamas in a basket. A guard took out a hose. The evidence of a crime needs to be erased quickly... I felt nauseous but I controlled myself. I had a feeling of cold indignation.

We went into the office where the DA was childishly fussing around to prepare the official report. D. carefully verified every part. It's very important, the official report of an execution! At 5:10 a.m. I went home.

I am writing these lines. It is 6:10 a.m.

Monique Mabelly (Juge d'instruction)

Translated from the French by Anya Martin and Death Penalty News Admin.